The Road Not Taken

by ariaadagio

Summary

Meredith Grey and Derek Shepherd have weathered a lot of crap, but this? How in the hell will she ever trust him again? Sometimes, moving forward begins with a jump back to the starting line. Set between 11x17 and 11x18. A nostalgic retelling of S1, with a twist. [MerDer, minor Mexie, S11 fix-it, multi-chapter][Switch #1][COMPLETE]

Notes

Hi all! So nice to see you again :)

As promised, I'm back with another story. This is the first story in a two part series that will provide a 100% fix for S11 MerDer (up to and including Derek's death). So, for those of you who weren't completely satisfied with the ReVerse leaving Derek disabled, hopefully this will be a good alternative for you, where, in the end, both he and Meredith will be alive and well and happy. The first story in this series, The Road Not Taken, is novel length. The second story, thus far untitled, will be a short story or a novella at most.

This story is 18 chapters + a small epilogue. It's finished at this point. All I have left to do is edit, so you needn't worry about long delays between chapters. I'm going to try to post 3 chapters a week, MWF evenings. I'm posting this chapter a teensy bit early as a treat. Thank you so much to my betas, my editor, and my ebook cover designer. You ladies helped make
this story shine :)

So, this story.

This story is ... um. I'm just going to say that Shonda opened the door for this with near death whatever, AU dreams, ghost Denny, George in his uniform after death, and wtf ever other crazy shit she's introduced since I stopped watching, so I don't feel like this is entirely out of bounds. I was and (if I remember right from the fan reaction on Twitter at the time) most of the MerDer fanbase was displeased by the completely inexplicable shift in the attitudes of both Meredith and Derek between 11x17 and 11x18. Meredith went from barely taking Derek back to YAY MY LIFE IS PERFECT WOOHOO, and Derek went from conflicted to utterly zen about retiring his ambitions, in a matter of days, and I remember wondering if LSD or psilocybin was involved somehow. I always thought the both of them needed months to make the progress they made in a matter of days. So ... I gave them months. You'll see what I mean.

I hope, hope, hope, that even those of you who don't normally enjoy this trope will enjoy this story. I promise it's a fun ride :)
"Meredith, I can't live without you," he says in the dim light. "I don't want to live without you. And I'm going to do everything in my power to prove it."

She stares at him for a long moment. This is what he always does. Tries to sweep away his mistakes. Tries to wax poetic in a way that makes his screw ups sound so pretty. But ….

_She kissed me_, he said. _I didn't kiss her. I swear._

_How exactly did she kiss you?_

_Um. He frowned. What do you mean?_

_I mean how?_ Meredith asked, trying to understand this. _You saw her coming. You tried to get away._

_She got you in a headlock or something and planted one on you?_ She knew men could get raped. Hell, she'd seen the results in the emergency room. She didn't find the idea of an unwanted kiss farfetched.

Except, once he understood what she was driving at, he blushed. And he swallowed. And he said, _No, it wasn't like that._

_Well, what was it like?_ she demanded. _Explain this to me._

_I … saw it coming_, he admitted. _I didn't try to stop it until it was happening._

_So, you encouraged it?_

_No_, he replied vehemently. _I just didn't discourage it. And that was wrong, and I'm sorry. I stopped her right after, and I came straight home._

Meredith blinks, pulled back to the present. Derek's still standing there, waiting for her response.

He said he didn't encourage it, but … that just … doesn't ring entirely true. Renee had to get the idea to kiss him from somewhere. Kisses don't just happen in a vacuum. _Nobody_ would kiss someone else without even the slightest social cue suggesting that there's interest. Not unless he or she is already intent on committing sexual assault.

So, there was encouragement. Somehow. Either imagined or real.

Derek says "imagined."

But "real" is how Rose happened, complete with another contentious kiss. And "real" is how he met Lexie, complete with a ballsy admission that he enjoyed flirting with her. Hell, "real" was the cause of the whole Meredith and Derek _thing_, which only started because he concealed the fact that he was married.

"Real" is his modus operandi all the time, and lying while he does it is his modus operandi two times out of three.

He gets unhappy with his current relationship and seeks fulfillment elsewhere.
And he lies.

So, while he says "imagined," and Meredith wants to believe "imagined," "real" is a helicopter full of guys with semiautomatics, circling. Waiting for a clean shot. And she's not sure where to seek cover. Behind a bush, or in Derek's arms?

How in the hell can she trust him?

She has no freaking idea.

But she's tired. She's so tired of missing him. His eyes are wet, and he's staring at her with this hopeful, contrite expression that slays her, and she can't. She can't tell him no. It's just ... not an option.

All she can do is love.

Maybe, that means she's a pushover. Maybe, that means she's screwed up. Maybe, that means she's dark and twisty and pathetic. But she can't care.

"I can live without you," she admits, scraping up a little of her dignity, and she sees some of that hope in his eyes dim. "But I don't want to. I don't ever want to."

She doesn't know how to trust him. But she wants to.

His smile is hesitant and blooming like a flower. She watches it burgeon. She loves it when he looks at her like that. Like she's the only thing worthwhile to look at in the world. But then she wonders if that's the kind of look that gave his lab assistant the wrong idea, and her blood chills.

"Thank you," he says, oblivious to her bristling. "Thank you, Meredith. I won't ever make you regret it."

Something about his assurance rubs her like sandpaper going against the wood grain. She gives him a flat expression and folds her arms. "Don't make promises you can't keep, Derek."

He flinches like she's slapped him, and his beautiful smile bleeds away, but he doesn't retort. He has no words, for once. No comeback. No judge-y, mean-spirited remark. Only curled shoulders, guilty eyes, and a sudden intense interest in his shoes.

Awkward silence ensues. She's not sure what else to say.

He swallows. "So, what now?" he says.

"I'm tired," she says. So much so that her eyes are burning, and her head is a little spinny. "I think I want to go to bed."

He tries to close the distance between them, but she skips back a step like a frightened bird. He holds up his hands in surrender. "Sorry," he says. "Do you ... want me in the guest room tonight?"

She peers at the hallway that leads to the second bedroom - the one done up with billowing, indigo-colored curtains and a queen-sized bed. "Yes," she says. He nods and doesn't protest. She hates how dejected he looks. And she's tired, and she's tired of missing him, and she feels ... conflicted. Sad and angry and betrayed, yearning and hopeful and relieved. She's not sure how to deal with all these disparate sentiments swirling together in the same choppy sea of emotion. They shouldn't all coexist. She knows what it's like to be in his arms, though. The world goes away. She's tired, she misses being in his arms, and she doesn't have to be alone tonight. She has options, now. "No," she says.
He looks at her with raised eyebrows. She thinks about stepping toward him, closing the space between their bodies, and wrapping her arms around his waist, so that he can hug her and tell her everything will be fine, and she can, in that moment, believe him, because when she's in his arms, she's safe, and his lying poetry is easy to believe. But then she remembers the helicopter, still circling in her mind's eye, and she yanks her fingers through her hair. "I don't know, Derek. I don't know how to do this."

He stares at her for a long, stretching moment, eyes deep and dark in the dim light, and she can’t read him. "We could … talk?"

She sighs. "We've talked for hours already."

"We talked about …" He looks at his shoes again, like he's so ashamed, he can't even repeat his sin - that he let that woman kiss him - aloud. He gathers himself, and when he looks up at her, the hope is back, loitering in his eyes. "We could talk about what to do, now, instead of what happened," he suggests. "We only talked about yesterday, not tomorrow."

A lump forms in her throat.

Talk.

She can't think of much she'd like to do less, in this moment, than talk more. She's tired and wrung out, and they suck at the talking thing. They've always sucked at the talking thing. But … maybe, it's what they need to get past this awkward impasse, where she wants to let it all go and move forward, because she loves him, but something isn't letting her do that, yet.

"Okay," she says, the word a bare croak.

She's tired, and she loves him, and she wants that to be enough, but it isn't, yet. She heads into the kitchen to grab a wineglass from the rack. She's tired, and she loves him, and she wants that to be enough, but it isn't, yet, and in the meantime, maybe alcohol will offer the stopgap she desperately needs.

"I don't want you to go back to D.C.," she says as she pours herself a glass of merlot.

He sits on the other side of the couch, only three feet away, but the emotional distance between them would dwarf the Gulf of Mexico. "Meredith, I have to go back," he says in a hesitant, exasperated tone that says he expects her to blow up at him. When she sighs, he rushes to add before she can speak, "Not for long, but long enough to wrap things up. I never even gave my two week notice. I just … left."

"I don't want you near that … that woman," Meredith snaps. She takes a sip from the wineglass, barely pausing to enjoy the explosion of berry flavors on her tongue before turning the sip into a chug. And then a gulp. And another gulp. "Not ever again."

He looks crushed. "You don't trust me," he says.

"No, Derek, I really don't think I do," she says. "You let another woman kiss you."

"But I told you about it," he says.

"But you did it," she counters.

He licks his lips and glances at her wineglass with an unreadable expression. Then he stares at his
lap. "I know I did, and I'm sorry. It was a horrible mistake. I was wrong to do it, and I'd do anything to go back in time and fix it, but that's not possible." When he meets her eyes again, his face is bald emotion. Pleading. "What else do you want me to say or do? Name it, and I will. I mean it."

The lump stuck in her throat aches. "I don't know."

"I thought we were going to talk about where to go from here," he says.

"You never going to D.C. again is where I want to go from here," she replies.

"But that's not a possible scenario," he says in a placating tone that makes her want to smack him, "so, what compromise can we make?"

She snorts and takes another chug from her wineglass. The wine is gone already, and her cheeks are starting to feel hot. She sets the glass on the coffee table with a clink, not bothering with a coaster. This whole talking thing is the Exxon Valdez, just like she expected.

"Do you want to go to D.C. with me while I close things out?" he says. "Would that make you feel better?"

"I don't know what will make me feel better," she retorts. "That's the problem! What I want to feel, and what I do feel, are two different things."

He's silent for a long moment. "Okay," he says, conceding, the word spoken long and slow. He sighs. "Maybe, we should shelve this for tonight, after all."

"Fine," she snaps. "Let's shelve it."

He nods, giving her that crushed look that makes her hurt. Then he presses his palms against his thighs and stands. "I'll check on the kids."

She doesn't watch him go.

She bristles when he skulks into the master bathroom without knocking. She stops her toothbrush mid-swipe, and watches in the mirror glass as he slinks behind her to his side of the vanity. "I'm out of toothpaste," he rushes to explain when he notices her scrutiny. "I'm sorry." He grabs a tube of Arm & Hammer from the lip of his sink and shuffle steps behind her, making his way back toward the door. "I'll get out of your hair, now."

The lump in her throat is back again. She spits out her mouthful. "Derek, put it back," she says. He stops to look at her. "Just …," she continues. "Sleep here tonight. This is your bedroom, too. We can …. You can sleep here."

"Are you sure?" he says.

She looks at the sink, watching the used toothpaste ooze toward the drain. She turns on the faucet to wash it away. Water swirls in the sink, and she stares.

"Meredith?"

No, she's not sure. She's not sure about anything except that she wants the awkwardness to go away. She wants to trust him and not to be angry. She wants.

She wants love to be enough.
"No, I'm not," she admits. "But sleep here, anyway."

Their first hour alone in the dark is awkward. She can tell from the way he's breathing that he's not asleep. He rolled onto his side when he lay down, presenting his back to her, like he was trying to give her privacy. His shoulders are stiff and his breathing is stilted, and there's no way he can be asleep. He's a mirror to her as she lies on her side, back facing him.

She thinks about breaking the line of demarcation and curling up beside him. She's missed him, and she loves him. But she doesn't translate thought to action.

She can't.

Something inside is broken. He broke it.

All she can hear is every big lie he's ever told her, and all she can think about is how much it hurt when she realized she'd been swindled. Again, and again, and again.

"What happened?" she blurts as she darts into the hallway outside the trauma room. Cristina and Richard block her path. Ominous, sad expressions loiter on their faces.

"A bus in front of him," Cristina says, gripping Meredith's shoulders. "It hit a telephone pole. He tried to swerve to miss it, but-"

"How bad is it?" Meredith snaps, interrupting her.

Cristina steels herself. "Meredith, you have to be strong."

And all the while, Meredith can hear the flatline pulsing in the background. She runs to the window and sees Derek lying on a gurney, eyes closed, intubated, bright red arterial blood spreading like an oil slick across his naked chest.

"Derek! No! No!" she shrieks at the window. Bailey backs away from the gurney. Mark is shaking his head. They're giving up. They're giving up on Derek. The flatline pulses so loud it's like a pneumatic drill inside her head, carving out her thoughts. "No! No! Derek!" He can't be dead. He can't be. "No! N-

"-edith!" she hears, a loud, insistent peal of thunder against her eardrums. She's screaming. She's screaming, and she can't stop. "Meredith!" Derek says, and his arms wrap around her, a warm vis. "Meredith, you had a nightmare." He shakes her. Earthquake. "Wake up. Meredith!"

She can hardly catch her breath as she claws at his t-shirt, panting. The canyon of space between them is gone, and she's wrapped in his arms like she's been imagining and wanting all night. His chest is a warm, solid assurance that she resides in reality, now. She can smell his aftershave and the faint remnants of his sweat.

"You died," she croaks, nonsensical. Tears escape like runaway trucks down her cheeks, heavy and roaring and impossible to stop until they crash into her pillow. Her eyes burn. "You died, and you left me."

"Shh," he soothes against her ear. "Shh, it's okay. I didn't die. I'm right here."
"I don't want you to die," she says.

"I'm not going to die, Mere," he assures her. "I'm right here. I'm fine." He pulls his fingers through her hair and shushes her. "Shh, it's okay. It was just a nightmare." He kisses her, and she lets him. It's hard not to relax when he's right beside her, warm and alive and saying things, and she slowly rescues herself from hyperventilation.

A knock at their bedroom door fills the quiet. "Mommy?" a bewildered, scared little voice says. "Mommy, why yewwing?"

"I'll be right back," Derek assures her in a low whisper. He kisses her. "I'll be right back. I'm still here. It's okay."

"Okay," Meredith says.

The mattress creaks as his weight shifts across it, and the absence of his warmth leaves her chilled. She listens, eyes closed, as Derek pads out into the hallway to calm Zola down, shutting the door behind him. The comforting, tenor murmur of his voice - his call to their daughter's cherubic responses - replaces silence. Derek and Zola have a brief discussion right outside the bedroom door, and then their chatter wanes in volume as they move away, back to her room down the hall.

Meredith imagines him tucking their daughter in. She thinks she hears him singing. He'll probably check Bailey's room on the way back.

A lump forms in her throat. He's such a good father for their kids. Even when he was swamped with work in D.C., he made sure to call the kids every single day. He made sure to let them know they were loved, and they hadn't been abandoned.

God, she loves him. She loves him so much. Why does he have to make it complicated? Why does he have to make it hard?

She pulls her pillow over her head as the tears renew, and all the stuff she's pent up since before he even left dribbles out onto the fitted sheet like she's a freaking leaky faucet. He returns in a matter of minutes to find her sobbing. He wraps his arms around her and resumes his shushing and soothing, but all she can think about is what he's said, and all she can do is doubt.

Why did you let her do it? she said. Derek, why?

He swallowed. I can't explain, he offered lamely.

Well, try, she snapped.

He fell silent for a long moment. I don't want to fight anymore, Meredith, and we will if I talk about this.

I don't care, she said. I want to know.

You practically pushed me out the door, he said softly.

I did not! she said.

You did, he said, holding his ground. You pushed me out the door, and all we did was fight when we talked on the phone. I was lonely, she caught me off guard, and she was there.

You can't make this my fault, she said. That isn't fair.
He sighed. *I'm not trying to make this your fault, Mere. But you asked me how I could do that, and I'm telling you how. I didn't feel like I had any support from you, I was lonely, I wasn't thinking, and she was there. Did I respond to that situation appropriately? No. Am I proud of it? No. But I can't change it. And all I can do, now, is tell you that I know it was wrong, and that I'm sorry, and that you mean the world to me, and that it shouldn't have taken somebody else kissing me for me to figure that out. It was. I am. You do. It shouldn't have.*

She couldn't think of how to respond to that at the time. How does one respond to that?

It wasn't a satisfying answer. It was just an answer. But she doesn't think there is a satisfying answer. At least, not one that will satisfy her.

She wants to punch something. Or scream. Or cry some more.

She sniffs. Wipes her eyes with the backs of her shaking hands. He tries his best to comfort her, but …

"I hate you," she whispers.

He's quiet for a long time. A long time.

"Meredith," he says when he finally speaks. The word is old and weary and defeated, nothing like the three-syllable prayer he used to recite whenever he spoke her name. "I really don't want to fight anymore."

"I don't want to, either," she says. "But …."  

He heaves a disappointed sigh, like he thinks they're about to enter round forty-million-and-six of Meredith and Derek Fight Club, and she can't take it anymore. They suck at the talking thing. And she's sick of feeling like a conflicted failure.

So, instead of finishing her sentence, she kisses him.

They haven't kissed in months. Not like this. Not in a way that melds them into one being. And this is a language they've always been able to speak, no matter how messed up things are outside the bedroom.

At first, there's a kind of desperation to their union, tasting and touching in a tangle of limbs, and for a moment, she thinks she's found an answer to her woes. She always feels safe and replete in his arms - trouble wanes, fights go away, and she can find respite from anything for a while. Or, it used to make her feel that way.

It used to.

His past lies are like a poison, spreading with each heartbeat, bringing her coveted safety closer to death with every thump-thump. She kisses Derek, but all she can see is Derek kissing Renee, willingly, wholeheartedly, tongue plunging, and every good thing Meredith used to feel about kissing him sickens and succumbs. When Derek plunges home with his erection, she's not lubricated enough, and she can't help but cry out. He feels like a steel spear inside her, sharp and unyielding and awful.

He freezes when he hears her gasp. "Did I hurt you?"

She can't say yes. She can't. She's never had bad sex with Derek. And she can't let Renee be here in
their bedroom, in their private, holy place. She can't.

She closes her eyes and tries to push away Renee by filling her mind with thoughts of Derek, naked and aroused and gorgeous, housed in a slanting bath of sunshine as he poses. He's like a prostrate Adonis, all for her, smiling a smile that could stop hearts - could stop her heart - and she lets herself watch the apparition, hoping for asystole.

"Meredith?" the real Derek says.

"Just keep going," she says, breathless.

"Meredith, I'm not going to keep going if it's hurting you," he says.

It's dark in the bedroom. He can't see her eyes. She can't see his. She swallows. "It's not," she says, mustering up lying assurance in her tone. "I'm fine. It's just been a while."

"You're sure?"

"Yes," she says, perhaps a bit too quickly, because he hesitates even more. "I'm fine," she snaps. "I just wasn't expecting you to feel so big. Really. Please, keep going."

He's silent for a long, long moment. Doubting.

"Please, I love you," she says, and for all her discomfort, that is not a lie. She does love him. She loves him more than, perhaps, she should.

Her assertion seems to appease him, at least, because he closes the space between them and kisses her. "I love you, too," he murmurs against her lips. He tastes of salt, and she nips him, catching his lower lip between her teeth. He laughs.

"I love you," she repeats, because it bears repeating. She loves him, and she wants that to be enough.

She closes her eyes and goes back to watching her Dream Adonis in the sunlight, hoping she'll find enough desire somewhere in her fantasy to replace its utter lack in reality. But then Derek starts to move again, and it hurts. It hurts. It hurts.

And Renee keeps laughing and laughing. What a moron, she says. Why the hell would you believe a word out of his mouth?

And then Derek is there. I met a woman last night. Flirting with her was the highlight of my week. I used to be the love of his life, you know, Addison adds.

It's been so long since Meredith and Derek joined that he doesn't last more than a few minutes - or, maybe, he's just not trying to last. When he stops thrusting like a piston inside of her, she camouflages her relief as pleasure with a breathless moan that sounds - she hopes - maybe passionate. His whole body tenses, he makes a noise deep in this throat, and then he slumps, panting as he meets his release.

She waits, eyes squeezed shut. Her insides hurt. Every heartbeat is a pulse of discomfort between her legs, and he pulses, too, making it worse.

He slides out of her as he goes flaccid, still panting, and he's a heavy, crushing deadweight. When he regains his wits and his breath and his wherewithal, he picks himself up. He reaches between her legs and tries to finish the job with his hand. He kisses her over and over and over, keeping her lips
as busy as her lower body.

She tries to let her mind go. She tries to get into it.

*You can't trust anybody,* Derek said. *And no matter what I do ... you're always going to look for reasons not to trust me.*

His breath is hot and hungry against her skin, but all she can think of is how they've done this before, and how it took a few years, but they're having the same cyclical problem again. She feels like she's stuck in an agonizing threesome with him and her and their gigantic pile of oversized baggage.

He caresses and touches and kisses. He does each and every one of her favorite things. But she's crushed under the weight of all the bad that came before, and none of his pleasuring tactics find themselves effective. This is the most awful sexual experience Meredith's had in years, and she just can't.

She can't freaking finish.

"You're not into this," he says darkly after a few minutes of fruitless stimulation.

She swallows. "No," she admits, the single syllable a broken thing.

Her chest hurts, and her insides where he plowed her hurt, and hopelessness is a big bag of weights, pulling her under. They don't have bad sex. They never have bad sex. They occasionally have unsuccessful sex. Where his hydraulics fail to function. Or she just can't finish, no matter what they try. But it's not bad. They've always laughed stuff like that off before, enjoyed being close for the sake of being close.

How the hell will they ever fix this?

*You can't, clearly,* says her annoying little voice. *Too much is broken.*

Derek pulls his hand away from the space between her legs. She can't see his expression in the dark, only the glisten of his black, bleak eyes. She imagines a glower.

"Sorry," he says, glum, embarrassed, awkward.

"I want to trust you," Meredith confesses. "I want to, but I can't."

"I wish I could fix it," he replies. He sounds as broken and hopeless as she feels.

They lay side by side in silence. The minutes pass in an awkward march that feels eternal. She stares at the ceiling, aching, throbbing.

"Please, don't go to work tomorrow," he says, so quiet she barely hears him.

"Why?" she replies. "Maybe ... space will fix it." Though, somehow, she doesn't think so.

The covers rustle as he shifts. "We had months of space, and nothing is fixed. Maybe, closeness is what we need."

She can't imagine being trapped in this house with him all day tomorrow, wondering how she'll ever get herself past this. She needs air. She needs to think.

"We could go see a movie," he says, oblivious to her musing. They haven't gone to see a movie in forever, and Meredith can admit the idea holds at least some appeal. "Or ... a walk. We could walk
to the lake." That idea is even more attractive, but ….

"And do what?" she says.

"Be."

She swallows against the lump in her throat. "I'll think about it," is all she can promise him.

A quiet, defeated, "Okay," is all he says in return.

The silence stretches, and neither says anything else. The dull throbbing in her lower body is what makes her retreat to the bathroom to find some painkillers. She downs two ibuprofen and two acetaminophen in hopes that something will be effective at erasing the wildfire of hurt inside.

He's never once made her hurt like this before. Never.

They've always fit before.

Now, they don't fit.

She sighs, flips off the bathroom light, and heads back to bed. Derek says nothing, though she can tell he’s not sleeping. Thinking, maybe. But not sleeping. She resettles. Though the empty canyon passing through the middle of their bed is wider than ever, their backs aren't facing each other anymore, at least.

She's exhausted.

Her eyelids dip, and reality begins to slide away. She can't feel the bed underneath her, and her limbs and body diminish until she's weightless. She finds the liminal space where she's aware of both worlds, the dreaming and the real.

Derek the Adonis is laughing while he chases Meredith around the house, playing a flirty, adult game of tag with her. He's smiling when catches her. His body is alive, and his presence fills her universe when he kisses her. There is no lying, or any words at all - only the heat of his skin and the whisper of his breaths. In her Dream Derek's arms, she finds the safety she's been yearning for all day and all night. She finds her fantasy place where love really is enough.

She toes the liminal line for a while, half in and half out of sleep. She's only just stepped over the line when she hears a very real, very broken, very quiet, "I'm so sorry, Mere. I didn't mean to fuck it all up."

And that sad, futile apology is what takes her into slumber.

She wakes up in the bright OR, lying on the table, wearing nothing but a skimpy hospital gown, staring up at bright lights. She squints. An OR, but not really. There's no one in the room, which is painted a painful, immaculate white. The scent of antiseptic tickles her nose. A bleeping sound pierces the silence like a dagger. She follows the sound, looking left. An EKG monitor sits next to the table, and now that she's looking, she sees another table on the other side of the monitor, but that table is empty.

The stats on the EKG monitor are … not good. The pulse ox is down. Way down. Whoever's on this monitor is circling the drain, but as far as Meredith can tell, there's nobody being monitored. The machine has no leads.
She sits up with a groan, her muscles shaking a little with the effort. What the hell? She slides off the table. The floor is like a glacier, frozen underneath her feet, and she grimaces. She spots a patient chart lying on the instrument tray by the EKG monitor. She makes a grab for it.

Her eyes widen as she reads the label on the folder.

"Meredith and Derek," it says.

She flips open the folder, skimming the contents. She sees phrases like, "excessive scar tissue," and, "reports of chest pain." The thing that makes a lump form in her throat, though, is the DNR order stapled to the front of all the notes. Like it's more humane to just … let them die.

What the hell kind of dream is this?

"You're about to make a horrible mistake," says a familiar voice to her right.

She whirls on her feet, and sure enough, there he is, large as life, leaning against the table she just climbed off of, looking fabulous in his navy blue scrubs. She blinks. The room has no doors. How in the hell did he get here? Wait. The room has no doors. How in the hell did she get here?

She shakes her head. Who the hell cares how they got here?

"Mark!" she says, jaw dropping.

He smiles at her. "Hey, Big Grey."

The pads of her feet slap against the freezing floor as she closes the distance between them.

"Whoa," he says, rocking back a step upon impact with her.

"Oh, my god, Mark," she says, a lump in her throat, and she wraps her arms around his waist. His body is warm and solid, and he's alive, and she doesn't care what kind of dream this is anymore, really. She presses her ear against his chest. His heartbeat, strong and steady, pounds against her eardrums. She hugs him as hard as her arms will allow. It's just … so freaking nice to see him. So many people leave her. They don't come back very often. "Mark," she repeats.

"Wow," he says, grinning as he looks down at her. He rubs a palm down the curve of her spine. "Good to see you, too."

"I've missed you," she says. "Derek's missed you." Derek doesn't say much about it, but every once in a while, she'll catch him just sitting there, staring, with this … wistful, sad look on his face. Whenever she'd ask him about it, he'd clear his throat, and he'd say something like, Just thinking of a fishing trip I went on. But it's clear he'd mean, Just thinking of a fishing trip I went on with Mark, instead. "Derek's missed you so much."

"I know," Mark says. He sighs. "I'm sorry I couldn't stay."

"Me, too," she says. She swallows. "I'm sorry I wasn't there when you …." Died. When he died. "I …." Freaked out. Panicked. "Had stuff."

Mark shrugs. "Hey, I would have skipped it, too, if I could have."

She snorts with amusement. They pull apart.

"Lexie says hello, by the way," he adds.
She blinks. "Lexie … what?"

"She took the other job."

"Job."

"There were two," Mark explains, "and she said I'm too emotionally stunted to handle the other one." He glances at his wristwatch. It's black, with a funky digital display Meredith can't read at this distance. He hits a few buttons. Squints. Nods. "She's busy elsewhen." Else … when? He looks up again before she can ponder that too much, and he smirks. "You guys are more than a full time job, you know."

Meredith opens her mouth. Closes it. "Come again?"

"I'm here to help you," he says slowly, like he's talking to a kindergartener.

"Help me," she repeats.

"Yeah, you know," he says. "Kind of like Clarence."

"Clarence."

"Yeah, I know. I thought that movie was bogus when I saw it, too." He snorts. "Can we move on, now, or are you going to repeat that sentence, too?"

"Wait," she says. "Wait, wait." She shakes her head. "You're trying to tell me you're my freaking guardian angel?" She's not sure which is more unbelievable. That she has one. Or that it's Mark.

He rolls his eyes. "I said kind of like, Clarence. As in there are some similarities."

She stands on her tiptoes and peers around him. "I don't see wings," she says.

He sighs. "Yeah, that's a big nope."

She folds her arms and raises her eyebrows. "No bells rang?"

"Very funny," he replies in a flat, wry tone. "Look, I'm just an advisor with some fancy skills. Can we get to the advising part?"

"Okay." She frowns. "What are you here to advise me on?"

He gives her a long, serious look, but says nothing for a moment. He backs up to the operating table and slides his body onto it, sitting on the lip. He motions to her to follow suit. Her hospital gown makes the movement awkward, but she manages. They sit next to each other, hip to hip. Her legs dangle. She can't resist swinging them a little bit, like she's sitting on the dock by the lake on her and Derek's land.

"Now … don't panic," Mark begins.

She folds her arms. "Whenever somebody says that, panic is the next thing that happens," she grumbles. "It's inevitable."

Which is when a woman Meredith doesn't recognize pops in. Literally pops in. As in … materializes out of nowhere.

"Holy crap!" Meredith blurts.
The woman, a dirty blonde with the deepening laughter lines of someone in her early forties, is wearing jeans and a bright red t-shirt that says, 'Don't wear this on Star Trek.' She frowns at them. "Uh …," she says slowly. "Is this Admitting?"

Mark shakes his head. "No, this is Limbo. Go up one floor."

Limbo? Seriously?

The woman blushes. "Sorry, I'm new."

"Yeah, this place is a bit of a maze," Mark replies.

"Oh?" The woman gets a predatory, flirtatious gleam in her eyes, like Meredith's not even there. She smiles. Her teeth are a perfect, pearly white. "You should show me around, sometime."

But Mark merely holds up his left hand and displays the simple gold band on his ring finger. Meredith gapes. "Sorry," Mark says. "Married."

The blonde's I want to jump your bones look drips away like water. She sighs. "Damn it, even all the dead ones are taken."

"There's a singles bar on sub-level two," Mark offers helpfully. "It's called Rapture. They serve good cocktails."

"I'll take that under advisement," the woman says with an eye roll. And then she poofs out as quickly as she appeared.

Meredith blinks. And blinks again. She needs to make note of the wine she was drinking, and never drink it again.

"Now, where were we?" Mark says.

Meredith grabs his hand. He slips off the ring and hands it to her, so she can see it. The band is white gold, not yellow. The metal's been made warm by his hand. Inside the band is one word in looping script. Eternal.

A lump forms in her throat. "Lexie?"

Mark nods. "Yeah." He smiles. "She makes me happy."

Meredith swallows. "Really?"

"Really," he says with another nod. She hands him back the ring. He slips it on. It gleams in the bright light. She doesn't know how she missed it earlier. He continues, "But we're not here to talk about me. We're here to talk about you." He doesn't give her a chance to protest or pester him for details before he barrels onward. "Where you're headed with Derek?" he says. "You don't want to go there."

A sinking feeling pulls at her gut. "… Where are we headed?"

"You'll try to work things out," he says. "You both will. You'll try harder than you've ever tried at anything. But … you won't make it past Labor Day."

Her frown deepens. "What do you mean, we won't make it past Labor Day?" she snaps.

He raises his eyebrows and nods toward the EKG monitor with the dying heartbeat. "I mean, you're
getting divorced in about four months."

She shakes her head. "No."

"Yes," he says, nodding. "It's unavoidable for you right now, really."

"That's what you're here to advise me on, then? How to fix it?"

"You can't fix it by yourself," Mark replies with a shrug. "That's what unavoidable means. There's nothing you can do."

"Then why even tell me?" she says, exasperated.

He grins. "I said there's nothing you can do."

She sighs. "Dying has made you pretty freaking cryptic."

"Ever heard the phrase, 'Be kind. Rewind?'" he says, eyebrows raised.

"Um." Her eyes narrow. "Yes."

"Well, that's what I'm going to do for you," he says. "I'm going to give you a chance to have a few epiphanies you couldn't have any other way."

She frowns. "What does that mean?" She folds her arms. "And why aren't you visiting Derek, anyway? He's the stupid one who screwed up."

But Mark only keeps grinning his stupid, cryptic grin. "You'll see," he says. "And who says I'm not visiting Derek, too? Honestly, this is a kill-two-birds-with-one-stone type of operation."

"But."

"Look," he says, cutting her off. "Let me and Derek worry about Derek's story and Derek's epiphanies. Okay?" He puts his arm over her shoulder and gives it a squeeze. "This is your story, Grey. Do you want to tell it, or not?"

"... Okay ...?"

"Great," he says with a nod. "Buckle up."

She has a chance to look up at him and say, "Are we going on a trip or something?"

And then everything flashes white, and she leaves the weird, doorless operating room behind in Limbo.
A Harder Day's Night (Part One)

Chapter Notes

Thank you so much for the lovely feedback, everybody! I really appreciate everybody who takes the time to leave me a note. Hearing from you guys makes my day!

Just so you know, I'm saying S11 happened in 2012. Though Derek died in our 2015, S1-S3 and S4-S5 is widely regarded to cover two years total (one for each span, respectively), so I simply subtracted 3 off 2015.

I just wanted to take the time to mention that I'm participating in the Dempsey Challenge this year. I plan to ride either the 50 mile or the 70 mile bike course, and walk the 10k. I have a fundraising goal of $1000. I would be ever so appreciative if you would help me reach it! The Dempsey Challenge supports the Dempsey Center in Lewiston, ME, which assists cancer victims, their families, and their friends. It provides countless services, such as counseling, education, activities oriented around stress reduction, and fitness/nutrition consultations. If you're interested in donating, you can go to: support.dempseychallenge.org/goto/ariaadagio

Thank you from the bottom of my heart to anyone who donates. It's a wonderful cause.

Meredith wakes in stages.

First, she knows it's morning, just from the brightness laving the backs of her eyelids, turning the world a fleshy black. She hears the birds singing. A car putters somewhere outside. She smells something musty, and her throat tickles, like she's been breathing in dust. Her lower body doesn't ache anymore. The skin on her back feels like it's been plunged into a meat freezer, but her front is warm.

Why in the hell …? Wait. A car?

Is Derek leaving? There is no freaking way she is letting him leave after the barrage of I-need-yous he lobbed at her last night. Was all of it complete bullcrap?

Yes, a tiny voice tells her. Yes, it was. It always is.

*He lies.*

Her eyelids snap open. Derek's lying naked on the floor to her immediate right, asleep underneath a knitted gray blanket edged in fringe. She relaxes, seeing him there. He's not leaving. And he's here, so, clearly, unless they've both somehow been kidnapped and chloroformed by a maniac, there's an innocuous reason she doesn't remember how she freaking got here, and it's probably alcohol.

Except she doesn't feel hungover, and she only remembers one glass of wine, albeit chugged. Which is just … weird?

She frowns.

Her gaze wanders over Derek's naked form. She pauses to admire the swell of his ass and the pale
skin of his naked back. She admits she pauses. Even as distant as they are with each other right now, she can enjoy the view. Her Adonis. But then she shakes her head and continues onward, trying to make some sense of this situation.

Derek’s lying next to a discarded heap of newspapers and refuse, a pair of heels, and a crumpled black dress she doesn’t remember wearing. Déjà vu coils around her throat like a noose, but she ignores it and keeps looking. There's a pile of pillows, a table covered with books, and a grill sitting about a yard behind his feet. Her assessment finds the fireplace, and then continues upward. Books. A toilet brush.

The noose tightens, but, still, she ignores it.

What the hell are they doing on the floor in Alex and Jo's house? And where did all this junk come from? Are Alex and Jo moving? Alex never mentioned they were moving.

And what the hell happened?

The last thing she remembers is going to bed, aching and upset, next to an upset Derek. She doesn’t remember a wild night on a couch, and she doesn’t remember driving here. She doesn’t remember anything except a wacky dream with Angel Mark and something about going on a trip.

This is weird.

There is nothing about this that isn't freaking weird.

She reaches for Derek and squeezes his shoulder. "Derek," she whispers. "Derek, wake up."

He mutters something and sniffs.

"Derek," she hisses. "Wake up."

He grunts and sluggishly joins the world of consciousness. His hand sweeps around the front of his body. He grabs the black bra that had been discarded near his head and holds it up to her with a groan.

"This … is …." Another groan.

She's not hungover, but he clearly is.

She snatches the bra from him and stands up to put it on. The last thing she wants is for Alex and Jo to show up while she's buck naked after what looks like a night of debauchery on their couch. Derek doesn’t seem similarly fueled to make himself decent, though, so, maybe, Alex and Jo aren't home. No, all Derek does is leer at her as she arranges herself in her lingerie.

She rolls her eyes and steps over his prone body to the crumpled black dress, and she bends to root through it. Where the hell are her panties? Why is she always losing panties?

"Why don't you just come back down here, and we'll pick up where we left off?" Derek suggests.

She's never experienced déjà vu before today, but in this moment, the noose yanks shut, someone kicks out the floor from underneath her, and she's close to strangling, which is weird in and of itself, because she never expected déjà vu to be a violent emotion.

"Very funny, Derek," she snaps, disconcerted, and he frowns at her, like … she hurt his feelings?
Which is when she stops to look at him. Really look at him. He looks … young. Really young. None of his hair is gray. His crow's feet - the ones that crinkle whenever he smiles - are almost gone. He's thin like he's always been, but he actually has a little meat on him, unlike lately, and his muscles aren't as toned.

She swallows.

This is weird.

"What are we doing at Alex and Jo's house?" she asks, because her brain isn't quite letting her leap to another, more outlandish conclusion, yet.

Derek stands, making no attempt to cover himself as the blanket slides off his body, and he pulls up his white boxers to his waist. He hasn't worn boxers in years. He decided he liked boxer briefs better, because they keep everything … situated in the right spot.

This is weird. And wrong. And-

He looks at her, eyebrows raised, and says, "Oh, is that who owns this place?"

She blinks. "Yes, Derek," she explains, the words slow, "I sold it to them. Remember?"

All he does is shrug. And smirk. "Quickie before work?" he says, stepping closer.

"I thought you didn't want us to go to work today?" she says.

"Mmm," he says. "Well, you didn't like that idea. I'm bargaining."

"Bargaining," she says, tone flat.

He nods, stepping into her space. He leans, and he kisses her. "Yes, bargaining," he purrs against her ear, the word like silk sliding down her spine. His body is warm, and solid, and he smells good. "It's a form of compromise."

"Compromise," she echoes. All she's wearing is her bra, and he feels so good and so safe, and they're not fighting, and he's a bastion of familiarity staving off the sense of weirdness that's growing more scary by the second. She's so disconcerted, she finds herself kissing him back. "Okay."

She falls back onto the couch, and he falls with her with a groan. Then she's ripping off his boxers, and he's fiddling with the clasp of her bra, and they're naked again. A tangle of bodies and limbs and heat. Unlike last night, the mood strikes her like a whip. She licks him from Adam's apple to chin. Stubble pricks her tongue. He tastes … familiar, but different. Like ….

It's the remnants of his cologne, she realizes. It's a brand he hasn't worn in forever. His eyes are different, too. Younger. Less … angry. He's been so freaking angry, lately, and now he's not. But … he's not happy, either, so much as putting on a happy front, which, after nearly ten years of knowing him, she can read like a book. She pulls her fingers through his hair. It's longer than she remembers, and she marvels at the uninterrupted, raven-brown color.

"You look so good in this light," she says, brain still unwilling to make the leap.

He visibly preens at the comment, like it's something he needed to hear, and then he cups her face and dips low to kiss her. "You look good in any light," he says, and he drinks away all her worries, lips pressed against hers. He presses a palm between her legs and feels. He strokes her with his thumb, and a thrum of desire hums in her lower body like a plucked string.
"That feels good," she says.

"Mmm," he purrs.

The minutes bleed away, because she's in his arms, and he's kissing her like she's the only thing in his universe. Like, in this moment, she is the sun. It's a heady feeling she can get drunk on. There's no awkwardness or bygones or hesitation or pain, only heat.

She's missed it. She's missed him.

When he slides into her to the hilt, she gasps. This should hurt after last night, but it doesn't, for some reason. He fits. Bliss spreads across his expression. A deep sound of contentment loiters in the back of his throat.

And then he freezes.

"Shit, I forgot a condom," he says, and he pulls out again.

"I'm on the pill, and my uterus is broken, anyway," she says, frowning.

What in the hell? He knows she's on the pill and that her uterus is broken. And they haven't had sex with a freaking condom in …. Since …. She can't even remember. Years.

"It's okay," he says, shaking his head. "I think I have one left."

He sits up, bends over to find his pants in the heap of clothes on the floor, and yanks a shiny, crinkly wrapper out of the left pocket of the black bundle he picks up.

"Jackpot," he says with a twinkle in his eye. He rips open the packet and unfurls the latex down his length.

What in the freaking hell?

"You don't …." She's not sure what to say. "You think you need a condom?"

He glances at her. "Look, I'm all for the fun. More fun, I say. But I'm not all for the passing of STDs, okay?"

She's speechless. He thinks she might have an STD? "Derek, I'm not the one who kissed another woman," she snaps.

Which brings him up short. He gives her a lopsided, smirky grin. "No, I didn't mean to imply that," he says, the words slow and humoring, "but you never know ….

And then he winks. Freaking winks.

Which …. If it's not about her, is he trying to tell her he was lying about the kiss? That he encouraged it? That … it went even further than that? That he doesn't want to give something to her? And how could he do that with such blasé misappropriation of flirting?

A wink? Seriously? God, he can be so goes-for-the-gut mean when he wants to be. Her heart squeezes, and a lump forms in her throat.

When he scoots closer, she backs away, swallowing. "Derek," she says, the word a raspy croak. "I'm …. I'm not really in the mood, anymore."
He frowns, looking down at the condom on his penis with disappointment. "You were fine with it last night," he says.

"I don't remember last night," she says. "What the hell happened last night?"

He peers at her for a long moment. His erection is going flaccid in slow degrees. He sighs. "Okay," he says. "Sorry." He peels off the condom, leans forward, and reaches for his clothes. He stuffs the condom back in his black pant pocket, and then he pulls his boxers back on in silence.

She watches him dress in stunned disbelief.

This isn't like last night, not at all. Last night was awkward and awful, but today is ….

After he zips up his pants, he holds out his hand like he expects her to shake it. "This was fun," he says in a soft, hesitant voice.

Her mouth opens and closes. And opens again. "You're leaving me? After all that crap you said?"

"I thought you said that's how this works," he says.

She blinks. "What are you talking about?"

His frown deepens. "I don't know. What are you talking about?"

She clenches her teeth. "Derek, I know we have a lot of crap to fix, and that this is really weird and awkward, and that last night sucked, but I love you," she says. "Please, don't leave again. I want us to fix this."

He twitches like he just heard a gunshot. "Uh," he says. And then he laughs like you do when you hear a joke that's completely not funny. "What?"

She frowns. "Love," she repeats. "I love you, and I want us to fix this ….

She's greeted with more silence. What little mirth he mustered for his fake laugh bleeds away. There's no warmth in his gaze that says, me, too. He doesn't say it back. All he does is stare at her, dumbfounded.

"What?" she says. Maybe, they're even more broken than she thought. "What is it?" she says. "Is it that hard to believe that I love you?" She knows she was argumentative last night, but-

He backs away, and he swallows. He glances at his watch. "I …." He blinks again, uncharacteristically speechless. Derek always has something to say. His gaze flicks to her, though he doesn't meet her eyes, and then flicks back to his watch. "I have to go to work. My shift starts in a few minutes." And then he snaps into motion, searching for the rest of his clothes.

"Derek, what's wrong?" she says.

"Nothing," he says, in a quick, whiplash way that says there's tons of things wrong, and he's freaking out somewhere around a ten on the Richter scale of freakouts. He won't meet her eyes. He pulls his shirt on. "Nothing; I have to go to work. Look, it was very nice to meet you ….

"Meet me?" Meredith says. "What are you talking about?" The weirdness burgeons like a nuclear mushroom cloud, and she can't ignore it anymore. "Derek, where are our kids?"

"Our kids?" he barks. "Lady, I don't even know your name."
She gapes. "Meredith."

"Meredith," he repeats, but he doesn't say her name like he thinks it's pretty. He says it like anathema, and his mouth moves for a long time before he comes up with more words after that. "Look, Meredith. Clearly … you have some shitty stuff going on. I do, too. I understand. Believe me; I do. But … I have to go to work, now. So … " He steps toward the door, floor creaking as he moves. "Bye," he adds. And then he leaves, slamming the door behind him like he can't get away from her fast enough.

She gapes at the door, stunned, unable to move for at least five minutes.

What. In the hell. Just happened?

What. In the hell.

She swallows.

The conclusion she's been refusing to leap to smacks her so hard she can't ignore it anymore. She dashes to the disorganized heap of newspapers on the floor and peers at the date on the top one. Then she grabs the next. And the next. And the next. They're Seattle Times. All from 2005, like somebody's been collecting them. Alex and Jo didn't live in this house in 2005. Neither were even in Seattle, yet, by the dates on some of these earlier papers.

No. No freaking way.

She stumbles to the phone, next. The answering machine is blinking ominously. An answering machine. She hasn't seen an actual answering machine in forever. She hits the play button.

"Hello, Meredith. It's Ms. Henry. Listen, I know you're busy, but I have some paperwork for you to sign for your mother. Please, stop by the home as soon as you can."

Meredith gapes. No. No freaking way.

She heads back to the couch and sinks into the cushions like a sack of bricks, still naked, and utterly stupefied. Alzheimer's. She has Alzheimer's, and she's stuck in the past. Except … she shouldn't be aware she's stuck in the past. She should just be stuck there. So, this can't be Alzheimer's.

Can it?

No. This has to be a dream. A really fucked up, crazy, scary dream.

She pinches herself as hard as she can, and it hurts like a bitch.

Maybe, not a dream, then.

"I am alive," she says to nobody. Lucid dreamers have phrases like this so they know they're awake. She knows because of a patient she had a few years ago. Eliza. Elizabeth. Something like that. "I am awake," Meredith continues. "I am aware." She bites her lip. "And it's supposed to be 2012."

Nothing happens.

"Time travel is not possible," she says, again to nobody.

Nobody answers her.
Time travel isn't possible, except here she is, in the freaking past, awake and aware and in no way addled that she's aware of. Time travel isn't possible, except the living proof - a younger Derek who didn't even know her name - just fled out the door. Time travel is not possible.

But what if it is?

And what if she's just messed up her entire future by acting like a clingy mental case with the not-yet-father of her children? And if she did mess it up, how in the hell is she going to fix it? She likes her future. Most of it. She wants it back, give or take a plane crash, and a shooting, and maybe a drowning, and a secret wife, and that stupid lab whore kissing Derek, and some other stuff, but if she weighs all that against Bailey being born, and against Zola sleeping in her arms ….

There's no contest.

Crap.

Crap, crap, crap.

She has to get to work to see if she can fix this.

---

She races through her shower, barely stopping afterward to dry herself off. Her mad dash screeches to a halt when she swipes away steam from the mirror and sees herself, though. Her jaw drops. She looks … wow.

She looks wow.

Seeing Derek earlier should have prepared her for something like this, but she supposes it hasn't really sunk in, yet.

That she's in 2005.

She traces the mirror image of her face with her index finger. She hasn't seen a face this young staring back at her in she doesn't know how long. And her breasts. Her breasts are so anti-gravity she thinks she could get away without a bra. She can't get away without a bra anymore in 2012. The tiny wrinkles around her eyes are gone, too. And her skin is …. Her skin freaking glows. She doesn't think she even needs foundation. She spins, peering at herself in the foggy mirror, allowing herself a moment to gape.

Crap, she really freaking time traveled. She really freaking did.

Crap.

She yanks the first outfit she can find out of her closet - jeans and a lavender-colored blouse. She clutches them in her still-damp hands, biting her lip, as she stands there, naked, hair swept up into a towel turban. Should she wear what she wore the first day of work? She doesn't remember what she wore the first day of work. Crap. The jeans and the blouse she grabbed will have to do.

Changing outfits shouldn't irreparably screw up the timeline, should it?

She sort of wishes she'd taken more physics in school.

Or, at least, bought and read Stephen Hawking's A Brief History of Time.

Once she's put on her clothes and combed her hair into some semblance of order, she rushes out to
The major side effect of commuting to work is that sitting in the car with nothing else to do but think causes thinking. Thinking that doesn't just revolve around oh-my-god-oh-my-god-oh-my-god. And thinking actual thoughts with actual substance gives her a chance to talk herself out of the crazy.

To rationalize.

Her toe dip into the pool of insanity lasts about twenty-five minutes from start to finish, and then she's back to being convinced she's dreaming - really, that's the only logical explanation for this lunacy - when Mark pops into the passenger seat of her Jeep out of thin air. She flinches in surprise, and the steering wheel flinches with her. She swerves, much to the ire of the truck riding on her rear bumper, though she manages to stay in her lane with a few millimeters to spare. The ensuing honk from the trailing truck makes her flinch all over again. She manages to get the car back on a straight trajectory in the middle of the lane - and also flip off the driver behind her - in one smooth motion.

She glares into her rearview mirror. "Honking just scares people more," she snaps at Truck Driver. Not that Truck Driver can hear her, but she finds it cathartic to yell about his transgression, anyway. Then she turns to Mark. "And so does teleporting into my car without warning."

"Sorry," is all he says in reply. Like he didn't just nearly get her freaking killed. He grins. "For what it's worth, I'm like your own personal immunity bubble. You can't get hurt while I'm here."

Like he read her mind.

"This is the weirdest freaking dream I have ever had," she grumbles as she pulls around a jerk in a Cadillac going under the speed limit. "Bar none."

"It's not a dream, Meredith," Mark says.

"Right," Meredith says, rolling her eyes. "Either I had too much wine, or time travel is real, and my husband's dead best friend is my guardian angel." She glances at her passenger. "Which of these two scenarios seems more likely to you? I mean there's horses, and then there's zebras, and then there's talking zebras."

Mark winks. "Just call me Marty."

"What?"

He sighs. "Never mind." The seat squeaks as he adjusts his large frame. The tips of his hair nearly brush the ceiling of the SUV. "Listen, I just wanted to emphasize to you that this is real. You are really in 2005."

Meredith snorts. "While face planted and drooling on my mattress in 2012, I'm sure. And Derek's probably debating homicide to stop the raucous crap, she had wine snoring."

Mark shakes his head. "No," he says slowly. "Real as in, if you die here, you're dead, Meredith, and nothing short of an act of god will be able to fix it."

Something about his dire tone makes her still.

"This is serious," he adds. He glances at her. "Look. Ever had a dream where you know consciously that you're dreaming, enough to have a coherent conversation about whether you are or you aren't?"
"Ever have a dream that didn't feel unreal in retrospect?" he presses. "Ever have a dream where you're this self aware?"

She frowns.

*I am alive,* she said, less than an hour ago. *I am awake. I am aware. And it's supposed to be 2012.* And it was fruitless. She didn't wake up.


A big multi-wheeler truck blasts past on the lefthand side of the car. The horn blares so loud she can feel it in her chest. Shortly after, she can smell the exhaust wafting through her Jeep's air vents, and she wrinkles her nose. She tightens her fingers against the steering wheel. The leather squeaks underneath her palms.

"You have all five senses fully active right now," Mark says as if he's read her mind. Again. Has he? Does Angel Mark freaking read minds? "Ever had a dream like this?"

She has no response to that. None.

Her stomach churns. Her hands start to shake as she reverts to her previous state of oh, god. Oh, god. Oh, god. This is real. She's in 2005.

"Okay, good," Mark says with a nod, like she's spoken aloud. "I'm glad we're on the same page, now. And, yes."

Her eyebrows knit. Her head feels fuzzy. "… Yes?" she says, tone weak and raspy, as she tries to keep her eyes on the road.

"I read minds."

"… Oh." She blinks. And blinks again.

Silence stretches in the cabin. Mark glances at his watch. "Look, so, the rules are, don't get killed," he says, frowning at whatever time he sees on the face.

She looses a breathy, panicked gasp of laughter. "Really, that's it?"

"That's it," he says with a nod.

"Does me dying here destroy the future or something?"

"No, you dying here means I'd be returning a dead body to 2012, which I think your Derek would find kind of upsetting."

"Well …" She bites her lip. "What happens if I change things?"

"That's the whole point of this trip," Mark says. "So, you can see what happens."

"See what happens with … what?"

"That's entirely up to you." Mark grins. He glances at his watch again. "So … um … have fun?"
"Did you live this part of my life?" She glares at the road. His watch beeps. "Newflash. It wasn't fun. It was torture." She sighs. Congestion clots the space ahead with a sea of red brake lights. She eases off the accelerator and downshifts into fourth gear. "And … you know … you could have mentioned you would be sending me back to 2005 before sending me back to 2005. It's kind of a lot to process." The engine rumbles. "And I made Derek think I'm a clingy nut ball."

No one replies, though. She glances to her right. The seat is empty.

Which … what the hell?

"Wait, how long am I here for?" she asks. "What happens if other people die?" Her jaw clenches, and her fingers tighten around the steering wheel as tension overwhelms her. Crap. Crap, crap, crap. "If I change things, are the changes permanent?"

Because, of course, now, when it's useless to do so, is when she thinks of all the intelligent questions she should have freaking asked already.

"If I mess this whole thing up, do I still get Derek and my kids back?"

And, naturally, no one answers.

"Mark?"

Because Mark is freaking gone.

She smacks the steering wheel with the heels of her palms. "Crap!"

Meredith misses most of the orientation Richard gives and stumbles into the OR while he's busy giving his speech about the likelihood of washing out. He raises his eyebrows at her and stops talking. The whole crowd stares at her, unblinking.

"Um," she says in the pin-drop silence. Her voice echoes in the big, bright operating room. "Sorry, I'm late."

"And speaking of washing out," Richard says, tone chastising, "not a good first impression, Dr. Grey."

At first, she can't think of anything to say. All that comes to her is, Holy crap, you have hair. Which she summarily stomps to death with her figurative foot, because if there's any way to make this SNAFU worse, it would be saying that.

She swallows. "I'm sorry; I had …." Marriage problems. Time travel. A snarky, cryptic, disappearing guardian angel. "I had a th …." Er …. Think, damn it. A what? "A … thing. An emergency … thing. As in a thing that was … an emergency."

His eyes narrow. Silence stretches until she's ready to burst with nervous energy, and then he says, "Don't let it happen again," in a stern tone.

"Yes, Rich-" Her words choke to a halt. Great. This is just great. "Um. I mean, yes, sir."

Holy crap, this is going to be hard.

She doesn't miss the whispers spreading through the group like wildfire. The stares make the hairs on the nape of her neck prickle and stand up, and her skin feels hot as blush spreads across her cheeks.
and throat. She slinks to the back of the crowd, clutching her purse straps like they're the rope from which her life preserver is dangling.

She wasn't late the first time. She made a not-great-but-at-least-not-horrible impression the first time. She's already messing this whole thing up.

Is she messing this whole thing up?

Should she be changing this? Mark said the idea was to change things. But he also said it was her choice what to change, implying … she could opt not to change things. Which means … what? Exactly?

She can't …. Can't she? This is …. Is this? She should …. Should she?

And then her head is getting fuzzy, and her mouth is dry, and her legs are wobbling.

This is too much.

She shakes her head.

Stop, she tells herself. Just stop. Stop with the thinking, already.

She takes a deep breath, pushing the badness away.

She'll decide later.

She'll decide later what she wants to change, because if she tries to decide, now, her head will freaking explode.

She stumbles through the next few minutes by saying nothing and sticking to the rear of the pack. She keeps her head down, and she stares at her shoes for most of it, trying not to make eye contact with any of the other people around her. It's not until she gets to the intern locker room that she has her next holy crap moment.

"Cristina!" Meredith says, before she can stop herself.

Cristina, who's standing by her locker, changing into her scrubs, gives Meredith an arched eyebrow and a flat look. "Do I know you?"

"I've missed y- um." Crap. Meredith's mind races. She doesn't remember any of what she said on this day. And she was so damn the torpedoes, full speed ahead! about fixing things in her future with her future husband that she didn't even stop to think about all of the other relationships she's going to have to cultivate. "No. No, you don't know me." Yet.

She clears her throat. Crap, this is so disconcerting. She holds out her hand. "Meredith. I'm Meredith. Meredith Grey."

Cristina ignores Meredith's outstretched hand and shrugs. "Which resident are you assigned to?" she says. "I've got Bailey."

"The Nazi?" Meredith says, nodding. "Yeah, me too."

"You got the Nazi?" calls a familiar male voice, and Meredith turns away from Cristina, toward the sound. "So did I."
Meredith can only gape. Oh, god, George. Young, just-graduated-from-medical-school George, with his mop of curly brown hair, and his bright green eyes full of eagerness and optimism. He looks so baby-faced. Like he couldn't grow facial hair if he tried. And he's alive. He's alive, and it takes every last ounce of willpower she can gather inside to keep herself from gravitating toward him and pulling him into her arms.

"George," she croaks around the lump in her throat. "Hi …. I ...." What does she even say? She rubs her eyes because they hurt. "Hi."

George stops short at her greeting and blinks. "You remembered my name?" he says, surprise in his tone.

"Of course, I remembered your name!" she says, and his lips turn upward in a hopeful smile. The tiny voice in her head is whining at her. This isn't how it went the first time. This isn't how it went. She's messing it up. Maybe. But she can't care, because … George. Alive. Breathing. Solid. Right in front of her. She clears her throat. "I mean, we met at the intern mixer. Right?"

"You had a black dress with a slit up the side," he says with a nod. "Strappy sandals."

Cristina rolls her eyes, but Meredith can't bring herself to share in the silent ridicule. Not this time.

"Now, you think I'm gay," he says with a sigh.

Meredith shakes her head. Because he's alive. He's alive, and …. How many holy crap is that since she woke up on the couch? Thirty-seven? Fifty-three? "No, I know you're not gay."

Her heart starts to thud. How in the hell is going to work? How in the hell is she going to do this?

"Meredith?" George prods, shaking her loose from her snowballing sense of overload.

She squeezes her eyes shut and rubs her temples. "Um, yeah," she says. "You're right. I wore a black dress." At least, she remembers seeing a black dress by Derek's foot that morning, and each new holy crap, each new realization is slaughtering her neurons, so, she'll just … she'll go with it. That's all she can do.

George beams, and he holds out his hand. She shakes it. "Sorry," he says. "It's just, you were very unforgettable."

"Thank you," she says, still feeling a bit faint as her mind starts to race again.

"Oh, gag me," Cristina says.

George flinches and steps back, a little further out of Meredith's orbit. He gives Cristina a wounded look. "Well," he says, recovering his grin as his gaze flicks back to Meredith. He's staring. At Meredith. He's staring. She doesn't remember him doing that. He continues, "At least, we'll be tortured together, right?"

"Sure," Meredith says faintly.

If she sticks to keeping things the same, she's going to have to be an intern again. An intern who doesn't know 99% of what she knows, now. An intern who doesn't have 99% of her current experience. That's bad enough, but what's worse is that she can't possibly remember all the patients she's seen and the lives she's saved or lost. She can't emulate what already happened if she has no idea, anymore, what she did. And what if she does remember, and she knows her patient is someone
who died the first time, but she can fix it if she treats the patient differently this time? She can't in good conscience let a patient die to preserve a timeline, no matter how much she loves her kids and her future life.

Can she?

**Stop**, she tells herself. **Freaking stop. Just … stop.**


"Bailey?" Cristina asks as she approaches.

The man points. "End of the hall," he says.

Meredith takes a deep breath to steel herself as she slips into line behind Cristina, and George follows. Cristina stops. "That's the Nazi?" she says, disbelief dripping from her tone.

"Yes," Meredith says, peering at the tiny black woman leaning against the nursing station. Even Bailey looks like a kid. She's so young. Meredith has more experience than her. Meredith blinks. **Meredith** is more experienced than this **Bailey.** Bailey hasn't even specialized, yet. Another **holy crap** moment. Meredith thinks she might die from the stress if the holy craps keep piling up like this. "Yes, that's her."

And so begins her second first day as an intern.

**Holy. Crap.**
A Harder Day's Night (Part Two)

Chapter Notes

For those of you who've just been curious, or are interested in re-watching the original show along with reading this, this story will be dealing with events from 1x01 - 2x05. Any scene where Meredith was present is fair game, though I certainly don't use all of them.

I have some company this weekend, so I'm posting this early. Chapter 04 may come just a little late - we'll see what my schedule is like.

Shortly after Bailey starts reciting to her interns her "five rules," the helicopter arrives with Katie Bryce strapped to a gurney. The poor girl is twitching, stuck in violent tonic-clonic seizures that leave her jaw clenched, urine dripping down her legs, and spittle oozing from the corners of her mouth. The paramedic calls them grand mal seizures, and Meredith files that away despite the chaos of the moment. Some medical terms have changed or lost favor over the years. It's going to be hard to keep everything straight.

Meredith doesn't get lost on the way to CT with Katie Bryce. She barely listens as the girl babbles about her stupid rhythmic gymnastics. Instead, she looks for Derek. She didn't notice him anywhere in the hospital the first time this happened, but maybe that was because she wasn't looking for him. And she needs a chance to talk to him. Explain.

Explain … what? Exactly? What explanation can she offer for getting stupid amounts of clingy after what was supposed to be a one night stand?

She can't imagine ever letting a guy get close to her again if he admitted the morning after that he loved her and asked her where their kids were. Talk about nutso.

Clearly … you have some shitty stuff going on, Derek said.

A diplomatic understatement.

At least, he'd been polite about it instead of saying, Bitch, you be cray.

Her shift passes at the speed of a comatose snail.

Meredith slogs through the hours as ineptly as she can manage, though her inner proud surgeon is screaming at purposefully making mistakes. She doesn't see Derek anywhere, despite keeping her eyes peeled for him. When Katie's parents burst into the room while Meredith's checking Katie's stats, Meredith finishes quickly and steps back to let them dote.

"Katie, honey, Mom and Dad are here," the mother says.

"They gave her a sedative for the CT scan," Meredith interjects, "so she's a little groggy."

The mother, a rail thin woman with platinum blonde hair that matches Katie's strand for strand, seems to notice Meredith for the first time. "Will she be all right?" the mother says.
"Our doctor at home said she might need an operation," the father adds in an anxious tone. "Is that true?"

"Well, she may need a craniot-" Crap. Meredith clamps her lips shut and clenches her teeth. Speaking of her inner proud surgeon, more powerful than ten medical students, able to leap tall diagnoses in a single bound … her inner proud surgeon is an irritating bitch who won't stop butting in. "I mean. I mean. Hang on, I'll find her doctor for you. Okay?"

"You're not a doctor?" says the father, frowning.

Meredith shakes her head. "Oh, I'm a doctor. I'm just not Katie's doctor. Sorry, I'll …. I'll be right back."

Meredith can't recall exactly where she found Bailey the first time this happened, so Meredith wanders a bit. She almost runs into the smaller woman when she opens the doorway leading out of the hospital's residential area and onto the main promenade.

"Katie's parents have questions," Meredith tells Bailey without preface or apology for the collision. "Who's supposed to answer them?"

"Katie belongs to the new attending, now," Bailey says. "Dr. Shepherd." She points toward the promenade. "He's over there."

Meredith follows Dr. Bailey's gesture with her gaze, and there he is. Derek. Standing there. Conferring with two other doctors about who knows what?

Finally.

Meredith's chest tightens as she waits for him to notice her. She takes a few steps closer. He looks up from the lab analysis sheet in his hands for a brief moment. His gaze finds her, but it's an absent sort of glance. He looks back to his lab analysis sheet. A moment passes. And then he does his double take and looks back in Meredith's direction. Their eyes meet. His jaw drops, but he picks it up in a matter of seconds.

He says something to his colleagues. He glances at her one more time. And then he bolts. Hellbent in the opposite direction like he's being chased by a rabid lion.

His departure confirms her suspicions, and her heart sinks as she watches him go. This is supposed to be where he chases her into the stairwell, and they have their chat, where she tells him no, no, no, and he says yes, yes, yes, and doesn't listen. Instead, their entire potential relationship is crashing down around her like a bad start to a Jenga game.

All from one stupidly botched morning after.

And, now, it seems, she has a big pile of blocks to start stacking again.

But how?

How on earth?

His solution when she ran was to chase her relentlessly. But she can't do that. If she chases him, she'll just look even more crazy, and he'll run even faster.

Worse, she's an intern, and he's an attending. Her boss. Her boss's boss. One wrong look from her,
and he could easily have her fired. Hell, she wouldn't be surprised if he has her let go as soon as he
can find his way to Richard's office to complain. She arrived late, so she already gave them cause,
and she doubts Richard would put up a fight. Richard may have a bit of a soft spot for Ellis Grey's
kid, but he doesn't know the adult version of Meredith, yet. There's no bond. He only knows of her.

Maybe, she should revise her plan to act like a real, first-time intern.

She can't afford to act inept, given this new development.

Can she?

Meredith tells a nurse to page Derek to Katie's room, so he can answer their questions. And then she
finds a seat in the waiting area and slumps into it. Her head is starting to throb, and all she wants is
for this shift to be over, so she can crawl into bed, and sleep, and not think about this for a while.

It's just too freaking much.

When Meredith gets an emergency page for Katie Bryce, Meredith pages Derek and Bailey, too,
and she runs. She runs her ass off. Immediately.

It turns out getting there fast doesn't change anything, though. Katie still goes into v-fib. Meredith
still needs the defibrillator to get things under control again.

"She's all right, now," the first nurse is saying as Derek rushes into the room. "Pressure's returning.
Grid's coming back."

"What the hell happened?" Derek asks.

Meredith doesn't miss the flash of fuck, fuck, fuck, I have to talk to her fly across his expression.
She sighs, trying not to let his reaction to her sting. "Another tonic-clonic-" she begins, only to halt
mid-word. She clears her throat. "I mean, another grand mal seizure. She went into v-fib."

"You were supposed to be monitoring her," he snaps.

Except this time, she's not too flustered and stressed and nauseated to respond. She's been through so
many crash situations like this, the whining heart monitor didn't faze her. "With all due respect, Dere-
" Damn it. Damn it, this is so freaking hard getting into the be kind, rew ind mindset of 2005. And
calling him by his first name? Not a good way to convince him she's not clingy. "Sir," she says,
instead, though it kind of galls her to call him that when they're supposed to be equals - partners - and
she can still see Renee kissing him in her mind's eye. She sighs, exasperated with herself, and
plunges onward. "I was monitoring her. I got here a full five minutes before anybody else, and I had
you paged immediately. Whether I was watching her or not has no bearing on whether she's going to
have a seizure, or whether she'll respond to meds, which she didn't, by the way."

"Prazepam?" Derek quizzes.

"Yes," Meredith says with a nod. "Four mills. And Phenobarbital. Forty-five mills."

Derek sniffs like he's irritated, but he doesn't respond to her. "Somebody give me her chart, please?"
he says, pointedly not looking at Meredith. A nurse complies, and he flips through the pages,
reading. He pinches the bridge of his nose. "She should be responding to ...." He sighs. "What is
wrong with this girl?"

"I got her sinus rhythm back," Meredith says, trying to reassure him. She resists the urge to touch his
forearm, or his shoulder, or … anything. "She's okay for now."

"What the hell happened?" Bailey snaps as she dashes into the room, panting.

Meredith repeats what she told Derek.

"Damn," Bailey says. "What is wrong with this girl?" Bailey continues, echoing Derek. She adds a dismissive, "Decent work, Grey."

But, at least, she said it. A compliment. From this iteration of Dr. Bailey, that's solid gold.

*Operation: Avoid Getting Fired* seems to be going okay, at least.

Derek's still engrossed with Katie's chart as Meredith slips out of the room.

---

Derek's at a loss. Again. He asks the interns for help. Again.

This, at least, is 100% familiar.

"Hey," Cristina says as they leave the conference room after hearing Derek's plea for assistance. "I want in on Shepherd's surgery. You've been the intern on Katie since the start. You want to work together? We find the answer, we have a fifty-fifty chance of scrubbing in."

Meredith bites her lip.

Another catch-22.

She doesn't want to offer to give the surgery to Cristina, because she needs to work with Derek. She needs to convince him she's not nuts, and that she's good at her job, and isn't worth having fired. The best plan for that would be to wait a little while, and then approach him alone with the miraculous solution.

But she also wants to be friends with Cristina.

Meredith thinks for a long moment. Thinks. Waffles. Agonizes. Fix stuff with Derek, or launch her friendship with Cristina? Fix or launch?

She doesn't … **need** another guaranteed method to get the surgery. Does she? She already has one. If Derek wasn't lying about why he picked her for it, and if things still go the same way, she'll still get to do it.

If.

"… Okay," she says, unable to curb the hesitation in her tone.

Cristina rolls her eyes. "Well, don't jump at the chance to work with me or anything."

"Sorry," Meredith rushes to say. "I just meant-

But Cristina shrugs. "I don't care. I'm not here to make friends."

Meredith frowns. She folds her arms, unsure of what else to say to that. *I know? Me, either, but it's going to happen, anyway?*

Cristina raises her eyebrows. "So. Library, then?"
"Yeah," Meredith replies with a nod, grateful for a segue. "Okay."

They turn as a singular unit, and they head in that direction.

It sucks knowing the answer to the problem already, because Meredith's not sure how much time is a reasonable amount of time to wait to have a miraculous "epiphany" about Katie Bryce's diagnosis, and Meredith can't freaking remember anything but the broad strokes about how this went the first time.

She and Cristina research in the library. Cristina engrosses herself in a book on epilepsy. Meredith places a random neuro book in front of herself on the table, and she opens it to a relevant page. She pulls out a notepad and pen. But she only pretends to read the book, and the "notes" she takes? Well, they're notes. But not about aneurysms.

*Things I want to happen,* she writes.

1. *I want my kids and my husband back.*

Which means ….

1a. *I need Derek to like me.*

1b. *I need to convince Derek I'm not a lunatic.*

1c. *I need to not suck at lying.*

1d. *I need pigs to fly.*

1e. *Crap.*

She crosses out lines 1d and 1e. She thinks for a moment.

2. *Same friendships.*

2a. Cristina.

2b. George.

2c. Izzie.

Seems reasonable. Meredith has no regrets, there. Maybe, she could make friends with Alex faster? But … really … why? What for? There's nothing wrong with her friendship with Alex, or how it developed, and, as far as she's aware, there never has been.

3. *Fix things.*

What the hell things? Why did Mark send her here?

3a. ….

She has no clue.

She sighs and ends up drawing useless squiggles on the 3a line.

Now, if Mark had dumped her somewhen later in the grand scheme of her life … she can think of scads of things to fix. Don't stick her hand on a live bomb. Don't beg Derek to pick her, choose her,
love her, because his affection is not worth the loss of her dignity, and he'll pick her, choose her, love her in the end, anyway. Don't let Derek or Alex or anyone get shot. Don't let a deranged ferry crash victim push her off a pier, and, failing that, don't not swim. Don't let George get hit by a freaking bus. Diagnose Izzie's melanoma before it metastasizes into Ghost Denny. Don't run off with Zola. Don't fall out of planes ….

Frankly, her life is such a horrific mess of tragedy and badness that she's not sure she can remember enough off the cuff to make a comprehensive bullet point list of it all.

Which is when she stills, and the sinking feeling returns to her gut.

Mark doesn't intend for her to be stuck here long enough to fix all that, does he? He can't possibly leave her here that long. He …. He just can't.

She needs to get back to her kids. She needs to fix things with Derek. Her Derek. Not this stranger Derek who thinks she's nuts.

But what if Mark has no intentions of taking her back, period?

What if she's stuck here, forever, with whatever choices she makes?

And that's when she shuts down again.

And all she does is stare into space.

Cristina dropping a heavy medical volume onto the library table with a loud smack startles Meredith out of her mental reboot. "Are you even working on this?" Cristina asks in an irritated tone. "Or am I doing all the heavy lifting?"

Meredith blinks. "What?"

Cristina rolls her eyes. "You're just sitting there, goggling like a fish."

… Sitting there? Right. Crap. Meredith gives herself a mental shake and glances at her watch. It's been about three hours. That seems … long enough? She closes her book. The book in which she hasn't flipped a page this whole time.

"I was thinking," Meredith says. "And, now, I have a theory."

Cristina's eyes narrow. "A theory."

Meredith nods. "Yes, a theory. As in an idea. Which is more than you can say."

Cristina folds her arms. "Well, what is it?"

"It's a long shot," Meredith says with a shrug, "but I think it's an aneurysm."

"Nothing showed up on the scans," Cristina counters.

"She's a rhythmic gymnast," Meredith says. "She says she fell last week, which is when the seizures started, and they've been escalating ever since. Maybe, the aneurysm is a tiny one that's hard to see and doesn't cause any of the traditional symptoms except seizures."

Cristina considers the idea for a long moment. "Dr. Shepherd would need to do a cerebral
angiography to check for that. We haven't run one of those." She looks positively dumbfounded when she admits, "An aneurysm's … possible. I guess."

Meredith nods. "Shall we go find him?"

"Maybe, he's still in the conference room, brainstorming," Cristina says.

They put their research material back onto the right shelves, and they head back that direction. They find the conference room empty, though, and so they continue onward to Derek's tiny office on the third floor.

"So, I wonder why he's here?" Cristina says as the elevator hums.

"Why who's here?" Meredith says.

"Shepherd. Have you read some of his research papers? He's kind of a rockstar. I don't get why he would come here. Seattle Grace's neurosurgery department doesn't even rank."

"Maybe, it will, now," Meredith says.

"Well, of course it will, now. But I wonder what kind of carrot on a stick he was offered."

"Maybe, he just wanted to leave New York," Meredith hedges.

"Yeah," Cristina says, "because it makes so much sense that he would pick up and leave a private practice with hospital privileges at Columbia for … well … here."

"How in the hell do you know all that?" Meredith says. They step out of the elevator onto the third floor.

Cristina shrugs. "I read his bio."

Meredith bites her lip, debating how to answer this. She can't spill the beans on Derek's reasons for being here. But she needs to start connecting with Cristina on a more personal level if they're ever going to be more than work friends.

"You can't comment, make a face, or react in any way," Meredith says.

Cristina's eyebrows raise. "What are you talking about?"

Meredith glances up and down the hallway to make sure they're alone. "I swear, I didn't know who he was at the time, but … Dr. Shepherd and I had sex last night."

Cristina's mouth opens. Closes. She makes a noise deep in her throat. And then she says, "Maybe, he got fired for cavorting with interns."

Meredith rolls her eyes. "He didn't get fired. He came here by choice. And he didn't know who I was last night."

"Did he tell you that he didn't get fired?"

Not exactly. "No," Meredith says.

Cristina frowns. "Well, was he good? I mean, he looks like he would be. Was it any good?"

Meredith sighs. "Really, really good."
"Jeez, Mere," Cristina says with a snort, and Meredith wants to cheer, hearing the diminutive form of her name coming from prickly Cristina's lips. "You are in so much trouble."

"Yeah," Meredith says. "I really freaking am."

When they find Derek and tell him their idea, he's doubtful.

"Well, you know the chances that a minor fall could burst an aneurysm," he says. "One in a million. Literally."

But after a few seconds to waffle, he decides to do the cerebral angiography, anyway.

Not two hours later, he's staring at a subarachnoid hemorrhage on the monitor screen in the imaging room, and he's saying, "I'll be damned."

Meredith can't help the tiny smile that pulls at her lips.

"Uh … Dr. Shepherd," Cristina says, stepping forward as he checks Katie's chart at the nurses' station. "You said that you'd pick someone to scrub in if we helped."

"Oh, yes, right," he says, glancing back at them before returning his focus to the chart in his hands. "Um. I'm sorry I can't take you both. It's going to be a full house."

He signs a sheet on the chart and flips it closed. His gaze shifts back to Meredith and Cristina. He looks at Meredith first. And then Cristina. And then at Meredith. He pauses. For a long moment, he pauses. She makes sure not to smile. Or look beg-y. Or do anything that might indicate to him that their relationship is not strictly professional. His eyes narrow, but his expression is unreadable.

He looks back at Cristina and offers a friendly smile. "Dr. Yang. I'll see you in the OR."

Cristina waits until he's not looking and pumps her fist. Meredith gapes. He didn't pick her. He ….

"But … Dr. Shepherd," she says, protesting.

"I can't take you both," he insists, not looking up from the sheet of paper he's reading. He's avoiding her is what he's doing. Avoiding eye contact. That freaking bastard. "I'm sorry," he adds.

And then he grabs the chart, tucks it under his arm, and leaves them in his wake.

"Sorry, Meredith," Cristina says, but she doesn't sound at all sorry, and why should she be? Nobody should be sorry for fairly receiving a reward. Nobody should be sorry for taking her shot.

Meredith shakes her head. "He freaking lied to me!"

"What did he lie to you about?" Cristina says.

Meredith sighs. "He said I …." She can't tell Cristina about what happened the first time. That he said he hadn't picked her because they'd slept together, but because she was good at her job. Except, based on this little display, he clearly had picked her because they'd slept together, or he never would have picked Cristina, because, if anything, Meredith's shown she's even more capable than she was the first time around. "He said …." She swallows. She can't tell Cristina. "Nothing. I'm just a freaking gullible idiot."

Cristina regards her for a long moment. "He promised you a surgery in exchange for sex, didn't he,
and now he backed out."

"No!" Meredith snaps, horrified. "No, last night wasn't like that."

Cristina folds her arms. "Uh huh."

"It wasn't," Meredith insists. "We didn't know we worked together!"

"Oh, come on, Meredith," Cristina says. "I'm not stupid. What are the chances that you'd meet your boss at some random place, and on top of that, not know he's your boss? Like one in a zillion? You expect me to believe that bull?"

"But that's what really happened," Meredith says, starting to shake. This isn't how it went before. This is not how it's supposed to go!

Cristina rolls her eyes. "Look, what you do to get ahead is your business. You want to be a shark, be a shark. But don't come crying to me when it doesn't work out." And then she stalks off.

"Cristina," Meredith calls, but Cristina doesn't turn around. "Cristina!" Meredith pleads to no avail. People are starting to stare. Patients. Nurses. "What the hell are you people looking at?" she snaps, and everybody takes extra pains to appear busy again.

But she can't just stand here. She flees, cool air whipping at her face. She finds the closest supply closet and slips inside. She sinks to the floor and clutches the bridge of her nose.

"I am alive," she whispers to herself. "I am awake. I am aware. And it's supposed to be 2012." Crap. "Why can't it be 2012?"

She straightens her knees, kicking a bucket out of the way in the process. Nothing is happening like it did the first time. Everything is all screwed up. And trying to fix things to be like they were just keeps making it worse. And Derek is a big fat liar. He's a lying liar who lies, and how did it take her eight years to realize she's in love with an irredeemable Pinocchio?

He probably did encourage Renee.

Her eyes burn as her exhaustion starts to spill out through her tear ducts.

Why couldn't this be a bad dream?

"Mark, where the hell are you?" she pleads.

But no one answers.

The hours keep crawling. Why won't this hellacious shift end?

"Uh," Alex stammers, "the common causes of post-op-"

Richard sighs and looks around the room. "Can anybody name the common causes of post-op fever?" he says, voice carrying through the ICU ward and down the hallways that split off from the main room like veins.

Meredith sighs. With her new perspective - knowing Alex will be her person and her dearest, most stalwart friend - the idea of humiliating him here feels wrong. But … Operation: Avoid Getting
"Fired. "Wind, water," she says, "wound, walking, wonder drugs. The five Ws. Most of the time, it's wind. Splinting or pneumonia." She looks at Alex, trying to beam some reassurance his way. "Pneumonia's really easy to assume."

Richard gives Alex a pointed look, and then turns back to Meredith. "What do you think is wrong with 4B?" he says.


"How would you diagnose?" he says.

Meredith doesn't even have to think. "Spiral CT, VQ scan, provide O2, dose with Heparin, and consult for an IVC filter."

Richard nods and turns to Alex. "Do exactly as she says. Then tell your resident that I want you off this case." He approaches Meredith, eye contact never breaking.

"You're the spitting image of your mother, you know," he says. He stops beside her and folds his arms again. "I don't want you showing up late again."

"I won't, sir," she assures him. "I had an-

He nods. "Emergency … thing," he says, cutting her off.

"Yes."

He stares at her for a long moment, eyes calculating. "Well, is everything better, now, with this … emergency … thing?"

"Oh, yes." No. No, it's not. It's worse, and she's exhausted. "I promise."

"Good," he says. He continues on his way.

"Chief," she calls after him.

He turns back to her.

She bites her lip. Should she ask? She shouldn't ask. But … "Dr. Shepherd … didn't talk to you about me." Like … as in firing me. "Did he?"

Richard's eyebrows knit, and he frowns. "No," he says, the word slow and cautious. "Why would he?"

"It's nothing," she's quick to say. "No reason. Sorry."

"Uh huh," Richard says, like he doesn't believe a word coming out of her mouth. But he doesn't press it, either. "Well, see you tomorrow, Grey."

Meredith nods, and this time, she lets him go.

After Derek scrubs out of Katie Bryce's surgery, after trawling the hospital three times top floor to basement, Meredith manages to hunt Derek down. The first two times she walked by, his office was dark. Now, there's a strip of white light underneath the door, which means … he's in there. Or someone else is.
She takes a deep breath outside the door. Paces a little. She has no idea what to say or how to explain. None. But … he's Derek. She's never had a problem talking to Derek before.

Maybe, she can wing it?

She raps on the door with the back of her hand.

"Yeah, come in," she hears in his familiar timbre.

She turns the knob, pushes the door open, and steps into … chaos. That's the only way to describe it. She didn't get a chance to see the inside of his office earlier, because she and Cristina caught Derek in the hallway as he was leaving it. Now, though ….

The room is a disorganized shoebox.

Box after box is stacked along the walls. Stacks of papers and books litter every shelf he has. The surface of his desk is invisible under all the refuse. A coffee cup sits on top of the papers in his inbox, branding a brown-stained ring into the top memo - something that would normally give him apoplexy. By the door, there's barely enough room in the refuse for the coat rack, where two wrinkled ties and a spare suit hang from the rungs.

She doesn't remember his office ever being this messy.

He can't even handle tilted lamp shades without developing an eye tick.

What's up with all the freaking clutter?

He's balanced precariously on his chair, and he has his feet propped on the corner of his desk. His eyes bug out when he sees her, and he pinwheels. His notes go flying.

It would be comical to watch if she weren't so upset with him.

"Dr. Grey," he sputters, and she can see it in his eyes.

He wants to bolt like his hair is on fire, just like he always does when a problem blows up in his face that he's not sure how to handle. She hates that about him.

_Hypocrite_, the tiny voice says, but she shoves it away. She doesn't have time for self-analysis right now. Stupid voices and their stupid doubts.

She closes the door behind her and stands in front of it, removing his escape route. "Dr. Shepherd," she says.

For a moment, he's speechless. His mouth opens and closes like he's a confused goldfish or something. Eventually, he manages a halfhearted, "What can I do for you, Dr. Grey?" in a tone that makes it clear what he really means is, _I hope there's nothing I can do for you, Dr. Grey_.

She folds her arms. "For one, you can stop acting like you've seen me naked."

She doesn't miss the way his gaze drifts downward, below her neckline, before it snaps back to her face. She gives him a pass, though, because she put the idea in his head.

"I didn't know you were my boss," she continues. "You didn't know I was your intern. It was supposed to be a one night stand. Can we just file it away as a stupid mistake and be professionals about this, so you can stop avoiding me like I'm Typhoid Mary, I can do my freaking job, and,
maybe, we can exchange words that make actual sentences?"

The mouth opening and closing continues for a moment. "Um," he manages. "Yes. Sorry." He slumps. All the fight or flight bleeds out of him, and then he's just there. Defeated. "I'm sorry," he says in a more glum, sincere tone. He pulls his fingers through his hair. "I've never …. I wasn't sure what to do. I …. I'm sorry." He sighs. "You're right. I was unprofessional."

A lump forms in her throat, hearing that.

"This … never happened to me before," he confesses. "I …." He sighs. "I don't date. Not in years. I'm a little out of practice. And …."

"And I acted insane the next day?" she says with a wry look.

He swallows, and he gives her a hint of one of his smirks. Like the Derek she remembers is there, just … lingering under the surface somewhere. "Is that a trick question?" he teases, though it's an awkward, weak thing, and the blush that follows tells her he regrets saying it.

He's afraid to play with her, she realizes. He's such a far cry from the smirky, forward, flirty, obnoxious guy she met the first time. But … when she thinks about his history, and where his head must be at right now … she finds herself unsurprised.

His wife just cheated on him with his best friend. He fled to Seattle, was lonely and downtrodden and convinced he was a failure, worked up the nerve to go out and try to find someone, and he dug up a Grade A lunatic. Yet one more failure to add to the list. Of course, he's going to be gun shy, now, and it's crazy to her, seeing how such little nudges in the timeline can have such drastic impact on the overall result.

She gestures at the chair across from his desk. He doesn't say yes. He doesn't seem thrilled. But he doesn't say no, either.

The chair only has a small stack of junk on it. She lifts the pile of folders off the leather and adds it to the giant mess on his desk, and then she sits. A hush fills the space between them.

How on earth to explain … any of this? She remembers hearing somewhere that the best kind of lie is a lie that contains as much truth as possible. She thinks for a long moment while he peers at her with an expectant expression.

"I was married before," she confesses. "He …." How does she even explain the thing with Renee in simple terms? Crap. The glove doesn't fit quite right, but she settles on, "He cheated on me, and I …." Hopped backward in time. "Left."

"Oh, I'm … sorry," Derek says.

"You look a lot like him."

His eyebrows creep toward his hairline. "I do?"

"Yes, you do. A lot."

"Oh," he says, the single word laden with gravity.

She nods. "I was half asleep, and hungover, and there he was, next to me, and I … said things to him. I said that I love him, and I want to fix things, because I do. But you're not him," she says. The lump in her throat explodes to softball sized. Saying it makes her realize that it's true. "You're not
him," she repeats. He's not Her Derek. Not yet. He's a stranger she hasn't yet gotten to know, and she can't hold the future Derek up to this past Derek as a litmus test, because this Derek doesn't have a collection of Meredith's baggage arrayed in his mental closet, and she shouldn't have his baggage in hers, yet, either. "And I'm sorry if I sounded insane or clingy or whatever. I promise I'm not insane or clingy."

Derek stares at her, unblinking. She can see the wheels turning behind his eyes. And she can see exactly when his perception changes, and she morphs, from the nut bar who professed her love to him, to just another victim of a broken marriage. A victim like him.

A kindred spirit.

He looks at his lap for a long moment. And then back at her. "Is that why you wanted to ignore me?"

She frowns. "What?"

"Because I look like your ex," he says. "Is that why you didn't want me around?" He sighs and finishes his own leap to the land of conclusion before she can answer. "And I just wouldn't take no for an answer. I'm sorry."

"It's okay," she finds herself saying, tension draining out of her.

"Does he have your kids?" Derek says.

She blinks. "Huh?"

"You asked me where our kids were," Derek replies. "Does your ex have them?"

Her heart squeezes. Lie with the truth. Lie with the truth. "Yes, he does. He …." She blinks again as her eyes water. She hasn't been thinking about it because she's been so stuck on trying to get through this hellacious acid trip. "I miss them."

She misses him. And she's not sure she'll ever get back to them. Any of them. Ever. Not if the timeline keeps getting more and more screwed up. Not if Mark continues hiding. She blinks one more time, and the wetness spills.

She scrubs at her face with the backs of her hands. God, what is this? She's not a cryer. And she doesn't cry in front of strangers. And this Derek is a veritable stranger.

God, damn it.

His chair creaks, and a faint rustling sound follows. When she opens her eyes, she sees a white blobby thing hovering in her field of view. She blinks, and her focus returns. He's holding out a tissue for her. She grabs it, and she wipes her eyes. She sniffs. She doesn't apologize or thank him, though. She'd rather pretend she never lost her cool.

She swallows until the hurting lump in her throat is gone, and her chest doesn't feel so tight. "I want to know why you didn't pick me for the surgery today," she says. "I was the intern already on the case, and I've been more than competent."

He regards her for a long moment. "I should have," he admits. "You were." He blushes. "I just … didn't want to give you any more ideas."

"So, you didn't pick me, because we had sex," she says.
"No," he says, "the sex part was fine."

She raises her eyebrows. "Fine?"

He sighs. "Well, no. It was actually the best sex I've had in years, but …," he says, shame lacing his tone. Like he doesn't want to admit he and Addison were a failure a long time in the making. He pulls his fingers through his hair, agitated. "Just … the after. You, uh …" 

"I'm really sorry I freaked you out."

He gives her a wan smile. "I'm really sorry I took away a professional opportunity for personal reasons."

"Okay, good," she says with a curt nod. "Good." She stands. "So … professionals?"

His lip twitches, but she can't call it an expression. She can't read it. "Yes," he says, his tone much more friendly than when she arrived. "Professionals."

They shake hands, and she leaves.

Forty-eight hours late, and with massive weights attached to their ankles, team MerDer is back at the starting line. Mertina is a mess. And Mark is a glaring no-show.

It's not a beginning she ever would have hoped for.

But it's a beginning all the same.
Chapter Notes

Thank you so so much for all the lovely feedback! I really appreciate it! I'm posting this early since I have a few spare minutes, and I'm not sure I'll have time tomorrow. I hope you enjoy!

P.S. FFnet has decided it's super fun to sometimes chop out random sentences (often the tail end of one sentence, and the start of another, which makes a whole new sentence out of what was once two, and the resultant Frankensentence makes no freaking sense whatsoever). If you happen to notice one of these issues, can you please let me know? Thanks!

A week later, Mark's still a no-show, and Meredith's still stuck reliving this horrible hellhole part of her life. She's waking up before some people go to bed, doing nothing but scut work while she "learns," and being paid a pittance for it. She has no say about her shifts, or her life. The hospital owns her. Meanwhile, Cristina hates her, and Derek's, at best, neutral.

Meredith's trying not to worry. Mark wouldn't leave her here with no explanation. He wouldn't.

And yet … he has.

He abandoned you, the irritating voice taunts. Just like everyone does, in the end.

She sighs, trying her best to shove her doubts away, but ….

Whatever.

She's decided … to just do the best she can.

That's all she can do.

She wants her future back, and thanks to Mark's mysterious Houdini act, she's not sure she'll be able to return to said future without slogging there "on foot," so to speak. So … while she won't let herself stress too much about making every little thing match what happened the first time - there's no way she'll let a patient die if she knows, thanks to her new, wacky hindsight, that she can prevent it - she'll try her best to hit the major stops on the way to her 2012 destination.

George and Izzie being Meredith's roommates? Major stop. She's quick to acquiesce when George and Izzie ask for shelter.

"Thank you, Meredith," George says.

"Yes, thank you," Izzie adds. "I swear you won't regret this."

Meredith snorts. "I guess, we'll see."
George gives her a shoulder squeeze that lasts … and lasts …. They're all standing at a busy hallway junction like an arterial obstruction. The echoes of voices, both close and distant, cluster and bounce off the walls like ping pong balls, until the surrounding space is a solid, loud murmur. Two paramedics stride past, deep in conversation, and they almost bump into her. She and George are creating a traffic jam.

"George," Meredith says, the word flat.

"What?"

"Is this thank you going to end sometime soon?"

He snaps his hands back like he's been burned. "Sorry," he says. "Sorry. Thank you, Meredith. It'll be nice to get out from under my mother."

Meredith sighs. "I know that feeling."

"My mom irons my scrubs, you know," he adds.

"I do know," she replies, searching the crowd for Miranda.

He frowns. "You do? Did I already tell you that? I don't remember telling you that."

Meredith doesn't get a chance to reply, though. "I see you bring bribes, now, too, huh?" Cristina says as she strides toward them from the surgical wing. She stares at the styrofoam coffee cup in Meredith's hands with an eye roll.

"Too?" Izzie says, eyebrows rising toward her hairline. "What else is there to get surgeries besides bribes?"

"I don't know," Cristina replies. "Actual skill? Ask Meredith."

Meredith glares. "Cristina ….."

Izzie turns to Meredith. "So, what else is there to get surgeries besides bribes?"

"Nothing," Meredith replies. "Cristina's just ...." She sighs. "It's not a bribe."

"It's totally a bribe," Cristina replies.

"It's a freaking mocha latte," Meredith snaps. "Why are you so mad at me?"

Cristina did, after all, sleep with Burke. Maybe, not yet, but she will. And then there was that thing with Marlowe. And she was fine with the Derek thing the first time. What's different, now?

"Yeah, what's going on with you two?" Izzie says, frowning.

But Cristina only shrugs.

When Bailey steps out of one of the side rooms, she heads straight for her clot of interns. "George," she says without preface. "You're running the code team. Meredith, take the trauma pager. Cristina, deliver the weekend labs to the patients. Izzie, you're on sutures."

Meredith shoves the coffee at Dr. Bailey. "Mocha latte?" she says.

It's only been a week, but Meredith misses surgery. She misses cutting. She misses being able to act
competent and not have it look weird. She misses being able to make decisions. And she misses terrified interns giving her her own bribe-y mocha lattes, damn it.

At least, she knows that actually asking Bailey to allow Meredith to assist in the OR will have the opposite effect, and so she doesn't. Still, that doesn't mean she can't add a few friendly gestures here and there to make her the most appealing choice out of the five of them when a surgery does come along.

Bailey takes the caffeinated offering without word, though her eyes narrow, like she thinks she's seeing a scam in progress. She's just not sure what the scam may be.

"Mocha latte, my ass," Cristina grumbles against Meredith's ear.

Meredith ignores her venom, though. She gives Miranda the most pleasant smile she can manage and heads off for her assignment without protesting. All Meredith can do is hope that, after a few weeks of being lavished with lattes and good behavior, Miranda might feel benevolent.

Derek's doodling on his Sidekick as Meredith approaches the elevator and sidles into the space a few feet in front of him. She has yet another holy crap! moment when she hears the tap tap tap of his fingers flying across the little phone's tiny keys. Actual, physical keys. Like a keyboard. The iPhone hasn't been invented, yet. Nor the Android. She could make a freaking killing if she had money to invest in the stock market. Too bad she's also a broke resident in 2005, and what little she makes is going into the upkeep of her mother's house, and, you know, important things. Such as food.

"Seattle has ferryboats," Derek says behind her, tearing her from her musing.

Meredith turns to face him, eyes narrowing. He can't seriously be …. "Yes," she says, tone cautious, searching.

"I didn't know that," he says, not looking up from his phone. "I've been living here six weeks. I didn't know there were ferryboats."

Her lips twitch, and before she knows it, she's grinning.

He's flirting. He's flirting with her. She has no idea how this happened, how they went from agreeing to be professional to him flirting with her, but she won't knock it. She never thought she'd be happy to have him acting like an obnoxious, oversexed jerk again, but she is. Her heart feels like it's going to burst out of her chest.

"Seattle is surrounded by water on three sides," she says, allowing her grin to slide into something more … come hither.

He nods. "Hence the ferryboats." The elevator dings, and he looks up from his phone, steps closer. "Now, I have to like it here."

He gives her a strangely hollow grin, but it's a grin, nonetheless, and he's got his sparkle-eye thing going full blast. She feels her insides tighten, just looking at him. He's so … young. She loves his older, distinguished, silver fox look in 2012, but in 2005 he's just … so … hot. She swallows, barely hearing the clap as he closes his phone and puts it in his coat pocket.

He continues, "I wasn't planning on liking it here." The elevator clears out, and he steps forward, closer to her, close enough that the heat of his body radiates against her skin. Their shoulders brush. "I'm from New York. I'm genetically engineered to dislike everywhere, except Manhattan."
It takes all of her willpower to step away from him and into the elevator. He follows. She presses the button for the fourth floor. He hits the button for the fifth.

"I have a thing for ferryboats," he repeats.

The doors of the elevator trundle shut, and then they're alone. In the elevator. Their spot. She knows how this is supposed to go. More no, no, no on her part, and more yes, yes, yes on his, including some crap about a line and a marker, and then she jumps him. The jumping part is the vivid memory. She fully intends to do the jumping again. With gusto.

She glances at him, a sly smile on her face. "I'm not going out with you."

All humor drains from his face, and he steps back. "Did I ask you to go out with me?"

She blinks. "You're not flirting with me?"

The silence stretches for a long moment. She watches a war being fought in his gaze. He can't decide what to say. "Meredith …," he begins, tone gentle, "I really don't want you to get the wrong idea."

"Professionals," she says, heart sinking.

"Right," he says with a nod. "Plus, I'm your boss."

She sighs. "You're my boss's boss."

He rolls his eyes.

She folds her arms around her binder and hugs it to her chest like a shield. "So, what the hell was the ferryboat thing about, if you're not flirting?" she demands. "Seriously? How can you not know there are ferryboats here?"

His mouth opens. And closes. And opens again. He backs up another step, and his back thumps against the metal wall. She makes a mental note to dial it down. Damn it, this is hard.

"I knew there were ferryboats," he admits slowly. "I was just trying to be friendly."

She raises her eyebrows. "Friendly?"

"Yes, friendly, Meredith," he replies. "It's this thing called a segue. It's often used to start platonic conversations."

She snorts. He's still a giant smart ass, at least. "And how is being friendly in any way professional?" she says.

Silence fills the space between them, and he looks at her like she's from outer space. "You know, I feel very sorry for your coworkers," he says. "They must be miserable." A shallow smirk slides onto his face like it has a mind of its own.

"Yeah. Totally miserable," she says. She sighs. No flirting, no jumping, and now she's thinking about the other relationship she has yet to repair.

He frowns. "Did I say something wrong again?"

"No, it's just … I'm not getting along very well with Cristina."

"Dr. Yang?"
She nods.

"I'm sorry," he says.

She shrugs. "Nothing you can do about it."

"No, I guess not," he says.

She glances at him. She risks a suggestive smile. "Do you want to do something about it?"

He gives her a look. "That would be unprofessional."

"Unprofessional," she says, deflating again. Damn it. "Right. Which we're not."

"Definitely not," he agrees with a curt nod.

The elevator dings, and the doors trundle open. She leaves him behind to head up to floor five and do … whatever. "We'll talk later?" he says, hopeful, but with none of the playful smirky-ness of the first time they did this whole elevator thing.

"Sure," she says over her shoulder. And then the elevator doors trundle shut again, and he's gone.

She sighs. She didn't think there was such thing as platonic flirting, but there it is. Flirting so platonic and frustrating it hurts. If she could just get him to take the leap and admit that what they were doing was sexy flirting ….

Oh, holy crap.

The realization hits her like a stone.

Derek's … not a leaper. She never got that before. That he's not an emotional risk taker, and his whirlwind with Meredith was a freak accident where his heart jumped into the deep end before his head even realized he was at the pool. But it fits, now that she thinks about it.

Derek Shepherd doesn't leap.

Which means …? She's not sure what that means. But it's something important.

Her pager beeps. She glances down at it. The first trauma of the day.

She takes off at a run.

"Are you the surgeon they sent?" a concerned-looking nurse says as Meredith trots toward her.

Meredith nods. "Yes."

"We've got a rape victim," the nurse says. "You better get in there."

Meredith bites her lip. She can hear the heart monitor beeping with distress from here. She slips into the trauma room to find a young woman on a gurney, skin barely visible underneath the blood. Blood everywhere. The leopard print flats are what draws Meredith's attention, though, and a lump forms in her throat when she sees them.

Alison.
And Meredith didn't wear those same shoes today. The leopard print ones. They're resting in the bottom slot of her shoe tree, untouched. She hadn't remembered. And, for some reason, the fact that she hadn't remembered to wear them bothers her so much her eyes water.

"What's her status?" Meredith says.

"Twenty-one-year-old female found down at the park," a trauma nurse states tersely. "Post-trauma. She came in with a GCS of six. BP eighty over sixty. Obvious signs of head trauma. Unequal breath sounds." The nurse looks pointedly at Meredith, eyebrows raised. "She's ready for x-ray. You ready to roll?"

Meredith stares at the shoes. At Alison.

The girl woke up. She was a fighter. But she'd been transferred to a rehab center not long into her recovery. When she'd left Seattle Grace, she'd been blind in one eye and aphasic. Her obliterated motor cortex had caused partial right-side paralysis from face to feet, which, in turn, had caused her trouble moving her limbs, swallowing, talking, chewing, and so many other "simple" activities that healthy adults tend to take for granted. Beyond that small snapshot, Meredith didn't know what had become of Alison, though she can guess the woman lost her independence.

But there's no averting fate, this time. The injury has already happened. And this is one of those instances where the ability to prognosticate with blistering accuracy utterly sucks.

Welcome to Seattle, Alison.

"Hey," the trauma nurse snaps. "Are you awake?"

Meredith shakes her head. "Yes," she says. "Sorry." She grabs Alison's slack hand and squeezes it, because there's nothing else Meredith can do but do what she did last time, and be there. "Call it in to clear CT," Meredith says. "Let them know I'm coming. Load up the portable monitor. Call respiratory for a ventilator. I'll get x-rays while I'm down at CT."

The trauma nurse nods. An orderly moves in to wheel Alison away, but Meredith steps closer to the gurney. "No, it's okay," she tells the orderly, who raises his eyebrows in surprise. "I've got this one. Thanks."

She grips the metal railing, feeling the cool metal press against her palms. She sighs. And then she pushes Alison's stretcher to CT.

"I'm so sorry, Alison," she says. "For what it's worth, though, I'm here."

And then there's nothing else to say.

The EKG monitor bleats at a sluggish pace, filling the grim silence in the OR with a beep … beep … beep beep beep beep beep beep … that lacks any sort of rhythm. It says Alison is hanging on, but her heart is an unprepared runner stumble-step-skipping at the end of a marathon. She's hurt - very hurt - and her body is overtaxed, trying to keep itself alive.

Meredith shifts on her feet, adjusting the retractor as she tries to work out a crick in her neck. Joints pop audibly in the quiet OR. Not even minutes out of CT, Alison was wheeled into emergency trauma surgery, and they've been here for over an hour, now, fixing all the broken things.

"She's going to spend a hell of a lot of time in recovery and rehab," Derek says, half in awe, half dripping with disappointment, as he attempts to fix Alison's expanding subdural hematoma.
"If she survives," Burke mutters.

Derek looks up from his work. "What is she, like five foot two, and a hundred pounds? And she's still breathing after what this guy did to her?" His gaze creases with dark, smoldering hate. "If they catch him, they should castrate him."

Burke nods and leans forward. "See how shredded her hands are?" Burke says. "She tried to fight back."

"Tried to?" Derek says with a derisive snort. "The rape kit came back negative. She kicked his ass."

"So, we have a warrior among us?" Burke says with a smile.

Meredith swallows. "Alison. Her name is Alison."

Derek meets Meredith's eyes. His gaze softens. "Alison," he says, a soft, murmuring string of syllables. He looks back to the open skull flap. "Hang in there, Alison," he adds, even softer still, so soft Meredith can hardly hear him speak.

Silence stretches as everyone works.

After a while, Burke says, "I think I may have found the cause of our rupture." He pulls a mutilated piece of something shaped a bit like a fingerling potato from Alison's mouth. There's a ridge of jutting flesh just below the rounded end - a corona, frenulum, and glans, clear as day. The torn end is a masticated mess. Burke squints. "What is this?" he says, baffled. He raises the thing to the light and stares at it. "Does anyone know what this is?"

There's nothing about his tone that says he's quizzing interns. He genuinely doesn't know what he's looking at. To Meredith, though, it's so obvious it makes her snort. One would think Dr. Burke would have seen more of these than Meredith, given that he owns one. But ….

"It's a penis," Meredith said, opting for blunt. "She bit it off."

Burke drops the fleshy thing into the trash basin like he's been burned. Which, again, one would think he'd be less squeamish, given, a, his years of experience as a high-powered surgeon, and, b, the fact that he sees one of these things in the shower every day, but ….

Derek leans forward and peers at the ruined phallus. His eyes crinkle as he smiles. Derek is not squeamish. "I do believe that's not re-attachable," he says with a cheerful lilt. "What a shame."

"Yeah," Meredith says, nodding. "I mean, I know we took the Hippocratic oath and all-"

"Hey, now," Derek interjects, "no one is saying we wouldn't treat the guy, if he came in here."

I'm pro-punishment, she remembers him admitting, and with his childhood, seeing his dad murdered right in front of him, who the hell can blame him?

"No," Meredith is quick to say. "Of course, we would treat him - that's what we do - but … it doesn't necessarily suck that we can't. In this case, I mean." She's not sure she's explaining this very well, but -

"Today, bitchy karma's a good thing?" Derek suggests.

Meredith nods. "Yeah," she says with a curt nod, remembering how all of this ends, with Alison half-blind and half-paralyzed. "Today, it's really freaking good."
Derek looks at Meredith with a softening expression. "Yeah," he echoes in that soft, reverent tone, like he's looking at her and finding revelation. Finding … a good surprise. He nods. "Yeah."

And then he returns to the task of saving Alison's life.

Meredith heads to the nearest nurses' station to find some counter space where she can rest her clipboard. She has to fill out chain-of-custody forms. For a chewed up penis. She sets the biohazard cooler containing the penis on the lip of the desk.

George looks up from his paperwork, eyebrows raised, as she sets down her clipboard and searches for a pen. "What's that?" he says, glancing at the cooler and then back to her.

For some reason, men seem to be, as a rule, very freaked out by chewed up penises. So far, Derek's been the only one who seemed happy about it. She supposes it's kind of like that reflex that makes them all squirm and wince and cover their groins when they see a fellow male get hit in the scrotum.

"Don't ask," she tells George. "You don't want to know."

"I do want to know," he says. "Really."

"You really want to know?" she says. Maybe, he'll be a fan of the divine justice, like Derek was, instead of attacked by a sudden case of the heebie-jeebies. "You can't go back once you know, you know."

"No, really," George insists. "I do."

She frowns, but whatever. If he wants to know …. "It's a penis," she explains. "My patient bit it off her would-be rapist."

George blinks. "So, somewhere out there, there's a guy ….

"Without a penis, possibly bleeding to death," she says, nodding. "Yes."

George seems to be a heebie-jeebies person. He shudders like he stepped into a meat freezer without his clothes on. "Okay," he admits. "You're right. I guess I didn't want to know."

"Told you," she can't resist adding with a smile.

He snorts. "Yeah, yeah. I walked right into it. News at 11."

She chuckles. She's missed George. "Sorry," she says in a warm, affectionate tone.

When she looks up from her paperwork, pen clutched between her fingers, she frowns. George is staring at her like she just hung up the stars in the sky for him, and it's … disconcerting.

"What?" she says.

"Do you …?" He shakes his head and clears his throat, suddenly awkward. He breaks eye contact. "Nothing. Sorry."

"Why do I have to be the one that gets hugged?" Cristina whines as she rounds the corner and steps behind the desk.

"Because," Alex replies, "I don't do that. Besides, you're the ovarian sister, here." He doesn't stop at the station, just keeps walking.
"Did you seriously just …?" Cristina calls after him. She rolls her eyes. She raises her voice to add, "Since when has the possession of ovaries become an insult?"

Alex doesn't seem to care, and he doesn't stop. He rounds the corner and disappears. Cristina looses a huffy sigh and leans against the wall by the desk.

"So, what's up with you?" she says to George, ignoring Meredith.

George shrugs. "Meredith's carrying a penis around in a jar," he says.

Cristina's eyebrows knit. She thinks for a moment. "Oh, from the rape surgery?" she says, but it's to George, not Meredith. It's like, to her, Meredith isn't even standing there. Cristina steps toward the cooler, cracks open the lid, and peeks inside.

George opens his mouth to reply, but Meredith speaks first. "Yeah," she says over Cristina's shoulder as they peer at the penis. Meredith is in the room, damn it, whether Cristina wants to pretend Meredith's invisible or not. "I need to preserve chain of custody or whatever."

Cristina snorts. "Talk about taking a bite out of crime," she mutters, and then she leaves, not offering Meredith another glance, or a hello, or anything. Meredith swallows, watching her go.

Damn it.

"You okay?" George asks over her shoulder, concern dripping from his tone.

"I don't understand why she hates me," Meredith says as she turns back to him.

He shrugs. "She's Cristina. She hates things."

"Yes, but she's not supposed to hate me. She didn't before."

His eyebrows rise toward his hairline. "Before?"

Oops. "Nothing, sorry," she mutters with a sigh. "I'm just being stupid."

George's chair squeaks as he scoots a little closer. He gives her a grin. "You know what you need?"

Her chest aches, and a lump forms in her throat. She remembers arguing with him about this before, trying to refuse his offer, but … she knows Alison is going to be permanently broken. And she doesn't know if she'll ever see Her Derek again. Or her kids. And she's missed George so freaking much.

In this moment, she can't think of anything she'd like to do more than stare at babies with George O'Malley except, maybe, go home. Home home. 2012 home.

But 2012 home isn't an option, and staring at babies is.

She smiles. "Let's go," she says, grabbing the cooler from the counter.

George is happy to follow.

The problem with re-looking at re-babies with re-George is that Meredith's a mother, now. Will be a mother? Whatever. All she can think of when she sees the small, wriggling little bundle in the closest isolette is how Bailey looked the first time she held him in her arms.
He was so small he could have fit in her purse. His nose was wrinkled, and he squinted at the world like it had confounded him. He had ten tiny fingers. Ten tiny toes. A squiggle birthmark on his little thigh. Faint, fuzzy wisps of dark hair the same color as Derek's.

And then all she can think about is how Derek looked when she handed him their son - so awed and happy and we made this? and overwhelmed, all stirred into an emotional soup.

"Meredith, are you …?" George says, but he doesn't finish his question. He doesn't need to.

He wraps her up in his arms, warm and solid, and then it's worse, because she's thinking about the children and husband she might never find her way back to, while being hugged by a man she never thought she'd see again, and it's too much. It's all … too much.

Her brain breaks.

Being here.

In this place.

It's too much.

"I'm sorry," she blurs, gasping as she tries to catch her breath. "I'm sorry. I'm …."

"Hey, it's okay," George is quick to say.

He pulls her away from the viewing window. Away from the squirming, crying babies. Away from the visual knives. And then he stands with her while she untwists the knots she's made out of herself. He doesn't say anything until she takes one last deep breath and blows it out, and then she nods.

"Do you want to talk about it?" he says.

She shrugs. "I … don't know what I'd say. I …." She swallows. "I just miss my family."

George's expression sinks like a stone. "And all I've been talking about today is how badly I want to get away from mine," he says. "I'm sorry."

"No," she says, shaking her head. "No, it's okay. I'm just …." She sighs. "I'm fine. But can we talk about something else and, maybe … go hang out in geriatrics, instead?"

George snorts. "Okay. Deal." They fall into step and head down the hall, far, far away from the babies. "So, do you have a little sister or brother or something?"

She grits her teeth. Lie? Be honest? She thinks if she lies, she won't be able to keep the lies straight, after a while. "No, I had two kids," she says, and she lets the verb tense sit there in the otherwise silence like a blaring bullhorn.

His eyes widen. To his credit, he doesn't say anything foot-in-mouth-y like, "Wait. Had?" And he doesn't say anything woefully inadequate like, "That sucks." No.

He says nothing, does nothing, but offer his silent support.

She's missed George.

She forgot how much.
She finds Derek later in Alison's ICU cubicle, poring over something on his laptop. A research project, maybe. Something to keep him occupied. Dark circles hug his eyes, much like the ones she knows she has, based on her last pass by a mirror in the bathroom. This day has been a 100-proof emotion cocktail, and she's exhausted. She's feeling a little more settled, at least, thanks to her big dose of George time.

The top of Alison's head is swathed in bandages, and her face is covered with long lines of butterfly stitches where her skin was ripped open by … a knife … or fingernails … or whatever. Her nose is broken. Her skin is a blotchy black patchwork of bruises. She's intubated. And she's still unconscious, which, in this case, is a bit of a blessing, Meredith thinks, because no pain medication on this earth could mute the kind of agony that comes from this level of physical damage. Alison's body is basically a collection of injuries wrapped in skin.

"How is she?" Meredith says, though she can't stop herself from sounding depressed, because she already knows the answer. Her hind … Fore? Hind-foresight …? Whatever the hell it is. Right now, it freaking sucks.

Derek glances up from his laptop to the woman in the hospital bed. "No change," he says, sounding glum. He looks back to his laptop.

"Have you been here all night?" Meredith asks, though she knows the answer to that question, too.

"Hmm," Derek says, engrossed with whatever he's reading. "Yep." Another pause. "You know I have four sisters?" he says. Yes, she does know, but she doesn't interrupt him. "Very girly, tons of kids. If I was in a coma, they'd all be here. I'd want them here. Having no one?" He shakes his head sadly. "Can't imagine that."

Meredith frowns at Alison. "I can."

He peers up her. Sympathy slides across his expression like water. He's thinking of her "ex," and how she said she left him, and her kids, and how she said her ex still had them. She can tell.

"What about your mother?" he says as sort of a half-hearted consolation. He dips his hand into a plastic bag that used to be full of trail mix and pops a lone raisin into his mouth. Then he smooshes the now empty bag into a ball, dumps it into the trashcan near his feet, and stands. He heads to the sink in the corner to wash off his hands. "She'd be in here ordering all the surgeons around. She'd fly these cowboys in from Prague to do these amazing medical procedures."

Meredith bites her lip. *That's true,* she remembers saying the first time. *I do have my mother.* But in that timeline, she'd been trying to keep Derek away from her, not pull him closer. In that timeline, she didn't trust him, yet. She didn't trust anyone. Not with information about her mother's illness.

"No," Meredith says, staring at Alison. "She wouldn't."

A lump forms in her throat. It's weird being back in a timeline where her mother is still alive. Visiting her last week was like having a donkey kick Meredith in the gut. Awful. Painful.

*Are you the doctor?* her mother asked, alive, but still an echo of the past.

Meredith wishes she could remember when her mother's next lucid day will be. She wants to visit her mother when her mother can be her mother. She wants …. She's not sure what she wants. One last real conversation? Maybe.

"Meredith, I'm certain she would," Derek tries to assure her as he steps closer. He's close to her space, a navy-scrub-clad bastion at the edge of it, but not … in it. Not too far. There's a professional-
sized bubble between them. Not a friend bubble or a lover bubble, but a coworker bubble. He gives her an encouraging smile that doesn't meet his eyes. "Mothers do that sort of thing, you know."

"Not my mother," Meredith replies.

He frowns. "I think it's part of the mother code."

"My mother is sick. She's been sick a long time."

She watches his expression sink like a stone. He cares for her. He does. That hasn't changed, even in this fucked up timeline. But …. "Oh, Meredith," he says, gravity in his tone. "What's her diagnosis?"

"Early-onset Alzheimer's," Meredith says.

"I'm so sorry," he says, deep and sincere. He inches closer. She eyeballs the bubble. It's getting smaller.

Meredith sighs. "Yeah."

"You must think I'm a jackass," Derek says.

She shakes her head. "I don't think you're a jackass."

"You must."

"I don't," she says. She offers him a hesitant smile. "I actually kind of like you."

His eyebrows creep upward in surprise. "Only kind of?"

She snorts. "Wait," she says. "First, you're convinced I think you're a jackass, and, now, you're offended I only kind of like you?"

He shrugs. His eyes are twinkling, though the twinkle is dim. The bubble shrinks another millimeter as he shifts forward. "I've been known to waffle," he says.

"Waffle," she echoes, tone flat with disbelief.

"Yes," he says with a wink. "I'm a waffler," he says. And the bubble is shrinking, still. Coworker has shrunk to friend, which is knocking on the door of lover. "It's terrible," he adds, shaking his head. "This waffling."

"Waffling is terrible?"

He nods. "Oh, yes."

She swallows.

She can imagine herself wrapped in his arms. She can imagine him telling her that everything will be okay, and that, somehow, she'll get back to the Derek she really wants to be with. She can imagine his palms sliding across her skin, and she can imagine the bluster of his breath against the nape of her neck as he leans to kiss her, and she can imagine the soft, rumbly hmm he looses that lets her know how undone by her he is. None of it is hard to picture when he's standing so close and winking his quirky little wink.

"Derek, you can't tell me this isn't flirting," she says, gentle, hoping.
He sighs, and he pulls away, and she can't help but feel bereft and abandoned all over again as the lover bubble expands back to coworker. Why is he always leaving her?

"Meredith, I do like you," he admits. "I do."

Which … duh. Crazy morning clinginess aside, she remembers how bright the sparks were that night at Joe's, after they got past the awkward if I know you, I'll love you? crap. She folds her arms across her chest like a shield. "But?"

"But … you're my intern," he says. "Beyond the fact that it's inappropriate-"

She snorts. "If you're so dead set on defining whatever the hell this is as being inappropriate, then why do you keep not-flirting flirting with me?"

"Beyond the fact that it's inappropriate, Meredith," he says, ignoring her question, "if people found out, I'd be okay, but your whole career would be impacted, and you … you're brand new," he says. He pulls his fingers through his hair, agitated, and he starts to pace. "I don't want to be the reason a great surgeon, who might someday, for all I know, save my life-" God, she thinks with an eye roll, if only he knew.-not be in a position to save it, because we had an affair, and she had to move to another state to find someone willing to hire her."

Her eyes narrow. He seems so freaking determined. Determined to be that guy. The one who does the right thing. It's such a 180 from the guy who chased her all over the hospital, relentless, asking and asking and asking for a date. Flirting like his life depended on it.

Why couldn't he have been like this the first time?

Did it really only take her acting like a nut ball for five minutes in the aftermath of their one-night stand to bump him off of his wayward path to sexual harassment?

She reins in her frustration, though - barely - and instead asks, "How do you even know I'm a great surgeon? The only surgery we've even done together involved a chewed up penis, and all I did was hold a freaking retractor while you and Burke did all the work."

He shrugs. "A gut feeling."

"A gut feeling," she echoes.

He nods. "Yes."

She sighs. "Derek, I won't have to move to another state, even if we do get caught."

"You don't know that," he says. "You can't know the future."

Frustration is a black hole in her chest, gathering all matter in a crush of inescapable force. She looses a bitter laugh. "I don't know; I think you'd be surprised. And it's my career. Let me manage it."

"I wish things were different."

"They could be," she insists. "They could be different, Derek!"

He shakes his head. "I don't think so."

"Have a cup of coffee with me," she counters.
"Meredith, I-"

"A platonic cup of coffee, if the idea of dating puts you off that much," she assures him. "Just as friends."

For a long moment, he's silent, his gaze searching her face. "Why?" he blurts, like he can't comprehend what about him is so worth pursuing with this degree of vehemence.

"Because .... Because ...." Hell, what to say, now? "I don't 'sort of' like you," she confesses. "I like you, like you. A lot. I like you a lot. And I like to talk with you. And I know you just moved here, so I know you don't have any friends, and Cristina hates me, and it seems stupid to not at least go out for a freaking coffee with someone I enjoy spending time with." God, she's babbling. Someone, shut her the hell up? And to cap this embarrassing display, she feels compelled to add a begging, "Please, humor me?"

Why does she always end up begging this man for things? Crap.

He's silent for a long stretch of time, long enough for her to hope he's considering- "Burke and I are going out for drinks," he says.

Nope. Not considering. Crap, crap, crap. She is utterly boggled at how hard this is turning out to be. He makes fleeing into as much of a sport as he makes pursuing. Crap.

"Are you going out for drinks with Burke seven days a week?" she says.

He frowns. "No ....," he says slowly.

"Then you have an opening somewhere," she counters.

"No, I don't."

She sighs, and her tenuous hold on her frustration snaps like a pencil would snap if it had the misfortune of being in her hand right now. "You're being impossible."

"I'm being impossible?" he scoffs.

"Yes." She shakes her head and huffs a why me? sigh. "And I have to go."

She has to go, or she'll punch him in the face. How the hell is she ever going to get him to listen to her? How the hell is she ever going to fix this? How in the hell is she ever going to get back to her husband? Being this simultaneously frantic to be near the him that isn't here and desperate to get the hell away from the him that is here, and knowing all the while that the him that is here and the him that isn't here is all the same him, in a way, makes her head hurt like someone is banging on her skull with a hammer.

"Meredith-"

"Look, I get it, okay?" she snaps. "We're 'professionals,' except whenever you feel like not-flirting," She's unable to stop the snark from invading her tone as she puts the word professionals in equally snarky air quotes. "You don't have to worry."

"Meredith-"

He has the gall to touch her shoulder. She shrugs him off and turns to go. "Just leave me alone."
"Okay. Sorry." And then his expression shifts from regret to disbelief. "Wait, why do I feel like the bad guy?"

"Maybe, because you are," she says, unable to stop herself, though she's not even talking to this Derek anymore. She's talking to the Derek she left behind. Forward. What-the-hell-ever. She has no idea anymore. "You hurt me."

"Meredith-

"Don't Meredith me," she counters, and then she stalks away.

It's not until she's around the corner, out of his orbit, that she realizes … Alison never went into distress. She was supposed to go into distress, and she was supposed to need another craniotomy, because her intracranial pressure went insanely high. That ICP explosion is probably what had, in the first timeline, caused all the contrecoup injuries. The ones that robbed Alison of her speech, and her mobility.

But this time, it hadn't happened.

Alison woke up. And she's talking. And Meredith has never in her life been more freaked out by a patient living. Dying, yes. Living, no.

Never.

Alison woke up and is talking, and Meredith has no idea what this means. None. Not Alison waking up, or Cristina hating Meredith, or the strangely premature knight-in-shining-whatever Derek who wants to flirt but not date, or who knows what else?

Meredith pictures an avalanche. A speck becomes a snowball becomes a boulder the size of a whale rolling downhill, flattening trees and people and decimating everything that was there before, until all there is for miles and miles is snow. Just snow.

Are little changes - like not wearing the right shoes on a given day - the specks before they roll downhill into miraculous recoveries that shouldn't have happened?

"So," Derek says softly as they stand next to the elevator, "this thing I have for ferryboats …"

Meredith closes her eyes and takes a deep breath. She can't take this, now, too. This not-flirting flirting. Why does he have to tease her like this? It's the one not-a-better-guy thing he keeps doing in a huge mess of totally-a-better-guy, and her brain is already dangerously close to breaking again.

"Please, not now," she says.

Derek turns to face her, a look of concern on his face. "Meredith, how can I fix this?" he says. "I want things to be okay between us."

She can't tell him to stop the not-flirting flirting. As much as she finds the not-flirting flirting frustrating, she doesn't want him to not want her. What she wants is for him to act on the want instead of just talking about it.

She feels a warm hand on her shoulder. The elevator dings, and the doors trundle open, but she makes no move to step inside the car, and the hand on her shoulder doesn't budge, either.

"Meredith, please, would you just look at me?"
God, damn, she sucks at saying no to him. She looks up at him through tired, burning eyes. "Please, go out for coffee with me," she says. He draws his hand back like she's burned him. "Just one freaking so-platonic-nuns-would-approve-it coffee. Please." If she can just get him to take the damned leap that he's so afraid of ….

He raises his eyebrows. "Nuns?"

"Yes, nuns," she says with a curt nod. "Please."

He sighs, and he stares at her for a long moment. The look on his face is pure misery. Like he wants nothing more than to say yes to her nun-approved coffee date, but he knows he shouldn't, and he's at war with himself, trying to be that annoyingly better guy.

After a long stretch, he slumps, and he turns away from her.

She frowns. "Where are you going?"

"I'm taking the stairs," he replies.

"But-"

"Meredith, I get that you're lonely-"

She can't help but be affronted. What does he think she is, some crazy cat lady forming bonds with anything that will pay attention to her? "Lonely?"

He reaches the stairwell and pushes open the door. He sighs. "You'll thank me for this, someday," he says.

"No, I won't!" she yells after him.

But he's gone, and she has no idea if he heard her.
Chapter Notes

Thank you so much for the feedback, everybody!

For those of you frustrated with or confused by 2005 Derek's behavior, hopefully this chapter will explain where he's coming from a little (more will, of course, be revealed as time goes on). It's important to remember that you as the reader have the benefit of omniscience, which he does not. What we've got going on here is a huge dramatic irony cake. Would anyone like a fork?

Anyway, the snowball is really starting to roll downhill, now. Chapters 5 and 6 are some of my favorite chapters in this story, because they're where I really get to start experimenting with my premise (the role reversal aspect). I'm excited to see what you think of this, along with chapter 6, which I'll post on Friday.

The Emerald City Bar is like a shipping box jammed full of packing peanuts, except the packing peanuts are people. The air is hot and smells like stale beer, and the room is noisy in the same way that a jet taking off is "noisy."

Meredith managed to claim one of the seats by the bar before the crowd swarmed for happy hour, but she's getting tired of people pasting themselves to her back or shoving past her shoulder, invading her space as they try to order drinks. She takes her salt shaker, douses the back of her palm, and licks her skin. Then she kicks back her shot glass at the same time some jerk bumps into her. She doesn't suck her lime, because she's too busy coughing up a lung and trying not to die.

"Sorry," says the jerk absentmindedly to her while she hacks. Then he asks Joe, "Do you do Irish Car Bombs here?"

"We do normally," Joe calls over the crowd, wiping off a freshly washed glass with a towel, "but we're out of Guinness right now. Sorry. Would you like something else?"

"Oh," Jerk says, frowning. "Sake bomb, instead?"

Joe nods. "Coming up." He glances at Meredith. "Fresh tequila for you?"

"God, yesh," Meredith says when she recovers.

She grabs a peanut from her bowl and cracks open the shell. Her head is spinning, and her skin feels hot, but she is nowhere near drunk enough for her purposes. Seriously, nowhere near. She is, after all, still conscious. She pops the peanut into her mouth and then pulls her fingers through her loose hair, pushing her face into the vee her elbows make when she presses them together.

She loses track of Jerk. It only takes a few minutes for her refilled shot glass to arrive, and it only takes her another ten seconds after that to consume it. Her throat heats up like someone tossed a napalm grenade down her esophagus. She sucks the lime to cap the experience, and then breathes out the fire with a wheezy, "Ughhhhh."
She's out of practice with this crap. She hasn't blitzed herself with tequila with the premeditated intention of getting blackout drunk in ... like ... like ... she doesn't even know.

_I feel empty._

_Two hours of vomiting will do that to you._

_No, I feel empty._

Maybe, then.

She feels a bit regress-y.

But ... time travel. She needs to not think about time travel. And she needs to not think about the fact that everything is screwed up, and Mark abandoned her.

Except, she's still thinking, so she's clearly not drunk enough. And was solving this crap with alcohol a good idea when she has to get up at like 4:30 a.m. tomorrow for rounds? Because she's an intern. Again. And she can't make nice schedules for herself until she's lived all the agains until ... 2009? 2010? Or ....

Damn it.

Still thinking about time travel.

She looks at Joe, who's wiping off the counter in front of her. The towel he's using is a white, swirly blur, and his whole body jerks in time with the motions of the swirls. She gets dizzy just watching.

"Sho, shplain shomethin t'me," she rambles at Joe.

The circular motion of Joe's hand stops, and he looks up from his task. "Explain what?" he says. Sweat pearls at the edges of his forehead, and he's panting softly.

"Shay I time-travullled here from eight yearpsh in the fush ... fush ... future, and I've done all thish crap before. Like, shay I've had theshe tequilash, and Jerk already bummed into me, and've done the whole be-inn-a-cluelesh-intern ... thin before. It shucks, by the way. Doon it again. I don' reckmend it."

Joe snorts. "Okay, I think I'm cutting you off, now, Meredith."

"No, sheerisly," Meredith says. She grabs a peanut, cracks open the shell, and pops the nut into her mouth. She waves her arm in a sloppy motion. "Hype. Hypot. Hyposhethically. Thetic. Hypo. Whatever. It didn' really happen. We're jusht pretendin."

Joe rolls his eyes. "Do you have someone to drive you home?"

"Why ish it," she says, ignoring him, "that even if I do everythin the shame. Shame. Same. I do eryshing the same. Shame. Sho, why ish it all diffren, anyway?"

"Well, that's easy," Joe replies. He leans forward. "Where are your keys? Give them to me."

She makes a haphazard grab for her purse and catches one of the straps with her index finger. She foists the bag at Joe. "Here. Shomewere. What'sh easysh bout thish schena ... shen ... shenrio?"

"Well," Joe says as takes her purse with a frown, though he doesn't open it or paw around for her keys, "you're human."
"Sho?"

"So, you can't do everything exactly the same, even if you try."

"But've done shtuff th'shame!"

He shakes his head. "You've done stuff similarly, but did you do it at exactly the same time? Did you move in the exact same way? Did you say exactly the same things? It's impossible. Particularly if this is an eight year jump, because there's no way to remember the specifics of eight years ago to such a granular degree."

She blinks. And frowns. And frowns harder. Well, that … makes sense. Even while drunk. "Oh." She licks her lips. "Yer shmart. Why're you a bartender?" She swallows. Or … oops. She thinks there's a faux pas in there somewhere. Maybe. "I men, not that bartendersh can' be … be shmart. I men ….

"Meredith," Joe says gently, "if you can't come up with a ride, I'm going to call you a cab. Okay? No more for you." He even takes her peanuts away.

She pouts. "Bud I wash eatinn thoshe!

Joe shakes his head. "Key word: was." Meredith rolls her eyes and reaches for her purse, but he pulls it away. "You can have your purse back when I see someone sober picking you up, or the cab is here."

"I'm sober," says a soft, familiar voice behind her. "My car's in the hospital lot. I can take her."

Meredith slumps. "Oh, god. Nah you ….

Derek snorts.

"How'sh drivin' your drunk'sh'a'ashkunk intern home be-inn profeshnal?" she wants to know as he takes her purse from Joe and guides her out of the bar.

It's not professional. That's really the only way to slice it. But Derek doesn't answer her, and she's having trouble walking straight. Or at all. His arm wraps around her, steadying her. If she weren't so spinny and swirly, she'd maybe … maybe enjoy it. Being in his arms again.

In this moment, though, she's trying not to vomit on his shoes. He has nice shoes. Black boots that go with his stonewashed jeans and black sweater and white striped button-down shirt, and why doesn't he wear jeans and sweaters and button-down shirts, anymore? She likes the jeans and sweaters and button-down-shirts, and she likes his shoes enough that she really doesn't want to throw up on them and. And.

Wait. What was she …? Her thoughts flee, and for about thirty seconds, she's blank.

Because … drunk.

The air outside is wet like a sauna, but cold like a fridge, and it smells like earth and ozone and spice-wait. No, the spice is Derek's aftershave. She's missed that smell. He doesn't use this brand anymore. She can't help but press her nose against his sweater sleeve and sniff. Which, really, she should be embarrassed about, but she isn't.

Because … drunk.
Whether he notices the arm sniffing or not, he says nothing, and they shuffle down the sidewalk under the dim haze of the street lamps. He's close. His sweater is soft, and she kind of wants to lick his stubble. She talks herself out of it, though, because she thinks she might hurl if she tries to stand on her tiptoes to reach said stubble with her tongue. Plus, she still really doesn't want to vomit on Derek's shoes. They're nice shoes.

"We haven' done thish n'yearsh," she says. She can't remember the last time either of them got smashed to this degree. Certainly, not since Zola.

"We've never done this," Derek says, tone flat. "You're drunk, and I'm not him."

She squints. "Him who?"

"Your ex," he says.


"Right," he says, like he doesn't believe her, but she's too dizzy to reply at this point, and her stomach feels like it's on spin cycle. She stops, leaning forward, hair dangling, weight on his arm as she aims for not his nice shoes. "You okay?" he says.

The vomit-y feeling passes, and she picks herself up. Sort of. "Falshe 'larm."

He nods, and they keep walking. It feels like his car is seven years away or something, and he drags her more than she walks. He settles her into the passenger seat of his Land Rover, posing her kind of like she's a Barbie doll or something, which she's too drunk to be offended about. He slams shut the door on her side, leaving her in silence for a few seconds as he shuffles around to his side of the car. The car cabin moves in slow revolutions around her head.

"You should look up the butterfly effect," Derek says as he jams his key into the ignition.

She's breathing thickly and kind of drooling, and she picks her head up off the window sill to look at him. She swipes the back of her palm at her mouth, trying to wipe away spittle, but it's such a sloppy motion, she sort of smacks her cheek and accomplishes … not much else. "Huh?"

"For your hypothetical situation," Derek replies.

She frowns. "How lawn were ya behine me?"

He shrugs. "Long enough to hear your hypothetical 'shenrio."

"Eeshdropper," she grumbles.

"Hey," he says with a snort and an affectionate shake of his head, "I just wanted a scotch, but someone had monopolized the bartender."

"Di'nah," she says.

"Did, too," he replies.

"Nah."

"Too," he says. He twists around to back his SUV out of his parking space. The motor hums, and her body swings forward an inch with inertia. "What brought up this time travel scenario, anyway?" he says.
She sighs as he hits the accelerator, and inertia sends her back the other way, into the seat. Her stomach roils. Inertia and drunkenness aren't good playmates. "Me from the fush. Fush. Fushure. My garden angel left me here."

He snorts. "Right." And then he glances at her, smiling. The car cabin is dark, and she can only see the glint of his eyes. "You definitely need to look up the butterfly effect for that."

"Yeah," she says, blinking like her eyelids are pasted onto her eyeballs with molasses for glue. "Kay."

And then the world goes black. Her last conscious thoughts are that this upcoming hangover is really going to suck ass, and did she really drool on his upholstery and sniff his arm? Seriously?

She's never going to get this man to date her at this rate.

At least, she didn't lick his stubble like she wanted.

There's that.

Her hangover the next morning does suck. No, it doesn't just suck. It blows. It blows goats. Lights make her squint, and noises make her feel like someone's inside her skull with a knife, carving out chunks of bone and goo. And speaking of her skull, her brain is way too big for it. And throbbing. Nausea coils, and she can't even think about eating right now. Her breakfast was acetaminophen, and it's not kicking in.

Why is it not kicking in?

"Oh, no you freaking don't!" Meredith snaps, grabbing onto the back of Alex's plastic smock. Before Alex can rip the bicycle spokes out of Viper's abdomen, she yanks hard, pulling Alex away from Viper like she's arming a slingshot. Alex makes a funny choking noise as the smock cuts into his neck, but she keeps yanking until he's forced to take a step backward, and then another. Once she has them separated, she steps between them, a hungover, nauseated human shield, and only then does she loosen her grip. "He needs scans, Alex."

Alex rolls his eyes. "He does not. I'm telling you; it's superficial."

Meredith folds her arms and glowers. "And I'm telling you," she says, "that it's not, and that he needs scans."

"Look," says Viper. "I'd really just like to go ...."  

Alex gestures at the man. "See? He wants to leave."

Meredith shakes her head. "Take him for tests. If I'm wrong, and it's superficial, then ...." Her voice trails away. Her head is pounding. What was she saying again?

"Then what?" Alex says, eyebrows raised.

"Then I'll ...." she begins.

Alex rolls his eyes. "You'll?"

"You can take one of my cases, no questions asked, if you decide you want it. Exceptions for when Bailey or an attending specifically asks for me."
He narrows his eyes. "Any case?"

Meredith sighs. What little patience she had is gone. "You know, it's sad I need to do this kind of bargaining just to get you to run some standard tests. Did the part where the chief raked you over the coals for misdiagnosing that woman with the pulmonary embolism just … not sink in?"

"Dude, whatever," is Alex's defensive, bristling reply.

"So, you can't just take these out?" Viper pipes in.

"No!" Meredith snaps.

Viper holds up his hands in surrender. "Oi, just asking."

Alex fills in some scribbles on Viper's chart with a pen and turns to ask a passing orderly to take Viper to CT. The orderly nods and steps behind Viper's gurney. "Can you lie back, sir?" the man says.

"Bye, Viper," Meredith says.

"Wait!" Viper snaps. He grins at her. "Want to wish me luck?"

Meredith frowns. "No, not really."

But before he shifts to settle onto the gurney, he leans forward, wraps around her, and then she's being kissed, and she can't pull away. She squeaks, trying to push him off of her, but he won't budge, and … there's freaking tongue. Someone is kissing her with tongue in the freaking emergency room, and he tastes like cigarettes and smells like booze. She's had far too much booze in her life in the past twenty-four hours. She makes noises against his lips, still pushing at his chest.

"Thanks," Viper says as he pulls back. "That'll tide me over."

Free again, gagging, Meredith rolls her eyes at him as she hops backward a foot. "You're not welcome!" she says when she catches her breath, but all Viper does is wink.

She glances around. The emergency room is teeming with trauma and staff and patients, but she doesn't think anyone was watching this exchange in the fray, at least. Anyone other than Alex, who's staring at her with a smug, porny grin.

"Go away," she snaps. She's snapping a lot today. She finds she doesn't care. She heads toward the admitting desk to see what's next when-

"You make out with patients, now?" Derek says behind her, tone incredulous.

She slumps. She sighs. "Do you just follow me around all day and wait for me to do something embarrassing? Seriously, is that a thing? You do that?"

He's frowning when she turns toward him, but it's a crappy frown that doesn't reach his eyes. No. His eyes are doing the stupid sparkle thing. God, damn him.

"No …," he says slowly. "I mean …." And there's that haughty smirk of his, blooming. "I don't really have to wait."

She arches an eyebrow. "So, you admit to following me?"

"Well, I don't know," he says. "Do you admit to kissing patients?"
She steps into an empty exam room, and he follows on light feet. He's too … happy. He's too happy, and she's too miserable, and it isn't freaking fair.

She folds her arms, trying to muster up a flirty smile to play his not-flirty flirty game with, but the smile dies on takeoff and launches as a grumpy frown. "If I said yes, would you be jealous?" she says.

"No," he's quick to reply.

Her eyes narrow. "Really."

"No," he repeats.

Her frown deepens. "No, not really?"

"Not no, not really," he says, shaking his head. "Just no. Did you really just kiss that patient?"

"No, it was standing CPR," she snaps. Two can play the snark game.

"Really?"

She snorts. "No."

"Really no?" he prods. "Because it looked like-"

"He kissed me," she says. She brushes the back of her palm against her lips and makes a face. She can still taste cigarettes. How did she ever used to find that attractive? She leans back against the empty exam table. "Seriously, do men ever have to deal with this crap?"

He looks like he can barely contain a loud guffaw. Instead, he clears his throat. "I don't normally have guys kissing me, no."

She sighs. "You know what I meant."

"I do," he replies. His gaze softens. He steps closer. "And, no, I don't have to deal with that. I don't envy you. Or any woman in a male-dominated workplace, really."

"You mean, you wouldn't do that?"

"Kiss a patient?" he says.

"Pursue a woman who doesn't want to be pursued," she says. "And I didn't kiss a patient. He kissed me."

Derek's silent for a long, long moment. The exam room isn't lit as well as the main emergency bay, and it eases the strain on Meredith's aching eyeballs. Or, perhaps, he eases the strain. He's very nice to look at.

"No," he says. His eyes look black in the low light.

She frowns. "No, what?"

"No, I wouldn't pursue a woman who doesn't want to be pursued."

She can't help but snort with disbelief. "Really?"
"Why is that hard to believe?"

"It just is," she says. "Go out with me."

"For the nun-approved coffee?"

"Yes."

He leans against the wall, arms folded across his chest as he regards her. He looks good like that, in his dark blue scrubs, leaning. She misses the lean. Oh, hell, she misses him. Period.

She peers back at him, wondering why he's just standing there, staring at her like he's cataloging every hair on her head, every freckle on her face, yet his appraisal lacks the warmth it usually does. It lacks the I'm stripping you naked in my head, and I like it undertones. It lacks affection, which is weird, even for this Derek. Because this Derek likes her, and he makes no secret of it, what with the constant not-flirting flirting. He just doesn't do anything about his affection.

"It's because I look like him, isn't it?" he says.

She blinks. "Huh?"

"I've been trying to figure out why you're so hell bent on getting me to go out with you," he says. "You know I'm your boss. You know it's against the rules. You know I keep saying no. It's because I look like your ex, and things aren't going well with your friends, and you're lonely, and you miss your kids, and you're trying to live out this … this … this fantasy where you get back together with him, and everything is fixed. Is that it?"

Her jaw drops, and for a solid thirty seconds, all she can do is gape. Of all the conclusions he could have leapt to, he launched off a springboard and arrived at that one? This situation is so ludicrous she wants to laugh. Or cry. Or laugh and cry. And throw up. The throwing up part is the hangover, though.

"Derek, that's not true," she says. "That's not-"

"Meredith, you looked right at me the morning after, and you told me you loved me, and then you asked me where our kids were," he counters. "Either I'm your ex's twin, or you're projecting your ex onto me. Take your pick; it's not healthy."

Oh, for the love of god, if he had any idea how hard irony was beating her senseless with a metal shovel right now. Only in her life. Only in her freaking life does the future father of her children decide it's bad she's chasing after him because he looks like himself. She can't help the laughter that pops loose from her throat with a will of its own, because this is all. So. Ludicrous.

"It's not a game, Meredith," he says, tone quiet.

Which only makes her laugh again. And her eyes water. And, now, he's glaring at her with angry, wounded eyes, and damn it. She takes a deep breath to clear the laughtergasm. And another. And another. When she thinks she can talk without bursting into paroxysms of giggles, she says, "Derek, if it's not a game to you, then why do you keep not-flirting flirting with me?"

That draws him up short. Now, he's the one who blinks. "I …"

"It's not a game, you say." She nods. "Fine, then. It's not a game. But, if it's not a game, then why do you keep playing one with me?"
His mouth opens, and closes, and opens again as his dark, wounded look shifts into something guilty. He pulls his fingers through his hair, and suddenly he can't make eye contact with her. And she already thinks this exchange is insane, but then he makes it unfathomable.

"You're right," he says. "I shouldn't …. I'll stop." His shoulders curl, and he widens the space between them. He looks like he wants to run. "I don't …." He sighs, and finds the nerve to look at her. "Meredith, I'm sorry."

For a moment, all Meredith can see is flashes of him telling her Renee kissed him. Because his body language is the same. His abject misery is the same. His guilt is the same. But she pushes the imagery away. This Derek knows nothing about that, and hearing the Derek who should be chasing her down the halls like a bull in rut tell her he's wrong, and he's sorry is … unreal.

This whole freaking conversation is unreal. All of it.

"I don't want an apology from you," she says, the words soft. She steps closer to him. He doesn't shy away. She risks putting her hand on his shoulder. The muscles underneath her fingertips are corded threads of steel. "Derek, I want to know why you keep playing with me. This whole thing. You and me. It's not how it's supposed to be, and I don't understand what's going wrong, because I like you, and you clearly like me. But …." He glances at her. "How is it supposed to be?"

"Not even remotely professional."

He snorts, but he doesn't reply.

"Tell me why you keep flirting with me even when you say you don't want a relationship," she insists. "I want to know."

"Meredith-"

"Don't Meredith me, Derek. Tell me."

"Because I like it," he snaps, and the sudden, thick discord in the air makes her cringe. He sighs like he's disgusted with himself, and he gives her a dark look. "I like it, okay?"

She frowns. Now, she's even more freaking confused. "But … if you like it, then …?"

He gazes at her, then, and in that moment, he looks very old. And very tired. And very, very alone. "It was nice," he admits to his shoes, the words such a soft murmur she can barely hear them. "Feeling wanted. It was nice." He swallows. His eyes are wet and dark and unhappy when he looks up at her. "I … haven't felt wanted in a while. And it was nice."

"Oh," she says, chest aching with sudden empathy.

She never really thought about this before. About the why. Why he would ever chase her without regard for propriety, his job, her job, or common sense, like he had chased her the first time. Because Derek's not an emotional leaper, and he's a smart guy. Also, contrary to the first impression he gave her so many years ago, she discovered through the push and pull of their relationship and through watching him over the years, that he's not a womanizer - if anything, he's awkward about dating - and he understands the word no perfectly well. Sure, he gets that he can do his stupid sparkle-eye thing, and women will do things for him when he asks. Only a guy with zero personal awareness
wouldn't realize that about himself, and Derek, for all his flaws, has a lot more personal awareness than zero. But ….

"Is that why you …?" she begins, trailing away into silence.

He looks at her. "Why I what?" he says, the words dark.

"It's stupid," she says, shaking her head. "Never mind."

Because she's figured it out. The why.

Her Derek came to Seattle to escape the shambles of a broken marriage, one broken by neglect, not directed sabotage. He felt like a failure, and he didn't feel loved or wanted, and he was lonely. He worked up the nerve to go out and, at least, fix the loneliness, and he met her. He met Meredith. It was like he was drowning, and she saved him.

The one night stand was to feel less alone. That was the emotional leap for him. And then, in the immediate aftermath of that success, his whole yes, yes, yes, to her no, no, no, was pure overcompensation. Winning. Getting the girl. That was all about erasing failure. And erasing rejection.

And she can't believe she never got this before.

She never got any of this.

When she extends her theory about Her Derek to this Derek, she gets it. She gets him. Why five minutes of her acting cuckoo for Cocoa Puffs was enough to alter his entire personality in the aftermath.

This Derek felt like a failure, and he didn't feel loved or wanted, and he was lonely. He worked up the nerve to go out and, at least, fix the loneliness, and he met her. He met Meredith. A clingy nut ball who thinks he's someone else. And, well, Derek failed at yet another thing. He can't even find a sane companion, let alone one who likes him for being him. He made the leap, and he fell flat on his freaking face.

So, why bother with the rest of it when he can't even get those things right?

"I'm sorry," he says, pulling her from her musing. "I won't harass you anymore." He turns to leave, reaching for the doorknob.

"But, Derek, I want you to harass me!" she replies. "I'm all for the harassing. More harassing, I say!"

He pauses there, hand outstretched, and he's silent, thinking. He snorts, and he shakes his head. Like he just … can't figure her out.

"Meredith," he says, a soft, consumed murmur that reminds her of how he used to say it. Will say it. Whatever. "You don't want me," he says. "You want him. And I have a lot of …." He sighs. "You don't want me," he repeats. But she gets the distinct impression what he really means is, Nobody wants me.

And then he's gone before she can reply. She doesn't chase him. This time, she doesn't want to.

Now, that she understands what the hell happened, and why this Derek is Jekyll to Her Derek's Hyde, she needs to think.
She needs to adjust her strategy a little.

But how?

When Izzie asks for Meredith's help with a coding brain-dead guy, everything in Meredith's head is screaming at her not to feed into Izzie's fantasy that brain dead can somehow be alive again if a miracle occurs. If someone's heart is still beating after brain death, it's only because the heart is still receiving oxygen. And if someone's heart is still receiving oxygen after brain death, it's only because a machine is forcing air into the lungs. The owner of the lungs is already dead. And if the body the owner left behind codes, despite the ventilator, that's just nature saying, "Hey, enough of this nonsense. Dead is dead."

It's downright irresponsible to go against that tide.

And this is crap Izzie should have learned in medical school.

"Izzie, no," Meredith says, the words gentle, as the whine of the EKG meter fills the tense silence. The high-pitched, bleating alarm is like an ice pick in her ears, and she can't help but wince. "Let the poor guy go."

Izzie gives her a pleading look. "But he could be-"

"But he's not, Izzie," Meredith snaps as her patience frays along with her tortured eardrums. Why did she ever think it would be a good idea to drink so much tequila? "His brain stem is dead. There's nothing left to save. He's dead. Brain dead is dead, dead."

"But-"

Meredith's chest tightens at Izzie's plaintive look, but Meredith won't give ground. This point of view of Izzie's is something Meredith runs into from time to time when she gets a fresh batch of interns, and it's something that shouldn't be entertained or encouraged. Entertaining it or encouraging it always ends up causing more pain in the end.

"He's not in a coma," Meredith says, pinching the bridge of her nose as her headache blossoms like a rose - red, and bright, and sharp with thorns. "He's not in a vegetative state. He's a three on the Glasgow scale. There's nothing left to register." Meredith tries to muster affection despite her aching head. She steps closer to Izzie and gives her bony shoulder a squeeze. It's weird. To have Izzie back is weird. Meredith's not even sure where Izzie ended up after she fled Seattle Grace and abandoned them all. Abandoned Meredith. "He's dead, Izzie. He's dead. Okay?"

Izzie's eyes water, and she sniffs. "You don't believe in miracles?"

Meredith sighs. She rubs her temples in slow, soothing circles. "I believe that people can win the lottery. It's rarer than getting struck by lightning, but it's possible, so I wouldn't call it a miracle. Just like I wouldn't call someone in a vegetative state waking up a miracle."

"Just winning the lottery?" Izzie says, tone incredulous.

Meredith nods.

"Maybe, this will be the guy who convinces you of miracles!" Izzie insists, pointing at the dead man on the gurney. "We can't just give up."

Meredith shakes her head. "Once the brain is dead, Izzie, you can't come back from that, no matter
what the odds. Nothing will fix dead brain matter. It's dead. Maybe, in the future, some really smart
doctor will invent a way to repair dead neural tissue, but in the now, and in the nearish future to now,
repairing it is impossible. It's just … impossible."

"But what about people who code and come back?" Izzie counters.

Meredith folds her arms. "If they come back, it means they still have a working brain."

Izzie throws her hands into the air in frustration. "How can you be so heartless, Meredith?"

Meredith bites her lip. The only reason to keep a dead body on a ventilator is to comfort the living,
not the person who's gone. She firmly believes that. "I think some would view me as the more
merciful, here, Izzie."

But Izzie snorts and rolls her eyes, unwilling to listen to logic or reason. "If you're not going to help
me, just go."

"Izzie …"

"Go away, Meredith! Unless you want to help me, go the hell away. He doesn't need you here,
telling him he can't live."

Meredith sighs and leaves Izzie to her fruitless pursuits. Meredith can hear the EKG monitor whining
as she walks down the hallway. Izzie won't turn it off. Meredith's head throbs in time with her
heartbeat.

She heads to the bathroom to be sick.

One banana bag, two more acetaminophen, and a thirty minute nap in the on-all room later, she finds
Derek sitting outside the Seattle Grace entrance, eating a sandwich he's pulled from a wrinkled,
brown paper bag. The air is wet and gray, but he's managed to sneak in some commune time with
the great outdoors in the few minutes between one drizzle and the next. He's spread several white
towels, probably stolen from the hospital laundry, on the bench where he's sitting. He wears a light,
spruce-colored windbreaker over his scrubs, and the breeze ruffles his hair as he stares into space,
thinking.

The sandwich he's eating is some horrific healthy thing with bean sprouts and kale and gross
multigrain bread that makes her want to gag just by looking at it. She hates kale. Derek's favorite
Freaking kale shakes that look like horse vomit. At least, he stopped trying to convince her of kale's
merits. When she couldn't even swallow the strawberry kale salad he made for her, he gave up.
Finally.

Really? he said, gapping as she spat out a gross, chewed up mess of kale and berries back onto the
plate. Not even strawberries make it palatable to you?

No.

He frowned. But strawberries are your favorite.

But it's kale, Derek, she replied. There's only so much a strawberry can do. Strawberries aren't
Superman.

He shook his head. It's shameful, he said with a smirk. Just shameful.
What? she replied. *The fact that I'd rather eat the cow than eat like the cow?*

He frowned. *Do cows eat kale?*

She rolled her eyes. *Shut up.*

He gave her a stupid, twinkle-eyed grin. *You know, if there's ever an apocalypse, you're going to starve to death in the aftermath.* And he sounded entirely too happy about that fact.

She snorted. *Oh, like there will be an abundance of kale in the apocalypse.*

Well ....

*Hah! Admit it; I won this one.*

*I will admit no such thing,* he said. And then he kissed her arguments away.

Her chest tightens, thinking about that. She can't believe she misses that. Kale indoctrination. She would give a zillion dollars just to hear him trying to convince her that kale slaw beats coleslaw in a battle of the slaws. Hell, she might even eat the damned slaw.

She sits beside this Derek, lump in her throat, as she tries to push the memories of Her Derek away. She turns over the green apple she's carrying in her hands as her vision blurs and resolves again as she blinks away grief. This apple is the first real food she's dared all day. Her head doesn't feel so swimmy anymore, at least, and noises aren't like knives cleaving her skull.

Derek glances at her out of the corner of his eyes. He chews the last bite of his kale creation - nothing but crust, one leaf, and an alfalfa sprout or two - and Meredith can't help but grimace. How he eats that crap, she'll never know.

He swallows. A bottled water sits by his hip. "Feeling better, now?" he says.

Like he read her mind. Like … he knows. About the kale littering her thoughts. She gapes at him. "What do you mean?"

"The hangover," he says, and she deflates. Oh. That. Of course. He gives her a half-hearted shrug. "I was going to ask you earlier, but ….." His voice trails away.

He was going to ask her earlier but. But the conversation had gone wildly off course, and he'd ended up admitting he likes to flirt with her because - when she flirts back - it makes him feel wanted.

He sighs and gazes into space with a thousand-yard stare and doesn't finish his sentence. Like all the fight has bled out of him. He's given up on faking happy until he makes the happiness real. His marriage is in shambles, and he's a failure, and he's alone.

She bites into her apple, pounds the first bite to smithereens between her teeth, and swallows. "Yes," she says. "I feel much better, now. Thanks. Hangovers suck."

He grunts like he agrees, but he doesn't share any anecdotes. He takes a sip of his water, and then he wipes his mouth with his crumpled paper napkin. His gaze follows an elderly woman limping toward the hospital entrance with the help of her walker. Then he stuffs his trash back into the paper bag and presses his palms against his thighs like he's going to stand-

She grabs his sleeve. "Wait, please," she says.

He sighs and glances at his watch. "Meredith, I can't do-"
She doesn't miss the begging that laces his tone, but she can't let him go. Not yet. Not until he hears this, because it's important. "It's not because you look like him," she tells him.

"What?"

A cool breeze blows, and she shivers, wishing she'd brought a coat. "You and me," she says. "It's not because you look like him. And it's not a game. It's ... your laugh," she confesses. "And your hair."

He blinks. "My ... hair?"

"It's very pretty," she says, but when his incredulous look burgeons, she adds a snappish, "Shut up."

He snorts with amusement. "I take it your ex doesn't have nice hair?"

"No, he keeps his short," she says with a sigh. "It's tragic. I mean, what am I supposed to grab onto when we-"

"Meredith?" he says, interrupting her.

She raises her eyebrows. "Yes?"

"TMI."

"Oh. Sorry," she says with a sheepish look. "I babble a lot. And no one ever shuts me up."

"I just did shut you up," he says, eyes twinkling. "Just now. Because of the TMI."

"And you're a smart ass," she responds with a grin. "It keeps me on my toes."

"Meredith-"

"It's really not that you look like him," she says. And she hopes he believes her once he's heard her out, because it's 100% true. While she loves the way Derek looks, it's his personality that gave him staying power in her life. It's the fact that they can have a stupid, fun argument about kale and Superman strawberries and apocalypses. It's ... the way anytime something is wrong, anything at all, no matter how idiotic it may be, he makes her feel validated, and safe, and whole. It's ... the way his dad can get murdered right in front of him, and his sister can OD, and his girlfriend can be a dead, frozen blueberry in his arms, and he can get shot, and fall out of a plane, and they can live their horrible, unlucky lives, and, yet, he can still wake up smiling, and believing in the innate goodness of life. "Really, it's not."

Derek sighs and pulls his fingers through his hair. "I wish I could believe that, Meredith, but-"

"It's ... the way you care," she says, interrupting him. "About everyone. You sat all night with a patient you've never even spoken to, all because she had no one. And it's your optimism. And it's your sense of humor. Talking with you is ... the easiest thing in the world."

He's silent for a long moment, staring at his lap and his crumpled paper lunch bag, not at her. "I still can't go out with you."

"All I'm asking for is a freaking cup of platonic, nun-approved coffee," she says. "You want to feel wanted? Well, I do, Derek. I want you. I want you very much."

He dares to glance at her, and she can see it. She can see the, god, I want you, too, loitering there. On
his face. But he says, "That sounds like way more than a cup of coffee to me."

"Well, I won't lie," she says. "I want it to be more than a cup of coffee, but ….

His eyebrows creep toward his hairline. "But?"

"But, Derek, if a cup of coffee is all you want, then all it will be is a cup of coffee, because I want you, and if as a friend is the only way I can have you, then so be it."

He swallows. The longing in his expression is unmistakable and loud, like an ambulance siren. He inches closer, staring at her like he wants to kiss her. And she thinks, this is it. She's finally gotten her lasso around his heart, and all she has to do is yank it closed, but then he snaps back like he's been burned.

"Meredith, I … I just can't," he says, tone croaky as he scrambles backward, and he stands. "Okay? I can't." And then he flees back into the hospital.

She bites her lip and watches as he leaves. "You say that, now," she murmurs. Because whether he wants to admit it or not, she just made some headway. She takes a bite of her apple.

Finally, his iron wall is starting to crumble.

She catches Alex in the hall outside the ER, later, after she's changed back into her street clothes to go. He looks haggard. And ready to go home. But he's still wearing his scrubs. She's not sure when his shift ends.

"Alex," she says.

He takes one look at her. His eyes narrow. And then he heads in the opposite direction, around the corner, without even bothering to acknowledge her. Seriously?

"Hey!" she snaps, clutching her purse straps as she stalks after him. Her boot heels make it hard to run, but she manages. "Alex, I'm talking to you."

He sighs when she catches up with him. "What do you want?" he says.

She frowns. "I want to know if I owe you a surgery."

"You don't."

"And Viper's okay?" she says.

He folds his arms. "Yeah."

She nods. "Okay." She turns to go. She's tired, too, and, at this point, fantasies about mattresses keep stabbing into her consciousness like unwelcome knives.

"What, you're not going to rub it in?" Alex calls after her.

She stops. Turns. Looks back at him, eyebrows raised. "And what would be the point of that?" she says.

He stares at her for a long moment, eyebrows knitting like he's puzzled, but he doesn't reply.

He walks away, and this time, she doesn't chase him down.
She sighs.

She could really use her person, if only to get some help with brainstorming how to get Derek to make the leap into a relationship, and it's not like Cristina is rushing to fill the void.

A lump forms in Meredith's throat. She adds missing Alex to her epic-sized list of things she misses. She swallows. Wipes her eyes. Her keys jingle as she fumbles for them in her purse.

She needs to go home.

She's tired, and she feels, in this moment, indescribably old.

"Ooh, this one is skin grafting!" Izzie says as Meredith walks in through the front door. Boxes are strewn all over the living room, and George and Izzie are pawing through them like they own the place, and they have a right to open things that aren't theirs.

"Skin grafting? No way!" George replies, grabbing the tape Izzie's pulled. "I've never seen that done before."

Meredith frowns. "Are those my mother's surgical tapes?"

"We should watch the skin grafting one, first," George says with the enthusiasm of a two-year-old in a candy store. Meredith remembers that excitement. When everything was new, and all surgeries, even appendectomies, were exciting and fun.

"Where did all this stuff come from?" Meredith says, glancing at the boxes. Everywhere. Boxes. Some open, some not. Pictures she never hung decorate the walls. Knick-knacks she never placed decorate the shelves and end tables.

"Oh, I unpacked some of your mother's things," Izzie says, wide-eyed. "I was upset, and when I'm upset, I like to nest."

Meredith sighs. She remembers this. The first time, she yelled at them and stalked off. But that was the first time. This time … she's older, and the idea that George and Izzie weren't family and weren't privy to any of Meredith's private life is a foreign concept to her, now. She doesn't care one bit that they were rooting through her mother's things.

"Izzie," Meredith says, "I'm sorry about-"

But Izzie shakes her head. "I don't want to think about that," she snaps, sounding a tad manic. She picks up a tape from the box, stares at the title, and adds with a false smile that doesn't spread to her eyes, "I'd rather watch this hemipelvectomy."

Meredith stares at them for a long moment. She bites her lip.

"I ordered Chinese food," George offers hesitantly.

The silence stretches. The twin hopeful looks on George and Izzie's faces make Meredith's chest tighten. Her friend who died, and her friend who left. Both of them are back, alive and resilient and here. And Meredith's been alone for … so freaking long.

"These aren't the good ones, you know," Meredith says, taking the tapes from Izzie and George and putting them back in the tape box.
"They're not?" Izzie says.

Meredith shakes her head. "My mother was a general surgeon. Skin grafts? Hemipelvectomies? These are from her residency, before she specialized." Meredith roots through the box, sifting toward the bottom, and liberates a tape of a procedure she thinks will have them drooling. A supra-adrenalectomy, both unusual and complicated. "How about this one?"

George takes the tape, first. He takes one look at the title and bounces. Actually bounces. He shows the title to Izzie, whose manic grin spreads so wide Meredith can see all her teeth.

"We should make popcorn for this," Meredith suggests.

"Popcorn goes with Chinese?" Izzie says with a frown.

Meredith shrugs. "Popcorn goes with movies, and I hate Chinese."

"Noted," says George. "Sorry."

Meredith shrugs again. "You didn't know."

Izzie takes the tape and carries it to the VCR. George settles on the couch. Meredith heads to the kitchen to make some popcorn.

"There's no … I'm not … you know, this is really … uh … not. Meredith."

Meredith pauses outside the door of a patient room when she hears her name, spoken by George. Her gaze flicks to the door. The room number. Why does it seem familiar?

"Meredith," another man says. "To be young and in love." He sighs. "I miss that feeling."

A long pause follows. "They'll find you a liver," George says. "Any day, now. You're at the top of the list. And then you can find some guy and … feel … f-feel that."

But the other man only laughs. "Maybe," he says in a soft, old, weary tone that says he's tired of hearing healthy people tell him he'll get a new liver soon. "In the meantime, George," the man continues. "I'll flirt."

Meredith frowns and walks over to the nurses' station nearby. "Who's the patient in 4451?" she asks the nurse who's sitting by the computer, biting a pen as she stares at the screen. Lucy, Meredith thinks is the nurse's name. Lucy Wu. Or … something. The woman's name tag is obscured by a stethoscope wrapped around her neck, and Meredith can't check.

Maybe-Lucy looks up and blinks. "Sorry?"

"4451," Meredith repeats. "What's the name of that patient?"

"Oh, him?" Maybe-Lucy says. "That's Lloyd Mackie. He's a friend of the chief's. He's a real hoot."

Meredith nods. "Thanks," she says faintly.


"I'm fine," Meredith manages to say, though her stomach feels like it's sinking into the floor through the soles of her shoes.
Crap. Crap, she remembers Mr. Mackie, now. And she remembers that his would-be liver match was found in the patient Meredith refused to help Izzie save. And, now, it's too late.

It's too late.

She, maybe, just killed a man.
The Road Not Taken

Author's Notes: I'm getting LASIK tomorrow, and I might need to take a tiny hiatus as a result. I'll certainly try to post on Monday as scheduled, but if the chapter comes later in the week, that's why.

Thank you, as always, to everybody who takes the time to leave me a note.

While the rain sluices down the windowpanes, Meredith fills out a check for Roseridge Home for Extended Care. Five digits of financial knife wounds. Her mother's bank accounts are all bleeding like the bill was a knife that tore the carotid, and if this were the first time around, her first time living through this, Meredith would be worried the funds would run out before her mother's time ran out, too. This time, though ….

Meredith pulls out a small photo album. She sees a tiny, smiling version of herself, puffed up proudly from the red wagon Thatcher purchased for her fourth birthday. Ellis and Thatcher stand behind her - Thatcher in the foreground, and Ellis in the background. Thatcher's smiling. Like he's proud. And happy. Like he's won the freaking lottery on life. Ellis isn't smiling, though. She looks more like … what the hell have I done? Or, maybe, like she's got indigestion.

Meredith shoves the album aside. She bites her lip as she signs her name on the check. After she puts the small piece of paper into a white business envelope and licks the lip to seal the glue, she leans back in her chair, pulling the photo album with her into her lap. She keeps flipping, past photo after photo, but it's a small album, and there's not much to flip through. She reaches the end in about ten flips, and in ten flips, she can't find a picture where her mother looks happy, except in the ones where she's at work.

Not a single one.

When Izzie appears next to Meredith, brushing her teeth as she looks over Meredith's shoulder, Meredith's returned her focus to the album page with the birthday wagon photo. She looks left, unfazed by the bright red underwear with blue ribbing, unfazed by the smiling cartoon cat that's almost next to Meredith's nose.

"Who'd dat?" Izzie mutters around an awkward mouthful of foamy, greenish toothpaste.

Meredith looks up, a faint smile on her face. "Hello, Kitty," she says to Izzie. And then Meredith points at the photograph. "These are my parents. And that's me."

Izzie nods. "Coot wag'n." And then she heads back upstairs to spit out her toothpaste and rinse.

"You don't understand," George snaps as they shuffle out of Meredith's Jeep. "Me gonads, you ovaries."

"Oh, that reminds me," Izzie replies. "We're out of tampons."
Meredith doesn't get out of the car right away. She grips the steering wheel and stares into space as rain plinks onto the windshield at a pace that can't be called rain so much as … leaking clouds. The plop, plop, plop of the water intersperses George's ranting, which she barely hears. She doesn't want to go to work today.

George splutters. "You're parading through the bathroom in your underwear, when I'm naked in the shower!"

"Can you add it to your list, please?" Izzie replies, oblivious.

Meredith Grey doesn't want to go to work. She frowns as she forces herself to slide out of the car. Her body feels heavy, and looking at Seattle Grace fills her with dread. She's never not wanted to go to work before. Work's … her escape. Her solace. Her safe space. Whenever her personal life is falling apart, work is supposed to be there to keep her mind off all the horrible things. Even when she was an intern the first time, for all her griping about the mechanics of work, like having to get up before some people even go to bed, like falling asleep in the shower while brushing her teeth, like having to do all the menial scut, she liked the actual work part of work. She liked the surgery high, and she liked anything that helped her get more of it. She liked it.

She slogs after George and Izzie with a sigh.

"What?" George snaps.

Izzie peers at George with an expectant look. "Tampons."

George gives an affronted snort. "I am … a man!" he says, gesticulating wildly. "I don't buy girl products. I don't want you walking in while I'm in the shower, and I don't want to see you in your underwear."

"It doesn't bother me," Izzie replies. "Look at me in my underwear, George. Take your time." She shrugs. "It's no big deal."

George blinks. His mouth opens and closes. "I …." He looks at Meredith. "Meredith, help me out."

Meredith turns to them at the sound of her name, frowning. "Huh?"

George frowns. "Mere, are you okay?"

She shrugs. "I'm fine," she lies. And she glides into the hospital like she's lost in some sort of unnavigable fog. If George or Izzie say anything else, she doesn't hear it. Not a single word.

Human beings shouldn't be awake at 4:40 a.m. They just shouldn't be. Meredith's confident that this is a medical fact. There's a reason the Exxon Valdez oil spill, the Chernobyl disaster, and the partial nuclear meltdown at Three Mile Island all occurred between midnight and 5 a.m. It's the whole deal with circadian rhythms being established by light or lack thereof. Most people don't function well when the sun is still asleep.

Meredith stops mid-hallway to stare dispassionately at her stack of charts, only noticing the busy staff passing by her, dodging all the spare equipment lining the walls in a vague, peripheral sense. She's not sure how she survived internship the first time. She never freaking bargained on having to experience it again, but even worse.

Now … what …. What was she doing?
What is she doing?

What should she do? And what shouldn't she?

Paralysis sinks in claws.

She frowns.

"Meredith, are you … okay?" a soft voice says behind her. "You seem … not okay."

She blinks herself out of a tired, defeated stupor to peer at him. Derek Shepherd is the consummate bright-eyed, peppy, annoying morning person to end all morning people. If Meredith's proof that most people don't function well when the sun is still asleep, Derek's proof that most people is only most, and not all. Or, he's proof that alien life exists. Which … would actually explain a lot of things about him, and jeez she is too tired for this.

"You're here early," she says, words flat.

He glances at his watch and then back to her. "I have a chordotomy at 5," he says. "I'll be out at 6."

"Oh?" Meredith says, perking up a little. "Percutaneous or open?"

Surprise registers on his face before he buries it. "You think I could do an open chordotomy in less than an hour, including scrubbing in?" he says. A hollow smirk slides across his face. "I mean, I'm awesome, Meredith, but-"

"No, of course, not," she replies, which is more blunt than she intended, and he deflates a bit, "but … percutaneous is such a new proced-"

"I don't know if you noticed this, but I'm kind of a neurosurgical rockstar," he replies with those bright, alien, mornings are grrrrRRREAT! eyes. He winks, but all Meredith sees is Tony Tiger flexing his manly tiger biceps. "I like doing the cutting edge stuff," he continues, oblivious. "Plus, percutaneous is a lot easier on the patient post-op, and the whole point of a chordotomy is to help someone who's in unbearable pain. Right?"

Too many words. "I hate morning people," is her grumbling response. "And I kind of hate you."

"Oh, come on, you do not," he says, still entirely too cheerful. And then he adds with a smile that, on any other day, at any other time, might stop her heart, "I like you," in kind of a hopeful tone that's … not flirting, per se. He did, after all, promise not to flirt with her, anymore. It's just … way, way friendly.

She ignores him. She flips the page of her first chart, trying to read the notes the attending-on-call left last night. The patient's name is Li Jing. Li is one day post-op from a hip replacement. Meredith can't remember a Li Jing. Which could be a good thing. Except Meredith didn't remember Lloyd Mackie, either, or the brain dead guy who should have supplied Lloyd Mackie with a liver. And not remembering those two people ended up not being a good thing. Not at all.

And … what is she doing? Maybe, she should just quit. Quit being a doctor. Except that decision might kill people who aren't supposed to die, too. It might create even more Lloyd Mackies.

"Seriously, what's wrong?" Derek says, frowning.

She sighs. "Nothing's wrong."
He gives her that knowing look of his that says he's not buying even a teaspoon of the bullcrap she's selling. He nods and folds his arms. "Hmm."

"I'm just …." She sighs again. He's looking at her with his *tell me what's wrong, and maybe I can fix it* face. She's missed that look. And she's missed that hmm. Which makes her want to laugh. She never thought she'd find herself missing his sometimes-irritating propensity for knight-in-shining-whatever-ness. "This sucks."

"What sucks?" he says.

She closes the chart she was looking at. "Being … here."

His eyes narrow. "Being … an intern? Because that's kind of *supposed* to suck."

"No," she says. And then she shakes her head. "Well, yes, that, too. And that *really* sucks, but I meant … just … being here."

A frown twitches at his lips. The first real crack in his happy morning mask. "What kind of here are we talking about?" he says. "The planet Earth, here? Seattle, here? Seattle Grace, here?"

She bites her lip. "More like … here as in now."

"Oh," he says, nodding. "That happens."

"What happens?" she says.

He shrugs. "Doubting you're where you're supposed to be," he replies. "I get those feelings, too, sometimes."

"Do you?"

He nods.

"Well, how do you fix it?" she says.

"Usually," he says, "I just wait for it to pass."

She stares at him for a long moment. Not an emotional leaper. Now, that she's figured that out about him, the signs are like freaking two-by-fours to the face, and they're constant, and how did she miss that about him?

"I can't just *wait,*" she snaps.

He frowns. "Well, why not?"

"Because the longer I'm here, the worse this feeling gets," she replies. "Nothing makes *sense.* I'm … supposed to be … somewhere else, and things are … supposed to be different. And …." She trails to a halt when she sees how he's looking at her. Like he's found a mirror, and he loathes what he sees, and as an added bonus, she's told him his chosen coping method - to wait for the bad feeling to go away on its own - blows goats. "And why does nobody ever shut me up when I babble?" she says. "Is there a medical treatment for excessive babbling?"

He stares back at her, considering, and the self-loathing drains a little. A small, amused smile twitches at his lips, and he takes her tiny olive branch of humor. "Are you always this philosophical before breakfast?" he says. "What are you like afterward? Plato on steroids?"
She grins. "You could go out to breakfast with me and find out."

He rolls his eyes. "I walked right into that, didn't I?"

She nods and gives him a conciliating pat on the shoulder. "You really kinda did."

"Sorry," he says with a heavy sigh. He pulls his fingers through his hair. "I wish I could help you." But I don't even know how to help myself is his unspoken admission.

"Don't be sorry, Derek," she says. "And you can help." Clutching her charts, she steps closer. Into his space. "Be hungry, and take me to breakfast."

"I already ate breakfast," he replies, and he takes a step backward. Away. "Remember, I have the chordotomy?"

She won't press the personal space thing anymore. She won't. She's not a sexually harassing jerk, and the discomfort he's displaying is a thing she doesn't want to cultivate. But he hasn't walked away, yet, and so she lets her grin widen. "So, what'd you have?" she says as she looks at him through her eyelashes. "Muesli? Straight out of the box? Or are you all fruit and fiber-y?" He blinks like she's sucker-punched him. Like he has no idea how this conversation got flipped around on him or changed tones so fast. "Omelettes?" she presses. "Do you like omelettes?"

"Meredith … that's not …." He clears his throat and takes another step back, and he fixates on her shoes. But he still doesn't leave. It's like … he can't. He adds, "That's not a work-related topic," like he's barely convinced himself, let alone her.

"I had leftover grilled cheese," she tells him.

He frowns. "I thought you said you hadn't had breakfast, yet."

"Did I?"

He sighs. And he slumps. "I … walked right into that one, too." And, yet, he still doesn't walk away, and he can.

She regards him for a long moment. She's beside him, her collarbone running parallel to his, and she's positioned herself so she's not blocking either escape route. All he has to do is turn perpendicular to her and bolt. He has a chordotomy in a few minutes, which is a perfect excuse to flee, but he's not taking it. He needs the physical space right now, for some reason, but it's like … he doesn't want the emotional space. It was nice, he said. Feeling wanted. It was nice.

Right. Her new strategy.

"Derek, I'd really love for you to take me to breakfast," she tells him, no game in her tone. No flirt. Just solid, unblinking assertion. The sky is blue. Morning people are aliens. Meredith Grey wants Derek Shepherd, alien or not. "Really, I would."

"Meredith," he says, but the protest is a half-hearted one.

"Or, I could do the Sadie Hawkins thing and take you," she suggests. Grass is green. Mass can neither be created nor destroyed. Where there's heat, there will be split ends. "I'm sure we can find someplace that makes kale shakes or … whatever."

His mouth opens. Closes. He blinks. "Kale … shakes?"


"Or kale bacon," she replies with a shrug. "Or whatever they're making with kale these days."

He snorts. It's a tiny one. Like one solitary cherry on top of a big freaking cake. But, still, it's a cherry. On top of a cake. "I don't think kale bacon is a thing," he says.

"I did say, 'or whatever,'" she replies, finger quotes around "or whatever" as she allows her grin to slide back into place.

"I guess, 'or whatever,' could be construed as all-inclusive," he concedes.

"Not could be," she says. "Is, Mr. Cheats-At-Crosswords."

He does the open-close-open-close thing with his mouth again. Like a stunned stupid goldfish or something. "… How did you know I like cro …." He shakes his head. "How did you know I like kale shakes?"

"Well, I know you like kale," she replies with a shrug. "It stands to reason."

He stares at her. For a long, long time, that's all he does. He's hit his blue screen of death, and his brain crashed. Or something. "How did you know I like kale?" he says slowly.

She gives him another shrug, like she thinks his question is silly because the answer is duh. "I pay attention to you," she says. "You were eating a sandwich with kale in it the other day." In Seattle, it rains. What goes up must come down. Unless it ejects into space. Then, it can keep going up. Or, would that then be classified as going out? Meredith Grey wants to go out with Derek Shepherd. Derek Shepherd wants …?

"It's …." His voice trails away. Like he's still busy rebooting. He frowns. "It's a superfood, you know."

"Yes, it cures the universe. I do know," she replies with a conciliating nod. "If only it tasted super, too, then it might actually be a super superfood."

He blinks. "I ….

She can't remember the last time she rendered him this degree of speechless. She hopes this means she's making progress. He still hasn't fled, so … that's a good sign. She hopes.

"I bet I could get you to like it," he says at last. And his grin is back.

She snorts. "I really bet you couldn't."

"Is that a dare?"

"Can it be called a dare when I know the future, and I know you'll lose if you try?" she says, grinning back at him.

"That is a dare," he says with a definitive nod, and his grin becomes his classic smirk. "You're daring me to make you like kale."

"I don't know," she replies. "Will a dare result in a breakfast that involves you and me simultaneously eating kale and gagging over kale, respectively, while sitting at the same table?"

She dares to close the distance. An inch. Just an inch. And she tips her shoulder toward him, her body no longer at a clinical parallel, but a friendly slant that would become an intimate intersection if
she stepped about eight inches closer. He traces the movement with his eyes, but he says nothing, and he doesn't step away.

And then Olivia, her nose buried in a memo she's reading, plows right into them, and Meredith's charts careen to the floor as her grip on them falters. Derek reaches out to catch the flailing nurse, and Meredith stares at her pre-rounds assignments as they spill out across the immaculate, white tiles.

"Sorry!" Olivia says, once Derek's saved her from falling on her ass. "I'm so sorry."

"It's our fault," Derek admits as he stoops to help Meredith pick up her charts. "We were blocking the hallway."

"No, no," Olivia says. "I should have been looking at where I was going."

"Yes, you should have," Meredith can't help but snap. Because their moment just got ruined. Hers and Derek's. And she worked so freaking hard to get that great moment to that great place.

"Sorry," Olivia bleats.

"It's really okay," Derek says, frowning at Meredith.

"It's just … they're adding shifts to my schedule," Olivia babbles, "and I don't know how I can fit more shifts. I wish we would hire more nurses. And …" She glances at Derek, and horror zips across her face like a flash fire. Like she's just now realized she's whining at one of her bosses. "And … and … and … I'll just go. Now. I'll just go, now. Sorry."

She flees before anyone can say anything else. Meredith fumbles to get the last chart she dropped back into her stack, which is no longer in order by room number, damn it. When she's righted her pile, and she and Derek are standing again, a freaking parallelogram of professional collarbones, she wants to scream. Moment. Progress. Organized stack. All three are definitely ruined.

Still, she has to try anyway, and so she says, "I admit, if it gets you to go out with me, that the kale thing might have been a dare."

He shakes his head with a sigh. "You are so frustrating."

She blinks. "I'm frustrating?"

"Stop baiting me, Meredith," he says, bristling.

She gapes. "You asked me what was wrong!"

"Well, I thought the answer would be work-related," he replies, but from his expression, his excuse is crap, and he knows it.

"You're my boss's boss," she snaps at him, folding her arms. "Work-related would be noticing I'm feeling down and telling Dr. Bailey to talk with me when she has a chance. It's not asking me if I'm okay."

His watch beeps. He glances at the time. "I should … go. The chordotomy."

Crap.

"You should take me to breakfast, Derek," she says. Pleading. Oh, hell, she's pleading. Why does he always bring out the embarrassing beggar within? "Please, take me to breakfast. I want you to take
me. I'd like to spend some time with you."

He steps back. "I ….

"I really like your company," she tells him. "I really like you."

"I …. I …. I have to go," he stammers, and he turns to flee.

Desperation curls around her throat like a noose. "Can I scrub in?" she begs his departing back. More begging.

He freezes, turns, and looks over his shoulder at her. "What?"

"To your chordotomy," she says. They never had the freaking Katie Bryce surgery moment. Maybe, they can have a moment over a percutaneous chordotomy. Maybe. "Can I scrub in? Please?"

He swallows. "That would be …."

"That would be professional," she counters. "You asking me to scrub in. So, I can learn. I'm an intern, and I'm supposed to learn." And the idea of doing pre-rounds for patients she may or may not kill depending on what she can remember and what decisions she makes turns her stomach this morning. She can't think about that anymore. She's been thinking about it for days.

"Meredith …," he says, pleading, like he knows he can't say no, and he wants her to pull the plug on this … whatever this is.

"I'd really like to learn," she insists.

He slumps. And the desperate, tiny sigh that escapes his lips makes her heart squeeze. She doesn't want him to feel cornered or beset by her, but ….

"Okay," he says, waving the flag of defeat. "Okay …." He glances at his watch. "You have ten minutes. Don't be late."

She finishes scrubbing in in five. It's easy to work that fast when she pretends the sponge is Godzilla and her hands are Syph Nurse.

There is no magic percutaneous chordotomy moment with Derek. There's nothing. He gets a call at the last minute for some emergency involving a nail gun, and he gets pulled out of surgery before they can even start. He gives her a somewhat relieved look that she tries and fails not to take personally. Then he dashes out, and she's bumped back to her crappy, nerve-wracking pre-rounds.

Crap.

George pulls Meredith to the side as he catches her wandering between room 3052 and room 3054.

"There need to be some rules," he says.

"Rules about what?" Meredith says. "Buying tampons?"

"Yes," George says. "Buying tampons is-

Meredith sighs, folding her arms. She didn't miss this part. Playing referee for her child roommates. "George, if you're planning on being a doctor, being squeamish about something like buying
tampons is kind of … not … doctor-y."

"But buying tampons is something I'd do for my sister," George snaps. And then he shuffles. And he looks at his feet. "You know. If I had a sister." And then he sighs. "You know what I mean."

Meredith frowns. She really, really doesn't know what George means. "Do you like Izzie? Is that what this is about? You have a crush or something?"

George blinks. "Izzie?" And then he smiles. And he blushes. Like he can't believe Meredith just asked him that. "No. I don't like Izzie. Izzie, no. She's … not the one I'm attracted to. She's …" He stares at Meredith for a long moment. And then he takes a deep breath. "You. I'm attracted to you, Meredith. And I don't want to buy your tampons. I want to go out with you."

Meredith gapes. "I … what?"

"I … want to go out with you?" he repeats in a more questioning, bashful tone. His blush is fire engine red.

"But you're not supposed to do that, yet," Meredith says. For some reason, those are the only words she can formulate.

"Yet?" George blurts. "So … there's a point in the future at which you might be receptive to dating me?"

"I …," Meredith begins. Holy crap. Holy crap, what is she supposed to say to this? She knew he always had a bit of a crush on her. She knew. But she never expected … He's not supposed to do this, now. Why is he doing this, now? "The universe hates me," she states to no one in particular. "That's all there is to it. That's why I'm here. That's why Cristina took a mean pill, and you're … you, and Derek …"

George's eyes narrow, and he frowns. "There's this thing called sense, and you're not really making it right now."

"George-"

"I mean," he continues, "not that you're not allowed to not make sense. Everyone is allowed to be nonsensical now and then. And I love that about you. That you babble nonsensically. The babbling is adorable. It's just …"

"George," she repeats. She puts her hand on his forearm and squeezes. She swallows, and she musters up what she hopes is something he can perceive as gentle. "George, no. I'm sorry, but I'm not interested."

"But … you were so nice to me."

Because you died. And I missed you. Crap. "Because I like you, George. I just don't … like like you."

It's as if his eyes are full of Christmas lights, and they all go dim at the same time. "Oh."

Just looking at him, deflated and destroyed, makes her feel like she kicked a puppy or something, and it feels awful. "I'm sorry," Meredith says. "I'm really sorry. I …"

But all George does is run away, almost tripping on a crash cart as he flees.
Meredith’s chest tightens, and for a moment, she can’t breathe. Just a moment. And then she sucks it up, all that badness, all that rampant, spiraling, the world is out of control, and I need help, and she shoves it as deep down into her mental bad-things-go-here box as she can shove it. But even with all that crap stuffed in a box she just … can’t. Dr. Bailey is sitting at the nurses’ station not twenty feet away. Meredith stumbles in that direction.

"Dr. Bailey, I don't feel so well," she says, the words faint. "I need to go-"

"To trauma," Dr. Bailey finishes for her, interrupting.

Meredith blinks. "Pardon?"

"Trauma," Dr. Bailey repeats. "Shepherd needs you."

Because what else could be worse than screwing things up with Derek even more? Not much, barring cancer and starving children and puppies in blenders. And the universe hates her. Meredith sighs.

"You're an intern, Grey," Dr. Bailey says, no sympathy whatsoever in her tone. "You don't have time to be sick, and seeing as how you're coherent enough to ask for sick leave, you're clearly not sick enough to warrant it. So, get down to trauma. Now."

"Okay," Meredith says, all the fight dribbling out of her like she's incontinent or something. She's not sure how this day can get worse.

She slogs to the elevator.

She hates being an intern again. She hates it.

She takes one step into the trauma room before she grinds to a halt and blinks. A bald man is stabilized on a back board. He's staring at the ceiling with a gaze that sees stars, not ceiling tiles. His scalp is bloody, and there are shiny, crimson-stained spikes sticking out of his head at random intervals.

"Those look like …," she begins, voice trailing away.

Derek looks up from his patient with a sigh and says. "Nails. Yeah."

There's no magic surgery moment over nails, either. For all his overbearing rockstar-ness, Derek's never pulled nails out of a guy's head before. He's making up this surgery as he goes along, and he's so fixated on not killing the poor guy with the nails in his head that the only words Derek utters during surgery are terse commands to his scrub nurses. He doesn't pause for teaching moments, or to make jokes to keep the mood light, or for anything half-resembling his normal effervescence.

Meredith ends up standing behind his shoulder, watching on her tiptoes, not doing much of anything. With brain surgery, there's not really anything 100 percent innocuous - like holding a retractor - that an intern can do, and this Derek doesn't know she's probably more qualified to pull out head nails than he is, given that she's lived through this surgery before, and she almost freaking specialized in neurosurgery.

She makes a weird noise in her throat, almost a snort, and Derek freezes. "Do you have something to add, Dr. Grey?" he says in a tight, clipped tone that screams - to her, at least - insecurity.
She shakes her head. And then she realizes he can't see her shaking her head, because he's staring at
the man's pincushion skull, not her. "Um. No," she adds, a soft squeak that pierces the tense quiet of
the OR.

"Hmhm," is all he says. It's an irritated hmm. But her mind is racing, and she can't even be offended
that he's being snippy with her.

She had a crazy moment when she realized she was, in this timeline, more experienced than Bailey.
And, at least, in the future, Bailey becomes a relative equal. The idea that Meredith's more
experienced than Derek, a man who has always been her professional superior in terms of renown
and regard and never her equal colleague is just … It's freaking mind blowing. She didn't want to
go to D.C., because she wanted some time to make a freaking name for herself, and, yet, here she is,
nameless, but, in this moment - in this tiny one-off moment, when all the stars are aligned with a
wacky head-nail surgery she's seen before, but he hasn't - more experienced than Derek.

She's more experienced. Than Derek.

It's so mind blowing that she's still somewhere in outer space, marveling over that revelation, not
paying any attention, when Derek says, "Dr. Grey?"

Meredith slingshots back to earth, and she blinks. During her mental vacation, Derek's pulled out
four more nails, and there's only one left. All the scrub nurses are staring at her, and Derek's peering
over his shoulder with his eyebrows raised, like he's asked her a question. Except … she's got no
idea what she's been asked. She licks her lips behind her surgical mask and bolsters herself for the
backlash.

"I'm sorry, what did you say?" she asks.

He sighs, and she doesn't miss the disappointment flicker across his gaze. "So, what's more
interesting than nails in a guy's head?"

She shakes her head. "Nothing, sir, I was just …." This sounds like the beginning of a crappy
excuse. Even to her. If she were her own intern, she'd kick herself out of the OR. "My mind
wandered," she adds lamely.

"I called your name four times," Derek says.

She bites her lip. "My mind wandered … really … really far?"

He's not mean about it. He doesn't yell. But he does say, "Why don't you scrub out, Dr. Grey?
Okay?"

And she can't even bring herself to protest, because if she were in his position, she'd do that, too, and
she would be mean. She nods. "I'm really sorry," she says to him. To everyone who's in here, saving
Jorge's life. And then she leaves.

She needs to learn to stop wondering if things can get worse, because, for her, the universe always
seems to deliver a mountain of affirmatives in response. She gives up trying to stay ahead of how
upset she is right now. How defeated she feels. She just … gives up. Her shift is close enough to
over that, instead of bothering to find another task, she heads to the locker room and changes out of
her scrubs while her eyes leak.

She doesn't wait for Izzie or George in the Jeep. Meredith doubts George will want a ride home from
her, anyway, and she'll lose what little composure she has remaining, if she stays. Izzie would
understand. Maybe. Meredith turns her key in the ignition, hits the gas, and heads home.

Alone.

The blaze in the fireplace burns and snaps, filling the common room at Roseridge Home for Extended Care with the pleasant scent of woodsmoke. Ellis Grey stands before the fire, staring into it with a distant, somewhat confused look on her face. It's the same distant, somewhat confused look her mother's worn every day Meredith's visited since she poofed into this stupid timeline.

Meredith proffers the photo album she found earlier to her mother. "I think these were taken at the old house," she says, trying to draw her mother into conversation. Any conversation. Ellis doesn't speak, though. She barely looks interested.

Meredith opens the photo album and points to the first photo. "There's you in your scrubs." Again, Ellis says nothing.

Meredith flips the page, but before she can describe the picture, her mother reaches out and takes the album from Meredith's grasp. Ellis pets the page near Thatcher's head and says in a soft, befuddled tone, "Who is that?"

"That's Dad," Meredith says, biting her lip.

Ellis's eyebrows knit together as she frowns. She looks at Meredith. "Who?"


Ellis looks back at the photo, a blank look on her face. "Thatch," she says, the barest murmur, an echo. Not comprehension.

A lump forms in Meredith's throat. "That's the red wagon he got me for my birthday," she says, pointing at the photo. "I'm about four years old in this photo." Still no recognition on Ellis's face. "This is your family, Mom. Do you remember?"


But it's clear she's lying. Confabulating. Whatever. She doesn't remember a damned thing, and Meredith forgot how much this hurts. Watching her mother have no memory of Thatcher or Meredith or anything that isn't work-related.

Meredith doesn't bother mentioning Liz Fallon, this time, because Meredith remembers from before what her mother's reaction will be. Ellis laughed, and she seemed so happy to steer away from talking about family to talk about her job. Meredith doesn't think she can deal with watching her mother remember work but not Meredith right now. Not with everything else going wrong.

Instead, Meredith sits on the chair by the fire. The cushions moan as her weight sinks into them. She leans back, which leaves her addled mother and the fire framed in a soft halo of light.

She watches the fire burn.

"You have no idea what this will do to you," Meredith says to Zona as they stand outside Jorge's ICU cubicle, despite the steady no, no, no, don't do it wail of the voice in her head. The soft, steady bleep of his EKG monitor is audible in the distant background. A nurse shuffles past with a paper
cup full of pills and rounds the corner, out of sight. Zona's arms are crossed defensively. "Isn't five good years better than ten bad ones?" Meredith continues.

"Meredith, what the hell are you doing?" Derek says as he stalks into the hall from the opposite direction in which the nurse departed. He glares at Meredith, and she slumps.

What the hell is she doing? She knows better. But … seeing her mother again ….

Derek glowers. At least, the first time around, he was a bit sympathetic, despite his exasperation with her. This time … there's no sympathy in his eyes. Nothing. Just annoyance. Because this timeline sucks, and everything that can go wrong will freaking go wrong. It's the Murphy Timeline.

Great. This is just great.

"She needs to understand," Meredith insists, though it's a pathetic defense, and she knows it.

"I do understand," Zona replies, eyes wet. "You think that I'm being selfish. That I don't want to give him up."

"I don't," Meredith tries to assure her. That's the last thing she ever meant to imply. The last thing.

"Really, I don-"

"This is Jorge's decision," Zona continues, steamrolling Meredith's protests. "And if that means ten bad years for me, fine. I'll give him those years, because I will give him whatever he wants."

"Look, I am so sorry, Zona," Derek says. "Please, forgive her." He sneaks an incredulous look at Meredith. "She's an intern-"

"And if he doesn't remember me," Zona says, almost snapping to be heard over Derek's futile placations. She takes a breath. "If he doesn't remember what we are, he's still my Jorge. And I'll remember for us both."

"Okay," Derek says using that soft, soothing voice Meredith misses hearing directed at her. The voice he's supposed to be using to make Meredith feel better. He puts his hands on Zona's shoulders, gives them a gentle squeeze, and he leads the distraught woman away, offering understanding, gentle soothing with every step. "All right."

Meredith can't freaking take this anymore. As soon as they're gone, she flees.

She picks a closet in the basement - one that hardly anyone ever uses, not even the janitorial staff - and she sits on an overturned mop bucket. The closet is dark, and the air is musty and smells like Lysol. She's so tired her head is spinning, and it doesn't take more than a few seconds of dark, stinky silence for her grief to swell like popcorn in a heated popper and explode.

Why can't she just go home? At least the broken stuff at home is broken in a way that still feels like some semblance of, maybe, fixable. Or, maybe she's kidding herself - according to Mark, she's kidding herself - but it wasn't as bad as it is here. And she misses her family.

She has less than twenty minutes to herself to grieve before a soft knock at the door makes her freeze, and a dark looming figure in a white coat robs her of her solitude. She looks up, squinting. What doctor even uses this closet? She picked it specifically because no doctor freaking uses it.

"I'm sorry," she croaks, because there's no way Shadow Doctor has missed her crying, and it'd be
But the figure shakes his head. "No," he says in a soft voice. "I don't need anything." Derek. It's Derek. Freaking hell. How can it be Derek? He flips over another bucket, oblivious to her panic, and eases onto the ground beside her with a soft groan.

She scrubs snot away from her nose with the back of her palm. "How in the hell did you find me down here?" she croaks.

He shrugs. "Asked around. Nurse Tyler said he saw you slip into here a little while ago."

Tense silence stretches. She's not sure what he wants. And she's not sure why he's not talking, anymore. Derek always has something to say.

"I'm sorry about Zona," she says, sniffing. "And I'm sorry about spacing out in surgery, yesterday. I'm sorry. So, if you came here to yell at me and make me feel bad, you don't need to. I already do. I feel horrible. In fact, please, don't. I don't think I can handle you yelling at me right now."

"I didn't come here to yell," he says.

She hiccoughs and wipes her eyes. "Oh."

"You want to tell me what's wrong?" he says.

"No."

He frowns. "No?"

"Derek, I …." Her throat hurts. She misses him. She misses Her Derek. And her kids. She misses them all so much it's a constant throb beneath her breastbone, like there's a hole in her heart. And she can't do more of the fruitless pursuit thing with him today. She peers at him through a curtain of stinging tears. "Derek, I really need you to be my friend right now," she says. She misses her best friend. "I really need that, and you're not, and I know you don't want to be. You're my boss. And we're professionals. So, no, I don't want to tell you what's wrong right now. I want you to go away."

"Meredith …"

"Please, just go away," she begs.

But he doesn't move. And, of course, it happens like this. Because the universe hates her, and this is the Murphy Timeline. He runs away when she wants him to stay, and he stays when she wants him to go, and it's like … a natural law that what happens in this timeline is the exact opposite of what she wants. Isn't it?

"Maybe, I can help," he says in that soft, soothing murmur of his. The one that always makes her feel better. The one she wanted earlier.

Except, now, it doesn't help, and she doesn't want it. "No, you can't," she snaps. "You and your stupid knight-in-shining-whatever-ness can't fix this. It can't be fixed."

It's dark in the closet. She can't really see his face, beyond the broad brushstrokes. Darker spots for eyes and lips. A dark halo of hair. The rest of him is just an indiscriminate blur, looming and hunched beside her. His bucket squeaks as he scoots closer, and the echoes bounce off the claustrophobic closet walls.
"It's not because of me, is it?" he says as he resettles, anxiety loitering in his tone. "Because I'm really sorry about that - for both today, and yesterday - but I couldn't show favoritism, Meredith, and you just can't do that with patients, and -"

"No, I get why you kicked me out yesterday. And …." When she's being even part-way rational about it, anyway, she can admit, "I get why you snapped today." But even knowing all that doesn't help anything. Because it's not just that; it's everything.

"Oh," he says. "Well, then … what?"

"Derek," she says, "No. Please, just … no."

Since he doesn't seem to be leaving, she teeters to her feet, wiping at her face with her sleeves. She turns to go and takes a step toward the door, but her pant leg refuses to move along with her actual leg. She looks down to find his hand clutching at the knee of her scrubs, which is … not professional. Not professional at all.

"I do," he says, the words very soft.

She swallows, and she rubs her eyes. "You do what?"

"Want to be friends with you. I do." He sighs. "I'm lonely, and you're … you."

She blinks. "Me?"

"Yes," he says. "You babble a lot." He looses a wry laugh. "And I don't get most of your humor. And, sometimes, I feel like my brain is working at half speed while yours is busy sprinting toward a finish line nobody told me was there. And, oh, you frustrate me. But …."

"You make me sound so wonderful," she snarks.

"No, you don't understand what I'm trying to say," he replies, strangely calm, not defensive, and she forces herself to hold back on any further comments. He takes a deep breath. "What you're doing right now ….

She raises her eyebrows. "Crying like a freak, leaking snot everywhere, and wishing the world would stop punishing me?"

"That's how I feel," he confesses. "All the time."

She swallows. "I don't think I've seen you crying like a freak or leaking snot lately."

He's silent for a moment. "Maybe, not at work," he admits slowly.

She gives him a sad smile. "Fake it 'til you make it?"

"Yeah," he says with a bitter laugh. "That's my life right now. Faking it until I make it." He shifts. Pulls his fingers through his hair. "Except when I talk to you, I don't feel like I'm faking. So …."

"So, what?" she prods.

He shrugs. "So, you make me feel better," he says. "Please, let me do the same for you?"

She collapses back onto her bucket, staring at the blur that is him. "You can't change your mind," she says. "You can't, or I can't do this with you. Whatever this is, I can't. I'm barely keeping my head
above water, and I know you're a waffler when it comes to emotional decisions, and if we add Derek-waffling to the list of things going wrong in my life right now, I think I'll-

"I won't," he says softly, interrupting her. "Meredith, I won't. You win. But … just friends. Okay? I can't …," he begins, but he doesn't finish his sentence. The bucket creaks underneath him as he shifts. He shakes his head. "Just friends. Okay?"

She swallows, and she swipes a loose hair away from her face. "Okay," she replies. "Just friends."

He nods. "So, will you tell me what's wrong, now?"

She bites her lip. "You're really not going to change your mind about the friend thing?"

"I promise," he says.

"It's just … sometimes, I have a hard time believing a single word you're telling me. Particularly lately."

A long pause follows. "Meredith, when have I lied to you?" he says, like he's been presented with a particle physics word problem.

She squeezes her eyes shut, and she sighs. "You haven't," she says. "Not …." Yet. Crap. She takes a deep breath. He has a point. He's never lied to her. Not this version of him. And he's not doing the same things he did before. *Give him the benefit of the doubt,* she tells herself. *For now. Just give it.* Except … that's easier said than done - stupid, stupid hind-foresight - and-

"Meredith?"

Oh, hell with it. "If you could go back in time and fix something bad that happened," she says, almost blurts, "anything at all. Would you?"

Silence stretches. Her frown deepens when he doesn't answer right away. "I … don't know," he says, cautious, unsure, after the long pause.

She gapes, hearing him say it point blank. "What do you mean, you don't know?" she says. "There's nothing you wish you hadn't done?" Like crashing his Harley after chasing a stoned Amelia. Or marrying a cheater. "Or something you wish you had?" Like convincing his father not to go to work the day he was supposed to die. Or telling his friend Martin not to go to his appointment at the World Trade Center on September 11. Or fixing things with Addison before she became a cheater. "People you wish you hadn't met?" Like Mark. Or the crazy, neurotic, neat freak of a girlfriend he had his freshman year of college. Emma or Lily or something. "Or …?"

"Sure, I have … I have all those things," he replies with a slow nod. "Things I wish I'd done. Mistakes I've made. But … the collection of all those things. All those mistakes. That's what got me here to this moment."

"And you like it here?" she says, unable to stop gaping. "You just said you were miserable not five minutes ago."

He nods again. "There are things about the here and now that I don't like."

"Like feeling unwanted?"

"Like that, yes," he says. "But … who's to say I'd feel any better if I went back and changed things? And who knows where I'd be, now, if I did? Maybe, somewhere worse. And, yes, maybe, I'm
miserable right this second, and, maybe, things seem very dark right now, but that doesn't mean tomorrow will be dark, too."

"So, the bad is worth it, to get to the good?" Meredith says.

"I suppose so," he says. And then he nods again. "Yes. Like eating brussels sprouts before dessert."

She sighs. "I wish I was that optimistic."

"You're not optimistic?"

"No."

His bucket squeaks as he scoots even closer, so close his shoulder brushes against hers, and she has to resist the urge to rest her head on his shoulder. "Come on," he says. "Surely, there's something you can smile about right now."

"I …." She swallows. There's really not. There's not a damned thing she can smile about. She's killing patients who aren't supposed to die, her mother isn't lucid, so there's not going to be any magical last chance to talk with her unless Meredith stays in the past long enough to make it to when she **drowns**, which, really, wouldn't be a good thing, and she doesn't care to repeat that part of her life, Cristina hates her, George hates her, Richard thinks she's a slacker who needs to be watched, and the love of her life just wants to be friends, which she's settling for, because that's better than the love of her life not wanting anything to do with her at all, or wanting to be something even more stupidly insufficient than friends, like work colleagues. "Bad things. They happen. Bad things happen to me. All the time. Always."

"But, surely, good things have happened, too," Derek counters.

A lump forms in Meredith's throat. "I did have a good thing," she says. Her eyes start stinging again, and she scrubs at them with the backs of her knuckles. "Things. I did have good things. But they got taken away." Her throat aches, and it hurts to swallow. "Every time I think I'm happy, something gets taken away from me. It's like … some universal law or something. Meredith Grey cannot have nice things." He's looking at her. She can't see him very well, but she can tell that much from the dark, blurry eye blobs on his dark, blurry face, and the hairs on the nape of her neck are prickling under the scrutiny. "What?"

"I'm sorry."

She frowns. "About what?"

He shrugs. "I'm sorry you lost them."

"It's not just my ex and my kids, Derek," she says. "It's … everything. And …."

"And what?"

"Other than getting this job, the only good thing that's ever happened to me and stuck long enough to make me think it might be permanent, the only good thing I thought would, maybe, possibly, if I fought really hard to keep it, stick, was meeting a man I could spend the rest of my life with and making a family with him." He made her believe, because he was always there, for years. Saying things and looking at her. Even when they fought, and he played the childish avoid-y game that she **hates**, he was still in the peripheral. Looking. And then he screwed it all up. "Except he kissed another woman, or … he says she kissed him or … whatever, but … I don't know if I can believe
him, and …" She glances in his direction. He's staring at his shoes, listening. This is kind of a unique opportunity, she realizes. To get his un-doctored opinion about himself, un-doctored because he doesn't know who, precisely, he's judging. "Do you think I should believe him?"

Silence stretches. He shifts. The rustle of his clothes fills the quiet. "I … don't really have context, Meredith," he says, tone wary, like he doesn't want to step into a minefield and get his legs blown to smithereens.

"I know you don't, but … just your knee-jerk reaction," she insists. "What is it?"

He doesn't answer.

"I just want to know," she says. "I won't get mad, even if I don't like your opinion."

Another long pause. "Cheaters lie," he says. His fists clench, drawing the legs of his scrubs into tents. "They'll say things like, 'It was an accident!' or …, 'He was just here.' But it wasn't an accident," he says, tone getting darker and darker as he continues. "There's no such thing as an accidental kiss or accidental sex. It doesn't exist."

Which … isn't what she wanted to hear. Because it's what she thinks. And knowing that he thinks it, too, when all pretense of defending himself is removed …. Talk about damning. She bites her lip, angst burning through her veins for a moment. *I'm calling Post-it*, she can hear him saying, almost begging, in her head.

"You don't think, maybe, he didn't want to kiss her, and he was just too … polite?" she says. "He's … very polite."

"Meredith, people don't just kiss," he replies. "There are boundaries any sane person won't cross without some sort of encouragement. So, either it was sexual assault, or it was, in some way, encouraged."

"That's … very black and white," she says.

He shrugs. "You asked me what I think. That's what I think."

"Maybe, not encouraged," she counters, putting on her devil's advocate cap. "Maybe, just not discouraged?"

"Like I said," he says with a sigh. "I don't have any context."

"Maybe, he …"

"What?"

"Maybe, he thought it was nice to feel wanted," she says. "Like you. With the not-flirting flirting thing. I … don't think I made him feel wanted."

"You can't blame yourself for his idiocy, Meredith. He could have told you he didn't feel validated instead of 'accidentally' falling on the first pair of lips that showed interest."

She sighs. Except he did. He did tell her that he didn't feel validated. Point blank. Maybe, not in the nicest way, but he did. And she told him to go to DC instead of admitting, maybe, he had a tiny, infinitesimal point.

Except … this isn't her fault. It isn't. Him kissing someone else isn't her fault, and … she can't think
about this. And she shouldn't have freaking asked this Derek about it. What a stupid idea.

"I'm sorry," Derek says softly. "I didn't want to upset you more."

"You didn't," she says. She upset herself. Why does this hurt so freaking much? She shakes her head. "So, he kissed that woman. Or she kissed him. And I thought … that was it for me. My only good maybe-permanent not-job-oriented thing. Ruined. But then I met a guy in a bar, and I thought, maybe, just maybe, I'd managed to luck out. Maybe, I'd gotten a second chance to find my happy-ish ever after."

"Happy-ish ever after?" he says. She can hear the frown on his face without even having to look to confirm it. "That's a thing to aspire to?"

"It is for me and my fellow realists, Mr. Optimist," she counters, tone prim.

He snorts softly. "Okay. Please, continue."

She rolls her eyes, but she complies. "I thought, when I met this guy, that, maybe, I could fix all the things that had gotten screwed up the first time, and I could do the happy-ish thing right this time around. I mean, why else would I have been given the second chance, if not for that? Except I woke up hungover and groggy and disoriented, and I told him things I never, in my right mind, would have said, and now he thinks I'm a delusional nut who believes he's someone else, which I truly don't. So, I've screwed up my second chance, too, and I'm too much of a realist to believe I'll ever get a third. I'm not like you, Derek. My hope isn't inexhaustible. I lost that superpower before my age hit double digits."

"My hope isn't inexhaustible," he says softly.

"Well, you've got much more of a surplus than me," she counters.

He frowns. "And I don't think you're a delusional nut."

"Well, what do you think I am, then?"

He doesn't respond right away. A bare, unintelligible syllable catches in his throat. Like he's not sure what to say.

"I promise not to get mad," she adds.

"Well," he begins slowly, "misguided, maybe. Not delusional. And …."

"And?" she prods.

"Maybe, a nut, but a very tiny nut, at least. Like a pine nut. Not a macadamia nut."

She snorts and bumps his shoulder with hers. "Shut up, you ass."

"You asked," he says with a soft, easy laugh that unfurls down her spine and makes her insides tighten.

She shifts as she feels her body respond, and she sighs. She lets herself surrender to instinct and puts her head on his shoulder. He doesn't shrug her off or shrink away like he's been burned, and he doesn't assert his desire to remain professional. He doesn't say anything. He wraps his arm over her shoulder, and it's … nice.

It's what she's needed. She breathes against the lapel of his white coat, enjoying the warmth,
enjoying his solidity. Enjoying ... him. It's easy to imagine she's home, and he's hers, like this. It's easy to imagine things are fixed. And that fantasy is a nice vacation from the awful present.

"I'm sorry I'm being a Debbie Downer," she says, letting the scent of his aftershave fill her mouth and nose and lungs. She breathes in and out and in and out.

He shrugs. "You should have met me about two months ago."

"What were you like two months ago?"

"Drunk."

She snorts. "And when I met you, that wasn't drunk?"

"No, that was tipsy," he replies. "You haven't seen me drunk."

"Will I ever?"

"Maybe," he says, another one of his amused laughs unfurling like a flower against her. "I mean ... we're friends. I do occasionally get drunk with friends." He squeezes her shoulder.

"You seem like you'd be a happy drunk. Not a Debbie Downer drunk," she says absently as she relaxes. And then she thinks of him playing Babe Ruth with her engagement ring. She frowns a little. "Mostly."

"I'm a happy tipsy," he replies. "I'm a dysphoric drunk."

"That's ... I could see that." Another thing that never clicked about him before, for some reason, but it clicks now. She snorts, and she elbows him. "Debbie."

"Maybe, Dougy?" he replies. "Like John and Jane Doe?"

"I don't know," she says, smiling. "You look like a Debbie to me. Debbie Shepherd."

He snorts. "Careful. I might have to start calling you Mac."

"Mac?"

He winks. "Short for macadamia."

They share a laugh. She wipes her eyes, but they're not wet with sad tears, anymore, and her head doesn't hurt so much. She feels ... so much better. So much. How in the hell does he do that? It's ... a talent.

She sighs. And she rests. And he lets her.

It's still a crappy day, a crappy week, a crappy month, but she can admit, in this moment, that it's not turning out as crappy as she thought it would be.
Thanks for the well wishes, everyone! I'm fine in terms of the LASIK, but I have a pretty righteous cold at the moment. So, I'm posting this chapter, and then I'm going to bed. I promise I will catch up on feedback replies as soon as I can. Suffice it to say, thank you dearly to everybody who takes the time to leave a note - reading your reactions and talking with you guys in PMs are what make posting this story fun! I can't reply individually to the folks who don't sign in, so I just wanted to toss out an additional thank you to all my guest reviewers, Mecawa, CG, and any other specific names I may have missed listing in the shuffle. Thank you!

P.S. Since my schedule is totally thrown off for this week, I'm not sure if I'll be able to post three chapters or just two, this week. I'll try my best. Depends how fast I get things back from my editor.

P.P.S. You know that feeling you get when you have a mental shovel and you just keep digging yourself into a deeper hole, even though you know you shouldn't? Meredith is so there right now. But hopefully some of you might start cottoning to the reason(s) Mark sent her back, now :)

P.P.P.S. I promise Mark will be back!

It's still dark outside when Meredith meets Derek for their first coffee date in a little shop four blocks from Seattle Grace. Meredith is due to scrub in in forty-five minutes or so. Derek doesn't have anything on his schedule, at least not this early, but he was happy enough to meet her. In the pitch black. And … though he does have bags under his eyes - which is unusual for him - when she takes in his eager look, and the perfect coif of his perfect hair … alien. He has to be an alien. That's the only explanation.

But … she's finally getting her nun-approved coffee date. With Derek. And she can't bring herself to get irritated with him for his morning perfection, when that perfection is what allowed him to cater to her horrendous schedule without so much as a grumble of complaint. And just sitting here with him makes her feel … a bit lighter. Like … for all the utter crap going on right now, for all the wrongness, at least something is headed in a positive direction.

They sit at a high-top table, sipping from steaming paper cups, though Meredith is quite confident that there are not enough coffee beans in the whole freaking world to wake her up right now. It feels like all she's done for days is work and sleep and work and work and maybe sleep, and patients have died and lived and died and died and lived.

"So, a CABG, huh?" Derek says.

The clank of dishes and the snort of the coffee makers behind the countertops fill the air. The shop is mostly empty, having only opened about ten minutes ago. It's too freaking early for sane people.

She yawns so hard it makes her eyes water and her jaw crack and her neck ache. She sniffles, and she rubs her eyes, trying to get the tired blur in front of her face to focus. "Yeah, Burke picked me for it,"
she says, devoid of enthusiasm. Cristina gave Meredith an evil-eye glare when she heard who Burke picked, and she stalked off, and Meredith hasn't seen her since, not even in passing.

Derek blows softly on the surface of his cup, nodding. The black-ish liquid flutters under the influx of moving air, and the curling steam disperses into invisible nothing until he stops to take a sip. "Are you excited?" he says.

"Not really," she says, looking down at her cup. She remembers Mrs. Patterson. The overweight anorexic woman whose heart tore when Meredith nodded off at the operating table. Her first brush with a potential malpractice suit. She's had many brushes since - both with grounds and without, all surgeons do - but this was the first, and it's left an indelible scar. She remembers thinking she might get kicked out of the program before she even started. "More … nervous."

"Don't be," Derek says. He gives her an encouraging smile. "It's an amazing feeling. Holding a heart. You never forget your first time."

Meredith pushes her coffee cup aside, rests her elbows on the table, and props her head against the backs of her palms. She grins tiredly at him. "And, yet, you chose neuro," she says. "Which doesn't involve hearts. Why?"

He thinks for a long moment, blowing on his coffee cup. He takes another sip and swallows. "The heart is the workhorse of the body. The engine. But … the brain. The brain is … that's you, Meredith," he says. He gestures vaguely at her head. "Inside your skull. That amalgamation of neural tissue is what makes you you. Somehow, all those individual cells come together and make a consciousness, and even today, scientists don't understand how the hell it all really works. Holding a beating heart is exciting, yes, but being able to fix what makes people individuals, what makes them love and hate and feel and be … that's …"

Her grin stretches. "Amazing?"

"Yeah," he nods, a drugged, happy look on his face as he thinks about it, and she likes to watch him be that blissed out. She doesn't remember the last time she saw that kind of unadulterated joy on his face, and she's missed it. Maybe … when Bailey was born, and Derek held him for the first time. "What?" he says.

She blinks, torn from her musing. "What what?"

"You have this weird look on your face."

"Weird, like … how?"

"I don't know," he says. "Happy, but … sad?"

She bites her lip, not sure what to say to that. She takes a sip of her coffee, buying herself a little time to think. The bitter scent of her drink fills her nose and throat. The warmth of the liquid as she swallows spreads through her chest, an ache.

"It's nothing," she says. "Just … you really like the cutting, don't you?"

"Yes," he says, nodding. "And the mystery. There's still so much that's unknown about the brain, and I like that every day I go to work, I have a chance to run into something new." Like nails. In a guy's head.

She nods. "Have you ever thought about going into research? Like … to cure something … or …?"
He shrugs. "Maybe, someday. But … I prefer the people aspect of the job, and research tends to be removed from that."

"Brain mapping?" she suggests.

"I admit, being the one to solve the mysteries would be … tempting," he replies. He thinks for a moment. "And incredible."

Meredith barely stifles another yawn. She takes another chug from her coffee, frowning when she realizes she's reached the bottom of the cup already, even though she ordered a freaking venti. She wishes coffee came in jug sizes. She sets down the empty should-be-a-damned-jug-but-it's-just-a-big-cup with a sigh. Another yawn cracks her frame.

A coffee cup with liquid still sloshing in it creeps across the table into her field of view, pushed by five lithe, familiar fingers. Her gaze snaps up to her coffee date.

He grins at her. "You can have the rest of mine, if you want. You seem like you need it."

"I'm not a morning person," she grumbles.

He laughs. "I noticed."

She glares. "I hate morning people."

Which only prompts him to chuckle louder, and the sound ripples through the tiny coffee shop. He has a great laugh. She wishes she were more awake to enjoy it.

"Thanks," she says, meaning it, though she knows she sounds grumbly.

He nods. "You're welcome."

But he likes his coffee black as the seven deadly sins, and she can't stand it that way. She takes some sugar packets and some creamer and dumps them in, stirring with her tiny straw until the black liquid in his steaming cup turns a creamy latte brown. Then she kicks the cup back to her lips and gulps. And gulps.

Now, it's her turn to say, "What?"

And his turn to say, "What what?"

"You're looking at me," she says.

He regards her for a long moment, silent, eyes twinkling. He leans back in his chair, an ease to his posture that's infectious. He shrugs. "You're nice to look at."

And the way he says it … isn't flirty or suggestive. Just … matter-of-fact. Open. Honest. He's sitting with his friend, who happens to be of the opposite sex, who happens to be pretty, and he's letting her know. And something about that easy admission turns her to freaking goo.

"You're not so bad on the eyes yourself, you know," she replies in what she hopes is a similar the-sky-is-blue tone.

The way he grins and blushes at her compliment makes her whole damned morning. She takes another sip of coffee.

"So, the people aspect," she says, returning to their earlier conversation track. "What do you mean by
"That?"

He shrugs. "I like seeing who I help," he says while she sips her coffee. "I like knowing the woman on my operating table is going to be able to kiss her kids goodnight again because of me. I like knowing the guy who was thinking about popping the question to his boyfriend is going to get the chance. I like knowing the kid will go to college, or the grandma will still be able to cross traveling to Greece off her lifelong bucket list, or the favorite uncle will get to see his nephew graduate from high school. I just … like the people part."

"Saving lives is pretty amazing," Meredith says when she sets the cup down, stifling another yawn as a new flood of caffeinated warmth fills her belly.

Derek nods, leaning closer. His chair creaks. "Hmm, yes," he says with that beautiful smile of his. "Amazing. And there's nothing else like it, Meredith. Nothing."

She raises her eyebrows at him. "Not even great sex?"

He laughs. "Well, there are a lot of different kinds of amazing," he says. "Great sex is definitely up there."

"Our sex?" Meredith can't stop herself from blurting.

He's silent for a moment, but his easy, happy look doesn't falter. "Yes, Meredith. Like I said. That was the best sex I've had in years."

"I take it you've had some clunker sex, recently?" she says, though the tiny voice in her brain is screaming at her.

"Sorry," she begins, "I shouldn't have-"

"Well," he says slowly as if she hasn't spoken, and she bites her lip, waiting for him to formulate his thoughts. "Clearly … something was wrong with it," he decides in a dark, hurt, why did this happen to me? tone. A loaded statement if ever there was one.

But he doesn't say another word after that. He doesn't elaborate. Doesn't say me and my wife were having problems, and she cheated on me. All he does is rip at the sugar packet until it breaks, and sugar particles spill all over the table like little diamonds. He stares blankly at the glossy surface of the lacquered wood table - at the diamonds - not at her.

It makes her wonder. It makes her want to ask. But she shouldn't wonder. She shouldn't ask. Should she?

Except … he's hinted. More than once, he's hinted or outright said that he's lonely, and that he's grieving, and that something horrible happened. He's hinted enough that anyone with two brain cells to rub together could figure out something bad was going on or had gone on in his life. He hinted just now.
And, maybe, all this hinting is … him asking but not asking. Asking her to ask him about the badness. Point blank. Because he has no idea how to say … whatever it is that he thinks should be said.

And … oh, hell. If she's honest with herself, she just wants to freaking know.

*I would have told you,* he claimed. Years ago. Months from now, when he'll be struggling to defend himself for his lies by omission. He cornered her coming out of the skills lab at work, when none of her friends were around to provide interference. *Please, you have to believe I would have told you. I was going to tell you that night. Please, Meredith.*

*That's just it, Derek,* she snapped. *You didn't tell me, and now I can't believe a word you're freaking saying.*

And this horrible trip through the past is her unique opportunity to find out, once and for all, if he was lying just to save his ass, or … if he really did mean it. That he would have told her if he'd had a chance, or if the circumstances had been different. This is her chance to find out if all her trust issues were misplaced, or if she had the right idea all along.

That he's a lying liar who lies.

She shouldn't wonder. She shouldn't ask. But there's this saying about cats and curiosity and the cessation of life, and hell if she's not, in this moment, a freaking tabby with a question mark bubble hovering over her head.

Maybe this is what Mark sent Meredith back in time to find out.

"So, tell me something," she says.

"What?"

"You had your own Manhattan practice with full privileges at Columbia, one of the top ten hospitals for neurosurgery in this country," Meredith says.

He nods. "… I did," he says, cautious, like he expects an attack, but he's not sure where from or what about, yet.

"And, yet, you quit that, and you came here," Meredith continues, hoping to prod him into exposition. But he doesn't say a word, just stares, and it's … nerve-wracking. "To Seattle Grace," she continues. Still no response. "Which doesn't even rank for neuro." And still no response. Her frown pinches her eyes and eyebrows, and she grinds her teeth. "Why aren't you answering my question?"

He busies himself with sweeping up the sugar he spilled, collecting it in a wrinkled napkin. "Because I haven't heard a question, yet," he says, expression flat.

She rolls her eyes. Smart ass. "Why the hell would you do that?" she says. "I don't understand why you would want to give that up to come here when you like neurosurgery that much."

But Derek only shrugs. "Richard called," Derek says. "He offered me the job."

"And you do whatever Dr. Webber tells you?"

"Well, no. But ….

"So, something must have sent you out here," Meredith prods.
What happened? Derek, tell me what the hell happened, she tries to beam at him. In your own words. Of your own free will. Prove to me that you're not a liar.

"With me here, Seattle Grace will probably start to rank, you know," he says with a forced smirk, one that doesn't reach his eyes, like he's trying to reclaim his good mood. "Next year. Wait and see."

She rolls her eyes again. "I love your modesty."

"I am being modest," he says.

Her frown deepens. "That's modest?"

"Well, I said probably, didn't I?" he says, grinning, though his gaze is still a hollow one. "It would probably start to rank?"

She snorts. "Seriously, why did you come out here?"

"Can you keep a secret?"

"Of course, I can keep a secret," she replies.

"Richard offered me chief," Derek says. "After he retires."

"But that still doesn't make sense."

He frowns. "You don't think I'd made a good chief?"

"I know you'd be great at it," she replies without hesitation, and some of his sudden tension eases, "but it doesn't make sense that you would drop your established setup in New York to come here to a non-ranked hospital, even to be maybe-chief, someday, if Richard ever actually does retire, and given that you know Richard well enough for him to call you out of the blue about a job, you know he's not going to ever retire, right? Not voluntarily, anyway."

"How do you know Richard?" is his response, and she resists the urge to scream. He's sending out conversational flash bang grenades left and right, hoping she'll get distracted.

"I lived here when I was little," she replies coolly. "My mother did her residency here. And you're dodging the question."

"I'm not dodging the question," he says, frown deepening. "I answered the question. You're just choosing not to believe me."

"Because your answer is total crap!" she insists. She can't stop herself from glaring. She folds her arms. "There's something you're not telling me."

"You're right," he says. "There is."

"Well, what is it?" she demands.

He leans even closer. He looks left and right and left again, like he wants to make sure he's avoiding prying eyes. And then in a low, deep whisper, he says, "By night … they call me the Batman."

She can't stop herself from groaning. "God, you're such an ass, sometimes."

"Well, I don't know what you want me to say, Meredith," he says, tone exasperated. "I'm … really at a loss, here. What do you want me to say that will make you happy?"
She rolls her eyes. "Never mind." She glances at her watch. "I have to get going, anyway, or I'll be late."

"We'll talk later?" he says, hope lacing his words.

She sighs. "Yeah, sure."

She's not sure why she's so irritated. It's not like this was a freaking surprise. That he's a liar. She grabs her purse and slings it over her shoulder.

"Thanks for the coffee," she says. And she steps out of the tiny coffee shop and into the drizzly, brightening Seattle morning.

It's still mostly dark out by the time she arrives at Seattle Grace, and the sliding doors in the bright, empty lobby haven't even shut behind her before Meredith makes a beeline for the coffee cart. The unmistakable aroma of a fresh brew tickles her nostrils and pulls her forward like a lasso. She smacks right into George, who's waiting for whatever his coffee order is. He glances at her once without expression, and then he double takes, gaze snapping back to her with an expression halfway between nausea and mortification slathered on his face.

He's been avoiding her like she has SARS, and this is the first time she's seen him in almost a week, despite the fact that they share a roof and a place of employment, which is a pretty insane feat. She bites her lip as she regards him. His hair is a disheveled mess, and there are bags under his eyes, like he hasn't been sleeping.

"George," she says, tense. "Hi."

He doesn't say her name, doesn't say anything, only blinks.

"Nonfat latte," the coffee cart guy says, and he holds out a steaming paper cup with a thin red stir straw sticking out the top.

George snatches his coffee, mutters a gruff, "Thank you," and then he bolts as fast as his legs will carry him.

"George, wait!" Meredith says, but he doesn't stop, and she sighs with dejection, watching him go. This wasn't supposed to happen, yet. She was supposed to have more time with him before their friendship went off the rails.

"Girl, what on earth you did do to him?" the coffee cart guy says with an amused snort. "Set his house on fire?"

Meredith glares at the too-happy-for-this-hour barista. "He lives with me," she says. "Setting his house on fire would be rather problematic."

Coffee Cart Guy takes the hint and shuts up. "What would you like today ….." His gaze shifts below her neck level to her name tag. He reads, eyes darting quickly left to right. And then he adds, "Dr. Grey?"

"An espresso shot, please." And then she considers that for a moment. "No, make that two." And then she considers some more. Coffee Cart Guy peers at her with raised, expectant eyebrows. "Crap, just make it three."
"A little tired today?" says Coffee Cart Guy.

"You have no idea," Meredith replies with a sigh, and she leans up against the cart to wait for her order as a yawn cracks her frame.

The coffee she had with Derek was a good start. But if Mrs. Patterson is going to have any complications, this time, Meredith is determined to make sure they won't be Meredith's fault, even if she has to drink an entire swimming pool full of espresso to make that happen.

"So," Derek says as he catches her in the hallway, shuffling tiredly out of OR 3, "did you get to hold the heart like Burke promised?"

Her muscles ache from the nape of her neck all the way to her toes, thanks to hours of craning over an operating table to look at what's going on - in case she's asked some asinine intern question - while also holding a little over half a pound of human heart. Which, yeah, half a pound doesn't sound like much by itself, but try holding up half a pound for about six hours. It sucks.

"Yeah, I did," Meredith says as she amble-limps toward the locker room, and he follows.

Derek looks at her expectantly. "Well?"

She frowns. "Well, what?"

Derek matches her frown with one of her own. "You don't want to gush?"

Meredith shrugs. "Not really."

"It didn't go badly, did it?" Derek says.

Meredith shakes her head. No hearts were dropped or punctured by fingernails in the re-making of this re-intern. She was careful this time not to nod off.

"No, it was fine," she tells him. But at this point in her life, she's held more hearts than she can count, and just standing there for hours, watching another surgeon do all the glory work, while her back was killing her, and she was fighting not to fall asleep in a horrible vortex of boredom and exhaustion, was not all that exciting, and there's nothing to gush about. She held a heart. Big whoop.

He regards her for a long moment, frown deepening. He folds his arms. "You're not still mad at me, are you?"

She sighs. "Derek, I was never mad at you." Disappointed? Yes. And a little irritated, though that had petered away after a few minutes of grr and some walking to burn it off.

"Really?" he says, eyes narrowing. "Because you seem … mad."

She rolls her eyes. "Derek … I'm not mad; I'm just …." A yawn chooses that moment to crack her open like a nut, and it keeps going and going and going, until her eyes are watering, and her jaw hurts, and she leans forward and clutches at his white coat with a tightening fist to keep herself from tipping. When she teeters back into fully-balanced and yawn free, she swallows. "Really freaking tired."

"Oh," he says. But he sounds … suspicious.

She stares ahead of her, a bit dazed. The room is swimmy, she's so done with this whole being
awake thing. A big hulking thing with wheeled feet blocks her path, but it doesn't sink into her brain that this large metal mountain in her way is something she should, maybe, try to dodge. Derek grabs her arm and steers her around it at the last minute.

"Oh, thanks," she says as she stops to squint at the obstacle. A crash cart. Yes. That would have been bad to run into. Oops.

He gives her a concerned look. "You should get some sleep."

She blinks slowly. "Tell that to the people in this timeline who still think forty-eight hours per shift is a good idea."

"This … timeline?" he says, eyes narrowing. "Meredith, are you okay?"

"My head is spinning," she says.

He nods. "Okay." He grabs her by the shoulders, turns her in the opposite direction, back toward the surgical wing and the big crash cart that confounded her poor, overworked, misfiring neurons, and he pushes her gently in that direction.

"But that's back to work," she protests as he guides her along. "I want to find an on-call room."

"It's not back to work," he tells her. "It's back to my office."

"Why?" she says.

He looks at her like she's crazy. "Because I have a couch you can use, and it'll be quiet, which is better than the on-call rooms, assuming you can even find a free bed."

"The attendings hog them," Meredith says, regurgitating Dr. Bailey's speech because Meredith is useless for sentience at this point.

Derek nods. "They do. So, I'll tell Dr. Bailey I want you today, and you can hang out in my office, no pages to be had for hours."

She grins sloppily at him. Being tired is, alarmingly, like being drunk. "You only want me today?"

He gives her an easy grin in response. "I want you on my service today," he corrects himself. And then he winks. "In a general sense of wanting you around, I'd say I always want that."

She giggles like she's on her second margarita. "Oh. I knew that. I make you feel better."

"Hmm," is all he has to say in response.

She lets him guide her through the bowels of the hospital. The surgery wing is busy, with doctors and nurses and administrative staff and cleaning crew moving every which way like human bumper cars. The office wing is a bit less frenetic, since it's home only to department heads, and only when they need a quiet place to work or meet with people. The peons - interns, residents, normal attendings - get nothing in the way of personal space at work, which leaves them commandeering space wherever they can find it, like empty nurses' stations, conference rooms, the lounge areas. Anywhere.

She blinks slowly when they arrive at his office. His keys jingle as he fishes them out of his white coat pocket. "Wait," she says as he unlocks his door, finally catching up with what he said ages ago, and he looks up at her, eyebrows raised. "There's a couch in your office?" His office was so
disheveled last time she visited it that she didn't even notice a sofa. Possibly under the weight of all the boxes and refuse.

He snorts. "Yes, Meredith," he says in an amused tone. "There's a couch."

As they step inside his dark office, he flips on the lights. She blinks, squinting, as the spears of illumination penetrate her pupils and strike her retinas. The office is still a mess full of paper and boxes and other clutter. At first, she doesn't even see the couch, but then her tired neurons start working.

It's there. Buried. The couch, that is.

Derek blushes ears to throat when he sees her cataloging his category 5 mess. "I have to move some things," he says, as if the obvious were somehow obscure. He shuffles to the couch and lifts a box off the cushions. He sets the box on the chair by his desk, which is covered with a mountain of file folders and framed photos and … junk. Piles and piles of total junk.

This is so anti-Derek and his compulsive, neat-freaky ways, and she's so tired, that she can't help but say, "Why is your office so messy? You hate messy, and this looks like a FedEx truck exploded or something," because her filter is totally broken by exhaustion, and she says idiot things when that happens.

He pauses from liberating his couch from his refuse. The red on his face gets redder. But all he does is give her a half-hearted shrug, like he's ashamed of his what's-become-a-trash-vortex. "Well, I did just move," he offers as a rather pathetic excuse, which he seems to know is a pathetic excuse, because he doesn't look at her when he says it, his skin is almost scarlet at this point, and his tone is … prickly.

She bites her lip. There's … subtext here that she's missing, she thinks. Something important.

He lifts the last box and piles it near his desk with a grunt. He pulls his fingers through his hair, and then he gestures at the couch. "You can crash here as long as you want." He plunges his fist into his coat pocket and fishes out his keys again. He makes like he's going to toss them at her, but then thinks better of it, given that she doesn't even have the reflexive wherewithal to dodge a crash cart, and he sets them on top of a box that's sort of serving as the couch's end table, right now. "Just lock the door when you're done. Okay?"

"Okay," she says, nodding. "Thanks."

He turns to leave.

"Are you okay?" she feels compelled to ask.

He frowns when he looks back at her.

"It's just … I'm getting vibes," she says. "That … that you're not okay."

But all he does is give her that half-hearted shrug he gave her before. "Sure," he says, and he gives her a smile that doesn't reach his eyes. "Why wouldn't I be?"

She bites her lip as ambivalence floods her. "I don't know," she says as she folds her arms across her chest. "You just … seem not okay."

Another half-hearted shrug. "I'm okay," he says, but she's known him long enough to know that that's a bald lie. The weight in his words, the way he won't meet her eyes. That's a lie. If not to her,
then to himself.

"If you want to talk to someone, I'm a decent listener," she says, not wanting to push too hard. Not right now.

He gives her a brittle smile. "I'll be around," he says. And then he slips through the door, closing it quietly behind him.

It's not until she's horizontal, staring drunk-tiredly at the dingy ceiling tiles that she realizes he's left her in a unique position to snoop. And, if she weren't so drunk-tired, she might think snooping is a bad idea, and that he deserves his privacy. But the simple fact of the matter is that she is drunk-tired, and he's left her in a room with a zillion still-packed boxes.

She rolls lazily into a sitting position, leans forward, and pulls the closest box toward her. It's a brown box, about twelve by eighteen inches. The cardboard is beat to crap from its bumpy transit, and the lips of the box are still taped shut with shiny brown packing tape. She's busy debating whether to go so far into the wrongness of snooping as to cut open things he's left sealed, when her gaze wanders to the shipping label.

She blinks. Mark Sloan, it says. And it's a Manhattan address.

A lump forms in her throat. Mark must have mailed Derek all his junk. The stuff Derek left at his old office when he fled. No wonder Derek hasn't touched these boxes, yet. Just looking at the name on the label must kill him.

She glances at the shipping labels of the adjacent boxes. More packages from Mark. Her heart aches, seeing this mess. She thinks of all the hollow smiles he's given her the last few weeks. Of all the times he's hinted something isn't right. Of the bags she spotted under his eyes that morning.

And that's when it hits her. A hypothesis for the cluster bomb of disorder in his life.

She's battled with depression on and off throughout her life. When it strikes, she tends to lose interest in things that normally interest her. Tiny tasks seem monumental and difficult, even stuff as simple as getting out of bed or, say … unpacking a box. Alphabetizing files. Sorting things. Cleaning.

Derek Shepherd is the consummate neat freak.

This office is wrong. This is supposed to be Derek's sanctuary, and he's surrounded himself with wall-to-wall crap that a normal person in his position wouldn't be ready to go anywhere near, let alone stack miles high in his personal space where he can see it, day in, day out, taunting him.

He's so upset by Addison cheating on him that his brain is sick. Because he hasn't had his intimate, confidence-bolstering, healing relationship with Meredith, yet, he never got his much-needed breath of fresh air, and he's still drowning. That has to be it.

And the fact that he not only let Meredith in here, but he left her alone to inspect the refuse - if she decided to be nosy - tells her some things.

The first thing is that, maybe, even though he's not saying it with words, he's asking her for help. Derek's not all that great at asking for help, and he had to have known she might infer something is going on with him from the simple fact that his den of trash has stayed stagnant for over a month, now.

The second thing is that, when he said the word drowning - as in Meredith, you pulled me up from drowning - he really meant drowning. As in I was in a black hell pit of despair and ruin, from
which I could see no way out. For some reason, the fact that he was that upset never sunk in before, and she's a little embarrassed she missed that, somehow.

But … depression can be stealthy. A ninja. And it can hide behind smiles with the ease of mist flowing through a valley. So, she pushes her embarrassment away to focus on the now. The now that involves her being left in his office to snoop.

The third and final thing she's learned from his willingness to leave her in the cluttered shrine to his misery is that the issue of him not telling her about Addison, yet, isn't one of mistrust. If he didn't trust her, he never would have left her alone in here with all his personal things, where she's free to snoop or steal.

Which leaves, of the remaining reasons that could explain his subterfuge, malice. Like he really is playing a game with her to see how long he can string her along, or …. She's not sure what else. All she can think of is malice.

Her stomach roils.

She doesn't like that the only idea she can come up with, at this point, for his failure to disclose, is malice. She hopes her lack of inspiration is just because she's tired, and, as a result, her brain isn't firing on all cylinders. She pushes the box she was looking at back into position with her foot, desire to snoop abating like a receding tide, and flops back onto the couch, which is soft and leather and smells like a new car.

She closes her eyes, hoping a reason for his reticence that's not malice-y will to come to her.

A not malice-y reason for Derek's behavior doesn't arrive during her slumber, but, thanks to Derek's plan, she gets six glorious hours of uninterrupted sleep. Six. She can't remember the last time she slept this much all in consecutive minutes. The swimmy, detached feeling she's been living with all day has disappeared, and her eyeballs don't feel like two-ton ball bearings jammed inside her skull.

She takes one last glance at Derek's office before she leaves. She could snoop, more. Now, that she's refreshed. She could. Except, now, that she's refreshed, the idea of snooping seems appalling to her, and she's appalled that there was a point in her exhaustion where she was even thinking about it. Snooping. She shakes her head, scolding herself. Then she locks his door and goes in search of him.

She finds him at the small round table in the attendings' lounge, poring over charts. The skin around his eyes is pinched, but not in a happy way. The pen he drags across the paper as he writes is heavy and scratchy and loud, like he's pressing too hard, and the knuckles on his pen-gripping hand are colorless, further supporting the pressing-too-hard theory.

She raps on the open doorway with the back of her hand to warn him she's here. He looks up from his work, and the horrid tension on his face relaxes into a warm smile. He looks so handsome when he smiles like that.

"Hey," he says. "Sleep well?"

She nods as she pads into the room and sits down across from him. "Yes, thanks. I really needed that."

He nods, like he's pleased he's done his good deed for the day or something. And then he sighs, looking back at his open chart. Tension curls his frame again. The too-tense writing continues.

"Derek, what did that chart do to you?"
He looks up. "Hmm?"

She gestures at the sheet. "You're writing on it like you wish your pen was a scalpel slashing the paper to ribbons or something."

"Oh," he says. He takes a deep breath and blows it out. "Just a bad day."

"A bad day?" she prods.

He shakes his head. "Let's just say that some of your coworkers are not as easy to work with as you."

"Who?" she says.

But he shakes his head again, and he won't give up a specific name. Which … she supposes she can't fault him for. They're friends, yes, but he is her boss's boss, and she can't imagine how pissed she'd be if she discovered he was gossiping about her to another of her colleagues, like Izzie or George or … whoever. Talk about inappropriate.

He writes one last sentence, completing it with a vehement press of the ballpoint to make period, and then sets down his pen with a long, tired sigh. He looks at her, and he smiles again. "Do you want to do something tonight? Something relaxing that's not in any way related to doctors or hospitals or drug addicts?"

For a moment, all she can do is stare at him. He's asking her to do something. He's asking her. She's not pestering him until he gives in. Which is … what she's been hoping for since she got dumped into this stupid Murphy Timeline.

And, of course, it's the Murphy Timeline, so, Murphy strikes again. "I can't," she replies with a disappointed sigh. "Izzie's having a party at my house. It's supposed to be small - the party, I mean - but I know it's going to be gigantic on the order of call-the-cops-with-a-noise-complaint, and I need to make sure my house doesn't get ransacked."

He snorts at her babble-y description. "Forget about the party," he says. "Your friends will be at the party. They can make sure your house doesn't get ransacked. You and I can be somewhere else."

He's … this …. Her jaw opens. He's …. This is sounding way familiar. She remembers this. She remembers this. He asked her out on a date with real food, waiters, big chunks of carbs in a basket. Her heart squeezes. She remembers this. And he's the one pursuing her, in this conversation. Both times. He's …. Freaking …. She wants to take Murphy and strangle him.

Derek frowns. "You don't want to?"

"I'd love to," Meredith admits, chest aching. He asked her out. Sort of. On a date. Sort of. "But I can't, Derek. My friends won't be there to protect squat." A metric ton of people she doesn't know will be there. Cristina, who hates her, will be there. George, who likes her a little too much - he'll be there. But Izzie, the one friendship Meredith's managed to keep stable so far, won't even arrive until the party is long past over, and, crap, this whole party thing is sounding worse and worse every time Meredith's thoughts wander toward the logistics. At least, she thought ahead enough to clear out all the breakable things and put them in the attic. She did that as soon as Izzie told her about the "small, intimate gathering" that Meredith knew would be neither small, nor intimate.

She looks at Derek. Having him there would be a lifesaver, and she remembers his sarcastic affront at not being invited the first time. Thanks for not inviting me, by the way, he said. That felt good.
"Do you want to come?" she asks him.

Yes, says his gaze, but his mouth says, "I shouldn't," and she feels herself deflating like a popped balloon.

Murphy Timeline. Check.

And, now, it's Meredith's turn to frown. "Why not? I thought we were doing the friend thing, now. Are we not doing the friend thing, now? You promised, no waffling."

"We are friends," he insists. "And I'm not waffling. But us having a friendship outside of work is … inappropriate-"

"Derek, you promised no waffling."

"And I'm not waffling," he insists. "You want to go to a movie? Fine. You want to meet at my place? O-"

"You'd let me see your place?" she blurs, astounded. "Now? Really?" He looks at her like she's just announced she's quitting her job as an intern to join the Hell's Angels or something. "I mean, I wouldn't have to pester you to take me there?" she adds weakly.

"Why would you think you'd have to pester me?" he says, an intense frown marring his face.

She snorts. "Are you kidding? I've had to pester you about everything."

He rolls his eyes. "You know, in some realities, we'd call that sexual harassment. Not pestering." He says it with a lopsided, friendly grin that tells her he in no way feels sexually harassed, but ….

"Weird to have the shoe on the other foot for once, huh?" she quips, unable to stop herself.

Her unhelpful tiny voice screams. What the hell are you doing? She wishes she could tell her tiny voice that she's already aware of the smelly foot she's just crammed into her mouth. Thanks.

Derek frowns, and the brightness in his expression fades like his batteries died. "This is one of those times when I feel like there's a joke I'm missing, but you're in on it, and you're laughing at me."

"I'm sorry," she says with an upset sigh. "I'm just … in a weird mood."

"Hmm," is all he says.

The suspicion in his tone is a deep, dark, twisty thing. And, still, he looks … hurt. The insecurity he radiates is a conflagration. And she kind of feels like crap for fanning the flames.

"I'm really not laughing at you," she insists, never tearing her eyes from his, never blinking, hoping he'll believe her.

He seems to accept this and continues, "Anyway. You want to meet at my place? Okay. You want to go out for coffee again, like we did this morning? Sounds good. In fact, I'd …." He stumbles to a halt, and his gaze grows distant. A wistful smile twitches at his lips. Like he's looking at a picture in his mind's eye that he likes and that makes him hurt all at the same time. "I'd love doing that," he decides. But then he soberes, and he's back in the room with her again. "But me showing up at a party full of your intern friends is just …." His voice trails away when he can't figure out what him showing up at a party full of her intern friends is just, but whatever it is, it isn't good.
"But I don't care if people find out," Meredith says. "I've told you that. I Don't. Care."

He frowns, folding his arms. His chair creaks as he shifts, agitated. "Well, I do. On your behalf, if nothing else."

She rolls her eyes. "Your savior complex is extremely annoying at times. Just FYI."

He bristles. "Well, you saying you're not mad at me when you clearly are is annoying, too." He gives her a mean smirk and adds, "Just FYI," in sarcastic little air quotes that make her want to smack him.

"I'm not mad," she insists.

"Come on, Meredith," he snaps. His whole posture is a defensive curl, now. "You think I don't notice all the barbs and the obfuscation? I'm not clueless."

She blinks. Her eyes narrow. "Just come to the freaking party," she tells him, choosing not to take the bait despite the directed weirdness of his comment. "Dr. Bailey will be there. It won't look that weird if you're there, too. Please?"

He pinches the bridge of his nose and sighs. Damn this man; he is so. Freaking. Stubborn. When he wants to be, he's about as movable as the Pacific Ocean.

"Just for a few minutes to save me from the fun of having to be at a party with Mean Cristina and Heartsick George?"

Derek raises his eyebrows. "Heartsick George?"

"He asked me out," Meredith says. She's gratified to see a flash of jealousy cross Derek's face before he tamps it. "I said no," she adds. "Hence the heartsick."

"You don't like George?"

She shakes her head. "I love George. But not as a potential boyfriend."

"Oh," Derek says. "Good." And then horror flashes in his eyes. "I mean .....

A slow, cat-caught-the-canary smile stretches across Meredith's face as she winks. "Jealous?"

He shakes his head like a windshield wiper on full speed, and his, "No!" is quick and bleating and says, I really don't like that I feel this way, but yes!

She gives him a sly smile. "Should I be jealous?"

"Huh?" he says.

She leans forward, resting her elbows on the table, and her chin on her hands. "Because, I'm very interested in you," she says. She licks her lips. "You know. As the potential boyfriend."

And the little voice is back. Meredith. Meredith, what are you doing? Stop. Stop it, now.

"Jealous?" he parrots, a look of confused, desperate frenzy in his gaze.

"Got a girlfriend stashed somewhere?" she prods. "A secret wife?"

He scoots back from the table, the feet of his chair screeching across the tiles, and he flinches like
he's been slapped. It's impossible to miss the way the secret wife thing scalds him, but ... not in the way she expected. She doesn't see guilt. She doesn't see oops, I've been found out. She doesn't see disappointment that his subterfuge has turned futile. What she does see is ... unreadable to her - she's not sure she's ever seen anything like it on his face - but it's bad.

"You are ...," he begins, his voice thick and low with upset. He shakes his head. "You are very, very frustrating."

"Well, ditto!" she snaps, pushing her chair back to stand as well.

He glares. "Yes, I'm interested. Is that what you want to hear? It doesn't mean I can, or I should, or-

"-Because of the savior complex," she interjects.

He exhales. A sharp, barbed sigh that tells her he's well past "getting" upset. He's already there, hogging all the space, and he's put up a no-vacancy sign. He pulls his fingers through his hair, and his jaw clenches, and she bites her lip, watching him. Wow, she really struck a nerve. She didn't mean to - well, okay, maybe she did - but she didn't intend for it to hurt. She just wants him to freaking be honest.

"Derek, I'm sorry," she's quick to interject. "I was just ... I was ... the flirty thing I do with you. I got carried away. I just ...." She swallows as she lets her eyes space, and she stops seeing as she turns inward. How to get him to spill? "I just ...." She sighs. "I just wish you would give me a reason for not going out with me that doesn't involve you making decisions for me. I get that you don't want to hurt me, but you're going to hurt me by shutting me down, even more than you would hurt me by advertising that we're a thing. You can't not hurt me, and I care far more about being with you than I do about what other people might think of me for dating a superior. I've told you that. So, unless you can give me a reason for not wanting to be in a relationship with me that involves you making a decision for you, and not for me, why not pick the option that hurts me the least?" She risks peering at him. He's staring back at her, expression dark and tumultuous and unsettled and ... nauseated. Hell, he looks like he wants to vomit. What in the hell? "Give me a reason that involves making a decision for you," she reiterates. "I can respect a decision you make for you."

"Derek, tell me what the hell happened, she tries to beam at him again. What happened? Tell me. In your own words. Of your own free will.

His lower lip quivers like he's a millimeter from losing it. A noise coils in his throat. Not a word, not anything. Just ... an upset sound filling a tense, silent space. His weight shifts from foot to foot like he's going to bolt.

"I ...," he says. He pulls his fingers through his hair again. "I ...."

"You?" she prods.

"Isn't it enough for you to know I. Don't. Want to?" he snaps, the words dark and sour like he's sucked a lemon. "Why isn't that enough for you?"

"But how can you be interested and not want to at the same time?" she counters. "Derek, I don't get it. Help me get it. I want to get it, so that, maybe, I can stop upsetting you, and, maybe, we can get a happy-ish ending out of this. But you're not making sense to me."

"I'm ... just ... not in a good place right now."

Understatement, if his messy office and his turmoil in the last few minutes has been any indication.
"Why?" Meredith says. "What kind of bad place are you in?" She swallows, and she dares two steps around the table, closer to him, closing the gap. "Maybe, if you talk to me about it, I could help."

He looses a bitter, caustic laugh that slices at her like a razor, and she flinches.

"You don't think I could help?" she says, frowning. She takes another step, and another, and another. "You said talking to me makes you feel better." Derek, tell me what the hell happened, she thinks at him once more. In your own words. Of your own free will. She reaches for his shoulder. Squeezes. And he leans. Into it. Like he wants the comfort.

But …. Jeez, all these mixed messages are hard to read.

"I want to help," she continues. "Like you helped me. I want to. I promise, you can't surprise me, no matter how crazy you think it is."

"It's not that it's crazy," he replies slowly.

She frowns. "Well, what is it?"

His mouth opens. And then closes. And opens. And closes. She watches with confusion as he blushes. His whole body. His ears. His face. His throat. He blushes like he's been caught naked in the OR or something.

Which … what the hell?

He gives her that look again. That unreadable-but-bad look.

And then he walks away.

Out of the lounge, so she can be alone with the burbling coffee maker and the hum of the refrigerator.
Come On, Stop Moving (Part Two)

Chapter Notes

Hey, all. My cold is much better :) Nothing else new to report.

A lot of you have asked for a MerDer kiss, or sex, or something on the scale between. I promise, this story does have paydirt - your wait won't be in vain. But I believe that physicality is a huge part of the problem with these two, and it's not even a band-aid over a bullet hole, it's giving someone with a bullet hole some pain medication and saying, "Okay, that's it, folks." Which basically means someone will bleed out, it'll just be a less painful death. It's solving the wrong problem. And MerDer always do that instead of actually talk and work out their shit. This story is meant to connect 11x17 and 11x18 - to go from total ruin (remember chapter one, and 11x17) to Psilocybin Meredith and Zen Derek (remember them in 11x18). S11 Derek is off screen, of course, but S11 Meredith has a lot of shit to work out, and she's only just started to make some connections and have some "ah hah!" moments. So ... carnality will have to wait.

Thanks, as always, to those who take the time to leave me feedback!

Once she's regathered her wits and given him a little while to cool off, Meredith looks for Derek. Even if they don't chat, she is on his service today, and she's got nothing to do unless he gives her an assignment other than sleep. But Derek must have taken lessons from George or something. How to Avoid Meredith 101.

She can't find Derek anywhere.

She does find Cristina, though, who's sitting on an old, decommissioned gurney in their favorite deserted hallway. Muted sunlight slants through the windows, bathing the gurney and the floor in front of it in a warm glow. A highlighter squeaking across shiny paper fills the silence as Meredith sits down, a few feet away. Cristina looks up from reading her textbook.

"You're not sleeping with Burke, too, are you?" Cristina snarks.

"Excuse me?" Meredith says.

"He picked you over me for the CABG, and he seems like the kind of guy who'd be receptive to screwing an intern."

Meredith gapes. "I'm not sleeping with Burke! Hell, I'm not even sleeping with Derek."

"You mean Shepherd?" Cristina says with a peaking, judging eyebrow.

Meredith rolls her eyes. She doesn't think she's ever going to get used to calling Derek sir or Shepherd. "Shepherd. Whatever," she says with a shrug. She takes a breath. "And I told you I didn't know who Dr. Shepherd was when we met."
Cristina snorts. "You can screw whoever you want, whenever you want. That's not my problem."

"Well, what is your problem?" Meredith snaps.

Cristina caps her highlighter and slams shut her book. "Look, Meredith. I can respect boffing the boss to get ahead. It's sad that women are stuck in such a sexist, cutthroat professional environment that that's sometimes needed to get ahead, but I recognize that it's a valid strategy."

Meredith blinks. "Then, wh-

"What I have a problem with," Cristina snaps, cutting her off, "is when you waste my time in the process."

"I didn't waste your time!" Meredith says.

"You thought Dr. Shepherd would pick you because you took a ride on the McDreamy train, and yet you still accepted my offer for help in the library, for a 50/50 shot that was, in your head, supposed to be a 100% shot for you and a 0% shot for me."

Meredith opens her mouth. Closes it. She can't even refute that, because she did think Derek would pick her. Not because of the train thing, but because of the stupid hind-foresight thing. Not that Cristina would ever believe her.

"Oh," Meredith says.

"Yeah, oh." Cristina rolls her eyes. "Admit it. You're a shark."

"I … ."

"Right," Cristina says with a glare as she slides off the gurney. The mattress squeaks. "Whatever." She turns to leave.

"Cristina, I wasn't trying to sabotage you," Meredith said. "I was trying to get to know you. I thought … we could be friends." Which sounds so … third-grade when she hears it aloud versus in her head, but … what else can she say?

"Yeah, well, do it when it's not going to impact my career," Cristina replies. She hugs her book to her chest and heads out through the swinging doors without looking back.

"Sorry, I'm late," Meredith says as she steps into the lobby of Roseridge Home, and one of the administrative staff walks up to her. A red-haired woman. Meredith forgets her name. Nina. Or Natalie. Or something. "It was the traffic."

"It doesn't matter, dear," says Nina-Natalie.

"Okay," Meredith says with a sigh. And then she frowns. "Don't tell me the notary didn't show."

"Oh, everybody's here," Nina-Natalie says. "It's just your mother … ." Nina-Natalie glances into the common room, where Ellis and a bunch of men in suits are sitting. "Isn't."

Meredith deflates. She remembers this moment, now, too. Crap.

"I couldn't come earlier in the day," she says, helpless. "I work forty-eight hour shifts, more than a hundred hours a week. I barely have time to sleep and eat when I'm not at work, let alone deal with
"..." This. A mother with advancing dementia who can't remember anything but work. Meredith swallows. "I don't know how I did this the first time."

Nina-Natalie gives her a sympathetic, though slightly confused, look. "I know it's hard, dear. You're not alone."

"It's not that I don't want to be here," Meredith insists. Though she doesn't. She doesn't want to be anywhere near this. She can't take this. She wants to be here when her mother is lucid, but Meredith is never freaking available when that happens.

"I know," Nina-Natalie says.

Meredith rubs her eyes. "So, when can we reschedule this?"

Nina-Natalie shrugs. "Mornings are her best time. This is going to be really hard to get done until you have a free morning that isn't on the weekend, when none of the notaries are working."

Meredith swallows. "It's not like I can stop by on my way to work. My work starts before the freaking sun is up. Do we have to sign the documents at the same time and place?"

Nina-Natalie sighs and rubs the bridge of her nose. "I suppose we could get the documents double-notarized. You sign. They notarize. Then your mom signs when she's lucid, and they notarize again."

"Please," Meredith says. "Please, can we do that?"

Nina-Natalie nods. "We can try." She gestures to the main room where all the men in suits are sitting. "Come this way."

The throbbing bass emanating from her mother's house is a physical wallop that Meredith can feel in her chest before she's turned off the intersection onto her street. People dart across the road in front of her Jeep, laughing, and she's forced to slam on the brakes as they stumble through the beams of her headlights. Meredith grits her teeth. Idiots. All of them.

When she rolls to a stop in front of her house, she sees that her driveway is jammed full with vehicles, one of which has rolled up onto her grass and is probably ruining the lawn. Moving silhouettes dance against the curtains. Laughter burbles into the air from the house like steam from a boiling pot.

Meredith sighs. There's no parking available on the curbs by her house, either, or anywhere in the seeable distance.

She knew this party was going to be loud and boisterous. Eight years ago, when she was younger, and worried about her career going up in smoke thanks to that punctured heart, and she had a not-heartskick George there, and a Cristina who liked her, Meredith was able to suck it up and enjoy the party, anyway. Or, at least, she was able to let the party foster her wallowing.

This time, though. The idea of walking into her house right now makes her head hurt. Or, maybe, that's the throbbing bass.

She takes one last look at her house. Screw it. Let them ransack it. In her mind, all the things inside of it have been gone for years, now, anyway, so it's not like she'd miss anything that gets broken, and
she just … can't stomach this crowd right now.

There's someone she'd much rather spend her time with. Someone who invited her out tonight. Someone who, maybe, needs a little company. Someone who's drowning.

She glances at her watch, and she reaches for her cellphone.

Derek didn't pick up his phone, and he's not at the hospital anymore, according to the staff at the admitting desk. Which means … he's still upset, and he's abusing caller ID to avoid her. Or wallowing and not checking his phone in the first place. Or … something.

The sun set hours ago, and even though Meredith has a general idea of where Derek will be, finding the exact space he occupies will be a bit more of a challenge. According to the ferry schedule, there are two Bremerton ferries running concurrently today. The Bremerton route is about an hour long, which means it's going to take about three hours to check both of them if she rides each of the two ferries consecutively. Her plan is to ride one ferry out to Bremerton, use the hour long wait for the second ferry to check his trailer and the dock by his lake, race back to the terminal, and ride the second ferry back to Seattle. That way, if she's completely wrong, at least she'll be back in Seattle and on her way home in a little over three hours. Which, she hopes, will be enough time for the monster party going on at her house to die a wheezy death.

She waits in line with the other cars at the ferry station. When she gets the green light, she drives onto the car deck and parks herself behind the cream-colored Taurus that puttered onto the deck in front of her. She turns off her ignition and yanks out the key.

Well. Here goes nothing.

She checks the decks systematically - from the car deck all the way to the top deck - but she doesn't find him anywhere, and she's beginning to think the Murphy Timeline may have struck again. With nothing better to do for the remainder of her hour-long trip, she repeats her search of all the decks, just in case she missed something, this time with an even finer combing exploration of all the nooks and crannies a person might be hiding in.

She's almost ready to give up with a sigh and sit in her Jeep when she sees him sitting on a bench on the top deck, half buried in shadow. His posture is hunched like he's cold, and he's wearing a black duster that covers him neck to ankles. Between his reduced profile, his midnight-colored clothing, and his raven-brown, wind-ruffled hair, he's camouflaged a bit like a chameleon. Despite his near invisibility, though, she's certain he wasn't sitting on that bench the first time she checked. Maybe, he'd been moving around.

He's staring at but not seeing the frothy waves forming in the ferry's wake, and he seems oblivious to the fact that he's being observed. The Seattle skyline towers in the distance in double, the real - sharp and bright against the purple, light-polluted sky - and the unreal - shimmery and impressionistic on the surface of the black water. He lifts a tiny, glinting, silver flask to his lips and kicks it back as she approaches.

"You know, you could get kicked off the ferry for that," she says to warn him that she's there. "You're not supposed to drink on the top deck."

His bleak gaze slides to her, and then back to the boat's wake. "Well, nobody's watching," he says in a dark tone.

She sits on the bench beside him, leaning back against the cold wall. "So, you blew me off for a flask
"How'd you know it was scotch?" he says.

She shrugs. "I know you like scotch."

He gives her a frustrated look. "How'd you know I like scotch?"

"Well, you ordered it, didn't you?" she says. "The night we met."

He sighs. Like he thought he was onto something, and she just debunked it. "Oh," he says. She doesn't miss how glum he sounds, and it makes her heart ache to see him so unhappy.

A liquid slosh marks the movement of the flask as he holds it out to her. "Want a swig?"

She hates scotch. But she's willing to take his peace offering. She sits up straight, takes the flask, tips it back, and coughs more than swallows, but she manages. Her eyes water and her vision swims. She hasn't eaten in a while, and this will probably hit her like a ton of bricks if she drinks much more than a gulp or two. She passes the flask back to him.

"Thanks," she says. She looks at her knees. "I'm sorry about … this afternoon. I didn't mean to make you feel attacked. And I didn't mean to be so pushy."

"I wish you'd tell me why you're mad at me," he replies. "I don't know what I did to make you mad."

"Derek, I'm **not** mad," she insists.

"And I'm not a **moron,**" he replies. He takes another swig of his scotch. "Stop treating me like one."

She doesn't know how to reply to that, so she chooses not to, and they sit on the bench in tense silence.

"How did you know I'd be on the ferry?" he says.

" Didn't you say you had a thing for ferryboats? When I thought you were flirting, but you weren't."

He makes a frustrated noise deep in his throat.

"How did you know I'd be on **this** ferryboat now?" he clarifies.

Because she knows he lives in Bremerton. And she knows he likes to ride the ferry back and forth sometimes when he's upset. Or when he wants to kill time. But she's not supposed to be privy to any of that, yet, and this time, she's not really sure how to explain.

"I … guessed?"

"Lucky guess," he says with a displeased snort, like he doesn't believe her, and she's not sure what to make of his irritation.

She sighs. "Derek, do you not want me here right now? I can leave you alone if you don't want me here."

But he doesn't reply. Doesn't say no. Doesn't say go away. He stares at the water with a brooding expression. The high-pitched, haunting whistle of the wind against the ferry fills the silence. He takes...
another swig of his scotch.

"So, how'd your party go?" he says, syllables relaxing a little more. Not so much that it could be called slurring, but … he's not sober. That's a definite.

"Overboard, just like I predicted," she says. "I … didn't go in." She turns to peer at him, pasting a hopeful smile on her face. "I thought I'd take you up on your offer, instead."

He turns to look at her. His eyebrows raise. "My offer?"

"To meet at your place," she says.

He sighs. "Meredith … I don't think ….

"You don't want me to see it, now?" He didn't, after all, exactly invite her over to his place, **tonight**. He just invited her out in general.

"It's not that," he says. His eyes close briefly, like he's staving off or enduring pain, and her heart squeezes as she watches him suffer. "It's … I don't think I'd be good company right now."

She snuggles closer, she rests her head on his shoulder again, and she drapes an arm across him. It's … a way more than platonic sort of embrace, particularly when it's with a friend of the opposite sex. But … she gets this feeling it's something he needs right now. He's always been tactile. He's always loved it when she touches him - a hug, a kiss, a shoulder squeeze, anything. He's not picky about comfort - he's always taken whatever she gives without complaint.

"Well, that's okay," she assures him. "We could watch television. You wouldn't even have to talk."

"I'm tired," he says.

She bites her lip. She rubs his side from armpit to waist. The soft rustle of her palm sliding over his duster is almost inaudible underneath the wind. "If you really don't want me to come over," she says, "I can go. Really, no pressure."

But, again, he doesn't take her up on her offer, and again, she's struck with the idea that he's asking for help. He just doesn't know how to actually **ask**.

"What do you like to watch?" is all he says as he stares, unblinking, into space.

She's about to say Top Chef when she remembers that show isn't even on, yet. And the only other things she can think of are Dinosaur Train and Barney and Sesame Street and …. Hell, maybe, she should just run with it. "It's been ages since I watched anything for people older than five," she says. "I really have no idea anymore."

He snorts. He takes another swig. And follows it with a second identical motion.

She looks up at him. She wants to kiss him. The urge to cup his face, tip his gaze toward her, and press her lips to his, is an overwhelming one that makes her ache. She just … misses him. But she stuffs that yearning away inside her box. The place she puts all the things she doesn't want to deal with.

"So, where did we leave off, anyway?" she says.

He frowns. "Leave off?"
"You know," she says with a grin. "That night. When you were just a guy in a bar, and I was just a girl."

He sighs. "Meredith, please don't start this again," he says, a tinge of begging in his tone. "Please, not now. I'm ... I can't handle this right now." His voice cracks, and for a moment, he looks like he's an inch from breaking down. "I can't ...." He takes another chug of his scotch like it's all that's keeping him afloat.

She frowns and straightens up so she's eye to eye with him. "What are you talking about?"

"I just want to be friends," he says.

She raises her eyebrows. "And that precludes me from knowing things about you?"

"Oh," he says, a sheepish look of apology sliding across his face.

"I just ... want to know," she says.

He regards her for a long moment, bleak, black eyes unblinking. But his expression softens as the moments pass, and the wind whips them. The hum of the boat's motor and the whistle of the air fill the silence as he thinks.

He looks at his lap for a moment, and then at her. "You really do, don't you?" he says.

"Yes, Derek," she says. "I like you, and you interest me."

She resettles against him, tightening her grip, offering him as much warmth and comfort as she can, and finally, she can feel his resistant wall crumble like old stone. He leans into the touch, and he sighs like he's relaxing. Like he's letting himself enjoy this for what it is. Someone who cares about him, trying to help him feel better. She resists the urge to shout with triumph when she feels his arm slide over her shoulder, and he pulls her close, shielding her from the wind. She closes her eyes and lets herself enjoy the closeness for a moment. She inhales the scent of his aftershave, which is laced with the peat-y bite of scotch. She misses him both more and less when they sit like this. It's an odd dichotomy.

"Tell me about your first job after medical school," she says.

"I did my residency at NewYork-Presbyterian, which is an affiliate of Columbia."

"Meet anyone special?" she says like a reflexive knee jerk. Which. Why?

"Why d'you keep asking me for my romantic history?"

Why does she keep asking him for his romantic history? Reliably, every time she establishes some sort of stable truce with him, she puts in a jab about Derek's love life. The tiny voice in her head is screaming. Dirty, dirty self-saboteur! Unresolved ... 2012 ... whatever ... clearly makes her incapable of filtering. Crap.

She shrugs, trying to play it off as cool. "Just something more to know about you. I took a long break between college and medical school and went to Europe. I dated a girl. Her name was Sadie. We spent a lot of time galavanting around London together."

"Are you bi?" he says.

"Nah, but at the time I was certainly bicurious," she says. "That was my experimental stage."
"What'd y'do in Europe?"

"Honestly?" she says, squinting up at the overcast sky as she thinks. "I don't remember much of it."

"Not big on traveling?" he says.

"No, it's not that," she replies. "It's just that I spent most of the trip getting high, finding the next party. A lot of it is an ecstasy blur." And it was, at this point, for her, almost fifteen years ago. Good god, when did she get that old? "I have impressions, but I couldn't tell you what I did on any given day, for the most part."

He gives her a wary look. "Y'don't use, still, do you?"

"No, I don't do that stuff anymore," she assures him. "Partying … lost its appeal to me."

"Good. I'm glad you stopped," he says. "Nothing good comes from doing that shit."

Which is ironic when he's using scotch to cope, and he's inebriated enough to be talking like all the words have glue on the ends, and they're sticking to each other, but she resists the urge to point that out to him. She doubts very much that he'd be receptive right now, anyway.

"You sound like you're speaking from personal experience," she prods, trying to keep him talking.

He shrugs. "My sister, Amy," he says. "She's an addict. Oxycodone, mostly, but she'll take anything she can get her hands on, if she's desperate. She OD'd when I was still a medical student and ended up in the same ER I was working at."

"That must have been awful."

His lips are a grim line. "You don't ever want to hear a flatline like that. Ever. It's …." His voice trails away, and he swallows like he's got a lump in his throat. His gaze is distant, and he flinches. She wonders if he's hearing flatlines or gunshots, now. He takes another swig. "You don't ever."

She rubs his arm. "But she's okay, now, right?"

"I suppose so," is his eventual reply. "I don't really talk to her."

"That's a shame," she says. "Why don't you call her?"

His gaze darkens. "She's an addict," he says, dark and dour, like that explains everything. "You know she's stolen my prescription pad? More than once?"

"So, what?" Meredith says. "She's your family. Right? And things aren't that black and white, Derek. They just aren't."

He doesn't reply. He stares into space with an intense gaze. Minutes pass, and they say nothing. All they do is share body heat and watch the water in silence while he works his way to the bottom of his flask. With the night and the fog filling the space behind the boat, the Seattle skyline is a distant, bare flicker of light, like twinkling candles on the horizon. Soon, the ferry will round the jutting landmass that makes Fort Ward, and nothing will be visible at all, anymore. She gazes up at the sky. No stars are visible. Only puffy, purple clouds.

"So, come on," she says when he tries to take a swig and finds his source of alcohol has dried up.

He frowns at his flask. He's gone past loose, past tipsy, and his digestive system is throttling him toward drunk like his brain is the rocket. He looks up at her like his neck is made of molasses or
some other goo, not bones and muscle.

"What?" he says, an almost comically slow reply.

She doesn't want to go down this route again. She doesn't. But the idea niggles like an irritating, itchy bug bite she can't stop herself from scratching. "I told you mine," she says. "Tell me yours. Who was your last fling? Have you ever dated anyone?"

Why? Why, why, why, why, why, the tiny voice screams.

He snorts with affront. "Of course, I've dated people. Lotsa them."

"But not recently," she counters.

"How d'you know all this stuff about me?" he asks.

"Well, a, you told me you hadn't dated recently. Remember? In your office, during my first shift?"

He deflates, like, once again, his theory has been debunked. "Oh."

"And, b," she continues, "it was easy enough to infer, anyway."

"How?"

She shrugs. How to put it gently? "Your pickup lines weren't exactly … Casanova quality."

"Oh," he says again.

Apparently, that wasn't gentle enough, because he stares at his lap, reddening like she just told him his life's work and aspirations are pointless and stupid. But the why, why, why of the voice is a tiny, whining, monosyllabic scream at this point, like a mosquito. She can't seem to find any hydrocortisone cream to her itch, and it's far louder than his blush.

"So, why haven't you dated recently?" she says.

Derek looks at her. "Have you dated recently?"

She resists the urge to sigh in irritation. God, he is so shifty about this. And so clearly rerouting the subject.

"Dated, no," she says, tone flat.

"Tha's right," he replies with a sloppy smirk. "Y'do the one-night stand thing."

She rolls her eyes. "That's not an insult to me. Don't say it like one," she snaps. "Why haven't you dated recently?"

"Oh, y'know, juss … busy with work," he says sloppily. "I guess. Haven' felt like it."

And that's when she finally snaps, and there's no more whining mosquito voice, or an itch, or anything. Just molten lava in her chest, and a red-hot blur burning out her vision. She yanks away from him like a boomerang changing direction, and she claims her own space, a foot away from him on the cold bench. Her anger burbles, and then the volcano erupts, spewing everywhere.

"God, you're such a freaking liar," she snaps.
He blinks sluggishly, and he looks at her like she's just spoken in tongues. "'Scuse me?"

The fact that he can ask that, that he clearly has no idea how someone could call him a liar, takes the inferno inside and tosses a nuclear bomb into the mix. "You're a liar! You're a lying liar who lies," she says. "You want me to trust you, but then you do crap like this, and what am I supposed to think?"

"Crap like what?" he says, still boggled.

He has no right to be boggled, god, damn it. None. None whatsoever.

One. Two. Three. Ten. She gives up trying to count away her rage. "Look," she says. "We're friends. Right?"

"Right ….

"And based on what I've seen of your social life, and how lonely you said you've been, I'd wager I'm your only friend right now," she says. "Maybe, even your best friend. Right?"

"I have friends," he insists, scowling.

"No, you don't, Derek," she says. "You had a friend, but then he slept with your wife."

He stares at her, gaping, eyes wide like some sort of mystified goldfish. It shouldn't, but his utter surprise makes her even madder. And his silence, his lack of self-defense or anything coherent, makes her madder still. How can he possibly not understand this?

"I don't get it," she continues. "I don't get why you wouldn't tell me that. Why, Derek?"

Silence stretches, and all he does is gape. But then darkness overtakes his shock. He backs away from her, spreading the foot between them to two feet, and he claws at the wall for balance. He stands, only to totter on his feet as his brain gains elevation. He makes a sick sound, like his world went topsy turvy, and for a moment, he almost seems like he might hurl. Right there on the deck.

"D'she send you?" he demands when he recovers.

Meredith blinks. That's … not the response she expected. "Addison? No!"

"R'you some sorta … p … p … private detective? R'you spyin fer her?"

"Addison didn't send me," Meredith says. "Nobody sent me!" Well, Mark sent her. But she doubts he'd take that well. Plus, it's beside the freaking point.

"Then how'd you know …?"

She folds her arms and glares. "You wouldn't believe me if I told you."

He rocks on his feet like she slapped him. His eyes are wet. "God, I was'n idiot t'think ….

"Think what?"

"Thadda woman like you'd like me," he says.

It's Meredith's turn to gape with surprise. "A woman like me?"

"Look, forgedd'it," he says. He turns and totters a step toward the cabin. And another. "I dunno what
y'want or why yer here, but … jus' forgedd'it. Jus' …." He can barely walk straight he's so smashed, and for all her fury, she's worried he'll stumble into the boat's railing, trip, and cartwheel overboard.

"Derek, stop," she says, stomping after him. "Stop. Derek, wait." But he doesn't stop. He's almost at the door to go inside when she grabs the back of his duster and yanks, preventing his egress. "Would you freaking wait?"

"Whaddaya want from me?" he says, pressing his forehead against the glass. He pants like he can't catch his breath. Like he's hot. Like he has the same kind of fury inside of him that she's letting overflow right now.

"I just want the truth from you," she says. "You want to know why I'm mad at you? That's why I'm mad at you. Because you lie. Over and over and over. And I was trying so hard to give you a chance to not lie, and you kept. Freaking. Ly-"

"Yes," he shouts, cutting her off. He turns to peer at her. The look on his face is ugly and hateful and sad and destroyed and nauseated and guilty and shamed and … she can't even catalog it all. He sways. "Yes, my bess fren slept with m'wife. In my house. On m'sheets. N'I can't …." He blinks. Blinks again. His lower lip quivers. She thinks he'll spill over, but he doesn't. He wipes his face sloppily with the back of his hand, running the motion to its terminus as he pulls his fingers through his hair. "Please, lemme alone."

His request is so … devastated, so small, so … anti-Derek, she hardly knows what to say. This wasn't what she was expecting.

At all.

"Derek, I do like you," she says. "I do." Her eyes water and spill. "I just wanted you to tell me. I needed to hear why. Eight years, and I still don't know why."

He glowers. "Why what?"

"Why you wouldn't just … say it. 'Meredith, I'm married.' Six syllables." She gives him a desperate look. "It's not hard, is it?"

"Cause," he says like the answer is obvious.

But it isn't obvious. It isn't! And she needs to freaking know. "Because, why, Derek?"

He shifts on his feet. Back and forth, swaying, like he doesn't know what to do with all his upset energy. His back is to the door, and she's in front of him, and he's trapped unless he wants to barrel over her or smash her with the door. And she doesn't even care that she's taking away his escape.

"Because, why?" she repeats.

His lower lip quivers again. He can't even look her in the eyes. He stares up at the sky. His breaths are choppy. "Cause if I tell you, then it's real, n'I …. I …."

"You …?" she prods. She's horrified at herself, but she's so desperate. She needs to know.

He sniffs. His head thunks as he leans back against the door. "I don' wan it t'be real," he says in a dark, broken tone that makes her insides feel like they're falling out. He wipes his face with his hands again. "This can' be real. I can' … be here." He won't look at her. He shouts at the sky, instead,
"This isn' m'life!"

Oh.

The silence stretches.

She gives him a sad look. "Fake it until you make it?"

He sighs, and he covers his face with his palms. "Y'know, he asked me that morning whether I'd gotten the tickets fer the Yankees game, n'we talked fer … twenny minutes, it must've been. Fer twenny minutes, we talked about baseball, n'he smiled at me like not a fuckin thing in the world was wrong."

A lump forms in her throat. "Mark?" she says.

"N'then, not twelve hours later, I found him in m'house, in m'bed, with m'wife," he says like she hasn't even spoken. He rams his elbow into the door behind him like he needs to beat the crap out of something, but there's nothing to beat the crap out of. "M'wife. I don' …"

"I'm sorry," Meredith says.

She doesn't know what else to say. She feels like she's opened Pandora's box, and she wishes she could stuff it all back in. She didn't mean to make him feel like …. He'd always said this wasn't a game to him, and she'd believed that, at least, but that still didn't change the fact that he'd willfully deceived her. It never occurred to her that he was willfully deceiving himself at the same freaking time. And how can he admit to her something that he can't even admit to himself?

_I would have told you_, he claimed. _Please, you have to believe I would have told you. I was going to tell you that night. Please, Meredith._

This Derek never got his breath of fresh air, and he's still broken, still drowning. He's still in a headspace where he can't handle what happened, yet, and his brain wasn't letting him try to process it, until Meredith pushed him off the ledge and made him process it, anyway. But Her Derek did get his breath of fresh air. She _saved_ him. And she healed him enough for him to start moving forward, to move him past the initial shock of injury.

_So, we need to talk_, Her Derek said years ago, minutes before Addison showed up.

_I was going to tell you that night_, he said, later, frantic to explain himself.

And for the first time ever, she feels herself starting to believe him. Down to the bone.

"I … I don' unnerstan what happened," Derek says, staring into space, talking like she's not even there, but the sound of his voice yanks her back into the present. "I don' …. What'd I do t'hem that'd make them wanna do that? How …?"

She swallows. She grabs his arm, fingers closing around the soft wool of his duster, and she tugs. Not yanks. If he doesn't want to go, she won't make him, but … he's almost docile, now. She leads him back to the bench, and she sits, and he follows. She wraps her arms around him. He's pliant. Despondent, really. And she wishes she could close the awful box she opened.

"Did she tell you she was unhappy?" Meredith says softly.

"No, she didn'," he says. "She didn' say anythin. I thought we were fine, n'then …." He flinches in her arms like he's remembering something awful. And then his gaze sinks from being pointed at
space to being pointed at her, and his expression darkens. "N'how'm I sposed t'tell you?" He says the word you like it's some sort of curse word. "How'm I sposed to look you in th'eye n'tell you m'wife and m'best friend fucked in my bed, and I had no idea it was happening 'til I walked in n'caught them? I caught them, Meredith. I saw …. How'm I sposed t'tell you that I couldn' keep my levens-year marriage in one piece, n'to this minute, I still've no idea how I broke it? Tell me the fuckin segue that stars that conversation, Mer-dith, cause I'd love t'hear it. I …. I don’ …." He swallows like he might vomit. "Juss thinkin bout it makes me sick."

"So … you didn't say anything because … you're embarrassed?" she says.

He looks at her like she's crazy. "Well … aren' you?" he says slowly.

She thinks for a long moment. Is she? Embarrassed that Derek may have strayed? She bites her lip. "No. I'm just … sad," she admits. She scrunches her fingers, gathering the fabric of his coat into tents. "And mad. And I don't know how he could have chosen to do that to me if he loved me."

"Well, I am," Derek says, the worlds dark and self-loathing and awful. "M'barrassed. M'barrassed that I was such a fuckin moron that I didn' figure out m'wife was unhappy until I saw that. M'barrassed that even Mark tricked me. Mark has all the guile of a fuckin watermelon, n'he still managed to blineside me. M'barrassed that m'a horrible lay, n'that I don' unnerstan women spite growing up with five a them. M'barrassed that three a my sisters have great marriages, n'my parents had a great marriage, and, yet, even with four great examples, I somehow can' manage the same. And … M'barrassed that I'm not enough. M'so embarrassed, Mer-dith."

Meredith blinks. Her eyes hurt. She rubs them. "Derek … that's ….

The degree to which he's twisted this entire event into a purposeful denigration of his character, rather than Addison simply seeking some comfort for her is … so Derek. So completely Derek. And Meredith can't believe she never figured this out before.

I was going to tell you that night,

She hugs him. Yes, some of his issues with Addison were his own damned fault, and, yes, he made mistakes, but … two people broke his first marriage. Two.

"This isn't all on you," she says. "Not all of it. This isn't …. You have to stop looking at this like it's an either/or thing. The world isn't all black and white. Stop with the freaking black and white, okay?" No response. Not even a blink. "And you're not stupid for not seeing that Addison was upset," she tells him. "People can be really surprising. Even people you know really well." Like him. To her. Repeatedly over the last five weeks. "And you're not a horrible lay. I mean, hell, I keep trying for more, don't I?" Again, he doesn't react, not with amusement or anger or anything. He's just … dead. In her arms. Dead. She tightens her embrace. "And you're enough, Derek, for me. You're more than enough."

There's nothing else to say, really.

The silence stretches.

"I don' unnerstan what happend," he says, tone plaintive, like he hasn't heard a freaking word she's said. "I don’ … fail like this," he insists to the empty space his gaze is stuck on. "I don'. I don' do
that. I don'. I don' fail. I don'.” He peters into silence.

"I'm sorry," Meredith says. "I shouldn't have pushed. I … had no idea."

He doesn't reply. It's like he's out of batteries, and all he does is stare at nothing. She rests against him, keeping him company in the dark, while the ferryboat finishes its journey to Bremerton.

She wishes she could close the box.
About Derek living in Bremerton. I know it's improbable (upgradable to impossible if I ever go there, I'm sure) for him to live in Bremerton. But I also know it's impossible for him to live in Bainbridge. Or anywhere, really. Unfortunately, this show has made an absolute incomprehensible clusterfuck of Seattle's geography, and you can choose locations where some things make sense, but that almost always makes other things not make sense. And it's a matter of personal preference as to which solution gives you the least amount of apoplexy.

I'm not a Seattle native, but I've been to the city enough times to be pretty familiar with the geography of the area. I've always done my best to represent it accurately in all my stories. S1-S3 really made it seem like Derek lived in Bainbridge. Then S4 went and showed the actual land, and suddenly Derek lives on a cliff overlooking miles and miles of civilization below, with hills, and valleys, and no visible water in sight, and there is no way in hell that that is Bainbridge. I'm sorry, there's just no way, and it's a lot easier for me to shrug off wayward dialog than it is for me to shrug off of an actual physical location we were shown in bright beautiful color.

In AATW, I chose to fanwank that Derek actually lives somewhere east of Seattle, and that he rode the ferry in earlier seasons for fun, not for commuting. Since the show never utilized ferries again after S3, that mostly calmed my inner WHY SHONDA WHY DID YOU DO THIS turmoil when it came to sorting out geography. But then 11x21 came along, and Derek rode the fucking ferry to get to the airport (and somehow managed to leave civilization enough on the way to be the sole witness of a crash and be the sole rescuer for hours, and to lose cellphone signal at the same time - don't even get me started on how little sense that makes; I'll just say anybody who's driven to SeaTac from Seattle will know that's utter bullshit).

My brain broke.

When I got to writing chapter eight, I had a do or die moment, and I had to pick somewhere for Derek to live. I spent about a week in paralysis. Making him live in Bainbridge gave me absolute hives. I've been to Bainbridge several times. It just doesn't work. It's a small island - which makes that miles and miles and miles view we got in S4 impossible. It's mostly flat, which makes the cliff impossible. Most of its bodies of water are teeny tiny ponds, not lakes, other than the one, which is not even on private land. It. Does. Not. Work.

I'm less familiar with the Bremerton area (in fact, literally all I know about it is that the ferry goes there, and how long it takes for the ferry to do so). Some may think the commute time is prohibitive, but I have two coworkers who, for the sake of living in the middle of nowhere, commute 1.5 hours one way (for three hours total), five days a week. People make interesting sacrifices for their priorities, and open space is a priority of Derek's. When I looked at Bremerton on the Google maps, I saw several major inland bodies of water that could serve as Derek's lake. Also, because I haven't seen Bremerton myself, I don't have my logic interrupting with, "Umm, Aria ... no. Here's why: A, B, C." All these things combined to make Bremerton less of a brain hemorrhage for me to pick than Bainbridge, so I picked it.
Am I completely happy with that choice? No. But it gives me the least amount of stress to write it that way, and if I hadn't said, "Fuck it, Aria; just go with it," there would be no story, because I'd still be stuck agonizing.

So, there it is. That's why Derek lives in Bremerton. It's the only solution I found even semi-palatable to write. Is it a perfect solution? Nope. As I said, perfect solutions with respect to GA and Seattle's geography are impossible, because the show has literally no idea about the city it's freaking set in (even Seattle Grace's location is an impossible Escher painting if you stop to think five seconds about it). Which, IMHO, is a travesty, but I'm not paid the big bucks, so ... oh, well.

Anyway. Thank you as always to anyone who takes the time to post feedback. I really appreciate it all! You guys are what make posting this fun for me. I'm posting this early as repayment for the schedule SNAFU last week.

A quick search of the cars on the ferry reveals that Derek must have parked in the Bremerton lot, which is good, because she's not sure how she would have managed getting both his Lexus or Land Rover and her Jeep off of the boat at the same time, not when he's too hammered to do his fair share of driving. She coaxes him to her Jeep, and he sprawls like a rag doll in the front passenger seat. It's a testament to how drunk Derek is that he doesn't ask her where she's taking him. All he does is stare out the window at nothing while she navigates the dark streets. Eventually, she turns off Laurel, and she hits a familiar split gravel path - the one that leads up the hill to his trailer.

His trailer sits atop the hill, dark and lonely, as she pulls up and settles her SUV into park. She pulls up the parking brake and looks over at her blitzed passenger. "Do you need help inside?" she says, swallowing.

_of course, he needs help inside_, the annoying, tiny voice shrieks at her, but she stuffs it away, hoping futilely for a negative from him, anyway. But only silence as he stares bleakly through the windshield into space.

Bad Things. Bad Things happen between them when alcohol is involved, and there's enough alcohol involved right now to fill a swimming pool. With the Murphy Timeline the way it is, she can't help but feel a swell of dread at that thought. There could be no more obvious sign of impending doom than Murphy himself waving a picket sign that said, "Doom Impending. Stop, Drop, and Roll, or Whatever."

When Derek paws sloppily at the door handle in a motion that reminds her of a puppet with a seizing ventriloquist, the dread burgeons even further. And then, as if to snap her out of paralysis, Derek groans and almost slides down into the muddy grass. He catches himself on the edge of the car, the skin of his palms sliding across cold, wet metal with a precarious squeak. His shirt and sweater ride up against the side of the car, revealing pale skin, a belly button, and the barest hint of a happy trail coiling below said navel. He swallows like he might throw up.

"Oh," he says, and the back of his hand flies to his mouth. He swallows again. Nothing comes up, but his skin turns sallow in his effort to keep everything down. At least, as he rights himself, his sweater falls back into place, and there's no skin to distract her.

She sighs, briefly devoid of sympathy. Bad Things. They're going to happen. But she can't in her right mind leave him alone like this.
She pulls her key out of the ignition and shuffles around to his side of the car. The air is chilly and wet, and the sound of crickets fills the air like a symphony. She opens the door and wraps his arm over her shoulder. "Lean on me," she instructs.

"Yer so bossy," he slurs against her ear on a wheezy exhale, and the scent of liquor makes her nose twitch.

"I thought you liked the bossy side of me," she says as he achieves upright and stands there, next to her, teetering in the shelter of the car door.

He looses a bitter laugh. "Yeah. S'nice. Means I don' have to figure out wha'cha want. Oh." He swallows again, and she doesn't like the way he's tilting toward her chest.

"If you're going to vomit, aim for the grass or whatever, please," she grumbles. "I like this shirt. It's my favorite shirt." Her ratty Dartmouth tee. Coupled with some old jeans for comfort.

"Why're women so conf … confing … use?" He gives up and adds a throaty, deflating, "Uh," as they stumble toward his trailer.

She snorts. "I've said the same thing about men more than once," she counters. About him, in particular. More times than she can count. "Seriously."

He stops talking after that, and they shuffle in silence, breaths thick and hot and misting in the chill. "Where are your keys?" she says, breaking the momentary armistice.

But all he does is blink, and say …. "Uhhh."

She rolls her eyes and reaches into his coat pockets. He doesn't make a joke about her hands, or him being happy to see her, or anything. In fact, he seems still to be churning on the location of his keys. She finds his wallet, his pager, his Sidekick, and a soft white handkerchief, but no keys. She frowns. Unless he stuffed them in his freaking underwear or something, there aren't many places left for them on his person, and there's no freaking way she's checking for keys in his underwear. No way.

"Did you forget your keys on the ferry?" she says. She doesn't remember seeing any keys on the bench he'd chosen. Doesn't remember any telltale clink of them falling out of his pocket, either.

He's no help. He doesn't reply.

She leans him against the outside wall of his trailer and goes back to check her car. The keys aren't under the seats or anywhere that she can find, and between fossilized pretzel crumbs and a collection of rumpled receipts, all the endeavor proves to her is that she needs to spend tomorrow vacuuming her car.

She heads back to the trailer where he's waiting. Luckily, she knows he keeps an emergency spare key, and if she remembers right, she already knows where he keeps it. Under a brick by the grill. But she goes through the motions of asking him, "Do you have a spare key?" anyway.

"'Nder there," Derek says, gesturing sloppily at said brick by said grill.

She nods and trudges to the grill to fetch the key. When she lifts the brick, several creepy crawlies with far too many legs dart out across the deck, and she resists the urge to flinch, though she can't quite stop the started, "Eekh!" that peals from her throat. She reddens, glancing at Derek.

He's oblivious, propped up against the side of his trailer, peering through his eyelashes at nothing. She nudges the key a millimeter with her finger. No more critters jump out at her. Appeased, she
scoops the tiny piece of metal into her palm. The key glints in the dim light.

She's greeted by the hush of an empty house as she unlocks the door. Her feet rustle on the soft carpet. The air in his trailer smells rotten, like … food got left out too long. Somewhere. That's enough to ping on her radar of wrongness, but when she flips on the light and gets a look at his place for the first time, this time, her stomach sinks like a stone into her shoes.

"Oh, Derek," she says, tears filling her eyes.

"Wha?" he says.

Dirty plates are stacked a foot high on the dinette table. His bed in the back is a disheveled torrent of sheets and blankets. A towel hangs messily over the bathroom door. Soiled clothes are strewn all over the floor in front of the bed. In the bed. Everywhere. Empty liquor bottles line the back of the sink underneath the window, and beer cans fill his sink to the brim. Some have spilled onto the floor, almost tripping her. A metal crunch fills the air before she finds her footing in the mess.

This is ….

This is ….

This is the Derek she met after Jen died.

This is … unreal.

She manages to maneuver him halfway to the messy bed when she suddenly feels dwarfed, and his weight presses her back against the bathroom door. She feels his breath against her skin. His lips touch her neck, and for a moment, despite all the clumsy wrongness in this painting, she's staring at a perfect Monet, and all she wants is to pull his mouth to hers and kiss him back. This is what she's been waiting for. Him to make an advance like this. Except … it's wrong. It's all wrong. It's a Bad Thing.

She splays a palm against his chest. "Derek, no," she says, and she pushes him back, widening the space between them to a few inches. He's docile, at least, and he lets himself be moved without protest.

He wobbles. And he blinks. And he looks for all the world like she's just stabbed him in the gut. "But …," he says, and the confused hurt in his tone takes her heart and crushes it, "I thought y'wanted me."

"I do, Derek," she's quick to say. "I want you very much. I do." I love you, she doesn't say. "But you don't want me. You've told me over and over. And for all we joke about it, I refuse to take advantage. Not like this."

He doesn't have anything to say to that except, "'kay," in a flat way that says that this moment is anything but okay. He shambles to his bed and face plants into the sheets without bothering to fix the covers or move his dirty clothes or anything. The mattress comes to a stop at his shins. His feet dangle. His breathing is thick and raspy and it fills the silence with dissonance.

She stares at him, biting her lip, not sure what to do. Eventually, she thinks, oh, hell with it, and, after pushing a wrinkled pair of jeans off the comforter to the floor, she allows herself to collapse beside him. The morning after is going to suck so bad, and everything will probably go even more wrong than it already has, but … she can't leave him alone like this. She just can't. She wouldn't leave
alone like this. This is the kind of crap that can lead up to slit wrists.

She wraps her arm over his body and rubs his back. "I'm here," she whispers. "You're not alone."

"Right," he says in a dark tone.

"You're not," she insists. "And I'm really sorry you're hurting."

He has nothing to say to that. Nothing at all. And he won't look at her. She pulls her fingers through his hair, because that's always something he's liked. Or will like. Or … whatever. And she presses against him. He still won't look at her, but he doesn't pull away, either, and she feels like she's made subtle progress.

She lies with him until he falls asleep, which doesn't take more than about three minutes. Once she's sure he's out, she slides to her feet and takes a look at the messy, rotting nightmare surrounding her. She has a lot of work to do.

She starts with the beer cans. Once the sink is clear, she can work on the rotting food. The moments pass as she goes about her emergency cleanup. Even with the running faucet filling the silence with a loud shhhhhhh, even with the gurgle of the dishwasher, Derek doesn't stir.

She doesn't remember falling asleep, but waking up is one of her more memorable life experiences. Muted sunlight slants into the shoebox-sized bedroom through the skylight, heating her skin and making her eyelids twitch. A forest full of birdcalls shoots back and forth overhead, beyond the walls of the trailer. Derek shifted over the course of the night until he curled around her like a big, lithe cat. His arm is draped over her hip, and his nose is pressed against the back of her neck. The covers are warm, his body is a furnace along her spine, and his breathing is a soft, rhythmic rasp filling the silence. For the first time in weeks, and only the second time in months, her husband lies beside her.

She doesn't want to begin the day. Or move. Or do anything but lie here. Not because this moment is wonderful, or because she's missed him desperately - though it is, and she has - but because she knows that as soon as he comes back to sentience, they're in for one hell of an awkward morning after, even without sex screwing things up. And that's assuming he wasn't blackout drunk enough to wake up like this and decide his amnesia meant sex screwed things up, even when it didn't.

Such is her life.

She sighs. And she waits. Sunday. It's her day off today, so she's in no hurry to get back to work or be anywhere or do anything, and she doubts Derek has a shift, so … at least his alarm clock won't be the party pooper.

She reaches back to her hip, puts her hand over his palm, and clasps her fingers around his. For a moment, she lets herself pretend that it's him. Her Derek. At home. And she imagines their rambunctious kids barging in to demand pancakes. They'll bounce on the bed and giggle and shriek, because Daddy is home, and Daddy makes the best pancakes. He puts berry and whipped cream faces on them for the kids. They love it.

She loves it.

She loves him.

She wants to go home.

Her heart aches, and a lump forms in her throat as she lies there, thinking about everything that's
missing. Everything that's gone. Everything that might never be again.

"Please, send me back," she whispers into the silence. "I learned stuff. I'm all epiphanied, now. You made your point. Please."

But nobody answers.

Derek's unhappy, curdled groan behind her makes her wince. Crap. She doesn't want this to start-

His fingers tighten around her hip, and his body tenses. For a moment, there's silence. And then he hazards a slow, wary, "… Meredith?" against the back of her neck.

"Yes," she replies with an unhappy sigh. When the silence stretches, she feels compelled to fill it. "We didn't have sex. I swear we didn't. I can't say I wasn't tempted, but I wouldn't ever do that. I wouldn't take advantage. I just stayed the night to keep you company. You were really upset. I didn't want to leave you alone, and I-

"I know we didn't have sex," he says, interrupting her.

"Oh."

"I wasn't that drunk," he says.

"Thanks," she snarks. "That's a confidence booster."

"No, I mean I wasn't too drunk to remember ….

She sighs again. "I know what you meant."

He swallows and sits up, making a sick sound deep in his throat. She tips her head back to peer at him over her shoulder. The comforter has fallen down to his waist. He's still wearing his shirt and sweater from the night before - the only things she dared remove without his consent were his coat and his shoes.

He pinches the bridge of his nose and squints blearily at his surroundings. His eyes are bloodshot and the skin around his eyes is pinched, advertising a massive, throbbing headache. The skin on his face is creased by wrinkles in the pillows, and his hair is a disheveled, product-hardened mess.

He stares at the space beyond the bed. For a moment, it's like he's seeing the math problem, but no computation is occurring behind his eyelids. And then he says, "… You cleaned?" in that same wary tone he confirmed her identity with a few moments earlier. Which … seems … bad.

In fact, he sounds … downright upset.

Which … what? If somebody, by some miracle, showed up at her house and magically did all her dishes and picked up her laundry, that'd be a happy thing. Right?

"Yes," she admits in a slow, cautious tone that matches his. She sits up. "You couldn't even walk in here without kicking a beer can."

He's silent.

She bites her lip. "I thought it might make you feel better to have your space all perfect and neat-freaky again. I mean, whenever I get depressed, it's usually a positive feedback thing - all the stuff I do when I'm depressed tends to beget more depression." She's babbling, now. She knows it. But she can't seem to stop herself. Why does no one ever shut her the hell up? "I know it's hard to find the
motivation to fix all the wrong things, and living in a rotting mess can't have been helping your mood. So ..." He's still not talking, and he only seems to be getting more upset the more she talks. "So ... I ... fixed it. For you. Because I thought it would help. And I wanted to help. Because we're friends. And friends help each other. And I'm taking it from the look on your face that it didn't help. And ... say something. I'm dying, here."

But he's speechless. His temples flutter as he grinds his jaw, searching for words. He stares at the non-mess with an odd, panicky look on his face that's worrying her more by the second.

"What's wrong?" she says, because she genuinely has no clue. She expected awkward, but not this.

"You ... went through my things," he says slowly. "While I was comatose from alcohol."

She blinks. "Derek, I didn't touch your things, unless you count empty beer cans, dirty dishes, and rotting food as things that deserve a privacy bubble. If it wasn't in plain sight, I haven't seen it. I swear, I wouldn't do that. I mean, I opened the cabinet under your sink to get some trash bags, but that was all. Really. I swear."

He frowns. "You knew where the trash bags were?" he says, but he says it in a tone that would be more befitting of you stole my car! and she's at a complete loss.

"Well ...." Yes. Yes, she did know. But she can't say that. She can see the trap a mile away. She just doesn't understand why it's a trap. "Isn't underneath the sink a pretty common place for trash bags?"

"So, another lucky guess," he says in that you stole my car! tone.

"... Another ...?"

He turns to look at her, then, expression fathomless, but bad. Bad, bad, bad. "How did we get here?"

Her frown deepens. "I drove you. You don't remember that?"

"No, I mean ...." He gives the space around them a kind of Gallic shrug. "How did we get here? You've never been here, and I didn't tell you my address."

"Sure, you did."

He snorts. "Meredith, I was drunk enough to say a lot of stupid shit, but not drunk enough to forget saying it. I never told you my address."

"Well, I mean ... you didn't tell, tell me." She looses a nervous laugh. "I mean not as in with words. I looked at your license."

He looks at her with a raised eyebrow. "What about Addison? How'd you know about that? And how'd you know her name? It's not exactly common. More 'lucky' guesses?" he says, putting the word lucky in air quotes with his fingers.

Meredith bites her lip. "You won't believe me."

"And what about Mark's name? You knew that last night, and I never told you that, either."

Crap. Crap, crap, crap. She doesn't even remember using Mark's name last night, but .... "His address was on the unopened packages in your office," she says, though she feels like she's stuck
inside a snowball rolling downhill. It's picking up steam and snow, and there are rocks at the bottom of the hill where she's going to crash. Soon.

"Tell me what leap of logic allows you to hurtle from a random name on unopened packages in my office to the guy who slept with my wife?"

"Derek, you really won't believe me."

He folds his arms. "Try me."

"No, you don't understand," she insists. "You **really** won't believe me."

He shifts, and the covers rustle and takes out his billfold from his back pocket. He pulls out his license. He sets the glossy card in front of her on the bedspread. Her stomach sinks when she sees the address written on it. It's a New York address. Not a Seattle one. He hasn't updated it, yet, and he caught her in her lie like a fish on a hook.

His look is grim and dark as he peers at her with unblinking eyes. "You know where I live," he says, counting things off on his fingers. "You know what ferry I like to ride and when. You know I'm married. You know my wife's name. You know minutiae down to the fact that I like kale and scotch and organization."

"I'm just observant!" she insists.

He glares. "When was my 'neat-freakiness' ever on display to observe?" He puts 'neat-freakiness' in air quotes and says the term distastefully. "You pulled that out of your ass, Meredith. Just like the rest of it. And nobody makes that many 'lucky' guesses."

She's lost this battle. She lost it the second she fudged how she knew his address. "You won't believe me," she repeats, the words weak and listless, because she has **no freaking idea** how she's going to climb her way out of this SNAFU. Not one.

"Well, you better come up with something believable pretty quickly, because, right now, I add two plus two and get stalker."

A fire flares in her chest. "I am **not** a stalker!" she snaps. The irony! The fire unfurls like a napalm explosion until there's nothing but heat, and she has to vent it. "And you practically threw yourself at me last night, like a freaking lovesick puppy," she adds. He flinches at the word puppy, and he looks at his lap, but she's too pissed off to regret it. "And I said no to that, Derek. Not you. Me. I'm the one who stopped it." He opens his mouth to reply, but she doesn't let him get a single word in. Not until she's finished. "If I was some kind of stalker, would I have stopped you?"

He pulls his fingers through his hair, agitated. "I don't know," he says, tone wavering.

"Come on, Derek," she snaps. "You know me. I mean, maybe not all the little details, but you know who I am as a person. Do you really think I'm a freaking stalker? Seriously?"

He gives her a pleading look that reminds her of broken glass, and her anger breaks open on his jagged gaze. He wants to believe her. He wants to give her the benefit of the doubt. He really does. She can tell. It's just … she's given him nothing else to work with. "Well, you said you're not a PI," he says, bare desperation dripping from his tone. "If you're not a PI, and you're not a stalker, what's left?" He takes a quick, clipped breath. "Please, tell me what's left?"

She sighs. What **is** left? Nothing. She's been too transparent. She sucks at being undercover. And
lying. And pretending the love of her life is a new acquaintance when he's not. She sucks at all of it.

Say you're Amy's friend, a frantic little voice says. He doesn't talk to Amy. He won't know.

But then Meredith would have to explain why she never mentioned Amelia before, like when he was talking about his four girly sisters, and it would have made a small iota of sense for her to respond with, Hey! I know Amelia! Amelia's not that girly. She doesn't have kids.

And then he could have said in an exasperated tone, I clearly meant most of my sisters.

Well, the little voice continues, floundering. Well … say you were snooping in Richard's office and found Derek's personnel file.

And that's not stalker-ish?

How about you overheard Richard talking to Addison on the phone?

But how did that explain all the other crap she knew?

Oh, forget it. I give up.

She bites her lip. "Would you believe divine intervention?" she says in a tiny, glum voice.

He snorts with disbelief and hurt and anger, and her heart sinks the rest of the way. There's really no way out of this where she wins. "Meredith, please," he says, tone begging. "Please, give me something. Anything. I can't take this right now. Not after …." The upset coil of desperation in his tone wraps around her neck like a noose and tightens. "I can't take …." He shakes his head. "I need you to be real. Give me something believable, or leave, and don't come back."

The look in his eyes slays her. God, this Derek is so freaking broken. And she's taking a hammer to all the pieces and smashing them with this ruse. And she hates the lying. And there's no freaking way out of this that she can see, except …. God, she wants to tell him. But she knows what will happen if she does. She can see it play out like that horror flick where all the birds peck everyone to death. Except, in this case, the birds would be Derek pecking holes in her ridiculous story.

"I'm from the future," she'll say, and he'll blink like she hasn't spoken English.

Whatever he expects to hear, it isn't that. A nervous laugh stutters from deep in his throat. "Um."

"See?" she says. "See, I told you. You wouldn't believe me. Trust has never really been our strong suit."

He snorts. "There's trust, and then there's idiocy. And what do you mean, it's never been our strong suit? There's no us, and thus no our!"

"I know you just met me, but I've known you for almost a decade, Derek. I know all these things about you because they're things I know about my husband."

"I think you need help," Derek says.

"I don't need help," she insists. "I'm telling the truth. I swear." She sighs. "Please, believe me?"

"Right," he scoffs with an eye roll. "Well, this has been interesting." He gestures at the door at the other end of the trailer. "Please, go."

She bites her lip and shifts from foot to foot. She has to give him proof. Proof that she knows things
nobody other than him would know. Things no PI or stalker or anyone could ever come up with.
"Your dad was shot right in front of you when you were just a kid because some asshole wanted his
watch," she says. "The last thing your dad ever said was your name. Amelia was with you when it
happened, and you tried to protect her, but she was really messed up by the whole experience, which
is why she got into drugs."

"You .... You could have found that. In some newspaper. Or ...." His look darkens. "Addison."

"Amelia bit your hand while you were trying to keep her quiet," Meredith continues. "Tell me what
newspaper would have told me that."

He has no answer for her.

"Your favorite book is The Sun Also Rises," she says. "You like fly-fishing and coffee-flavored ice
cream."

"Social engineering," he says. "You could have-	"

"I know your ring size," Meredith says. "It's a nine."

"Addison could have told you any of-	"

"And I know you stayed at the Algonquin after you found out about Addison and Mark, because you
didn't have the heart to kick her out of your house, even though just looking at her made you feel
sick," Meredith says, steamrolling him. If he wants to hear stuff she knows that Addison couldn't
possibly know, too, this will fit the bill. Meredith hopes. "I know you threw your wedding ring into
the garbage at the Blue Bar after you watched a couple get engaged over a ten thousand dollar
martini with a diamond in it. I know Richard called you that night while you were drunk. And
Addison might know that crap at some point in the future, but not now. You said all you've done to
communicate with her since you left was e-mail her your new address."

Derek makes a small, distressed sound deep in his throat, and his eyes widen.

"I know you got that scar on your forehead because you were out riding your bike in the rain,"
Meredith continues, at this point resorting to a complete word and thought dump. Every personal
thing she can freaking think of off the top of her head. "I think you said the bike was a Ducati."

"No, it was-	"

"No!" she snaps before he can correct her. "No, a Harley. Sorry. We haven't talked about it in ages.
The Ducati was Cristina's."

"I ...," is all he says, and Meredith presses onward.

"I know it's not just that scar on your forehead that you got from the crash. You have a mark on your
upper thigh where you were impaled by rebar. That happened your sophomore year of medical
school after a fight with Amelia. She got into a car with her drunk friends, and you had the bright
idea that you could chase after her and rescue her. You skidded, flipped over the handlebars, and
landed on some refuse outside a construction site. You were stuck outside overnight, calling for help,
until you were hoarse. Nobody found you until the morning. You have a sulfadrug allergy, and you
know that because they tried to give you antibiotics for the wound made by the rebar, and you blew
up like a puffer fish. You told me it was one of the most traumatic experiences of your life, bar none,
with the exception of your dad dying. You sold the bike afterward because you were too afraid to
ride it anymore, and even seeing Cristina riding around in the parking lot on her bike gives you the
"Your favorite professor in college gave you your signed 1st edition copy of The Sun Also Rises," she continues. "It's worth like a zillion dollars or something. Hemingway signed it on the title page. The message isn't personal. It's just his name in red ink. You try to reread it once a year, but the binding is starting to fall apart, so you have a second copy that you keep in your desk in the top left drawer. I think you said the professor's name was Dr. Pickens."

"Perkins," Derek says.

"Right." She shakes her head. "Perkins. Do you believe me, yet? I can keep going. Come on, Derek. You say you believe in magic and miracles and all that crap. Is it so hard to believe I got sent back in time when presented with the reality that I know everything about you?"

He's quiet for a long, long time, but it's a dangerous, predatory silence, like a lion hiding in the bushes. She braces herself and waits for him to pounce, but he doesn't. He doesn't pounce.

All he does is point at the door and say, "Get out," in a dark, quiet tone that brokers no argument.

Still, she tries. "Der-"

"Just get out!" he snaps. "Get out, Meredith. Get out. Now."

She pictures him sending her away. And she can't. She can't tell him the truth, because the truth is ludicrous, and there's no way he'll ever believe such a big pile of BS. Ever. Not ever.

"Meredith, please," he says, imploring.

She swallows. She can't. She can't do this. Her heart pounds. And then It starts screaming at her. That deriding little voice. Wailing. She snaps upright like she's been burned, and she pushes back the blankets.

Derek frowns. "Meredith? What are you …?"

But she's beyond hearing. She darts out of bed. Her purse and keys sit in a heap on the dinette set table. She picks them up, clenching her fists so hard the keys make dents in her palms.

"Meredith!" Derek barks after her, and she flinches.

She slams the door shut behind her and bolts for her Jeep. She has the key in the ignition, and the engine is rumbling before Derek stumbles out onto his deck.

"Meredith!" he calls after her. His feet thump on the wooden steps.

She jams on the accelerator, spinning up mud into the air like shrapnel, and Derek leaps back, halting his pursuit. Wet, low hanging branches slap at her windshield. She peers at him in the rearview mirror - he's staring plaintively back at her - until the hill down to the main road steepens, and he disappears.

It's not until she's safely on the ferry, Jeep set in park, and no Derek in pursuit, that she slumps. She grips her steering wheel, swallowing as her forehead comes to rest on the soft leather. For a moment, all she can hear is her clipped panting in the silence.
"What did I do? What did I do?" she whispers to the steering column. "Crap, what did I just do?"

*You broke something irreplaceable*, says the voice. *That's what you just did.*

Her eyes water. Her lower lip trembles. She peers at herself in the rearview mirror. She wishes the voice were real, so she could take it in her hands and strangle it. How in the hell is she going to fix this?

*Good question. Let me know when you have an answer.*

Mark pops into her passenger seat as she's pulling the Jeep into her driveway. She flinches in surprise. Double takes. Jams on the brakes so hard they squeal. She slams into her seatbelt, thanks to inertia, and then slams back against the leather seat. The car rocks on its wheels precariously, stopped on a slope, half in the driveway, half out, but she doesn't care.

"*Where have you been?*" she snaps, yanking up on the parking brake with enough violence to make her shoulder hurt.

Mark looks at her with this wide-eyed *who me?* expression that makes her want to scream. "Um," he says in a soft, surprised tone. "A … coffee break?"

"A coffee break," she repeats as she lets her foot off the brake pedal.

He nods. "Yes."

"A coffee break."

"Yes."

She stares at him for a moment, unable to breathe. Coffee. He was drinking coffee while she's been here, stressed and exhausted and miserable and making a giant freaking mess out of everything. She gathers her fists. Anger condenses like hot magma in her chest. Her teeth clench. And then she *explodes.*

"You *asshole!*" she snaps, lashing out with her fists. "You complete freaking *asshole!*" She hits and shoves and scrapes and claws, panting from the exertion, until he captures her wrists in his big hands, and all she can do is squirm and shriek and *hate.* "Since when do coffee breaks take a *month?*"

"Time moves differently where I'm from."

"What are you *talking* about?" she snaps. She tries to yank her hands free, but he won't let her. His grip is warm and, while gentle, iron strong.

"Meredith, it's forever, and it's endless," he replies in a calm tone. "Time there doesn't translate to time here, not in how it's experienced, or in how it occurs. I was only gone a few minutes."

She stares at him for a long moment. A few minutes. A few freaking minutes. Seriously? God, damn it! The fight bleeds out of her like he just gave her a gut wound. She slumps, and a barbed sigh falls from her lips.

"Are you done hitting me?" he says.

She nods.
He lets her go. A lump forms in her throat. "I thought you left me," she says to her lap.

"I wouldn't leave you."

"Everybody leaves me."

"Meredith, I won't leave you," he replies. "The point of this is to help you, not traumatize you."

"Well, I'm freaking traumatized." She punches the steering wheel, accidentally hitting the horn in the process. A dog barks somewhere else in the neighborhood in response. "Derek thinks I'm a freaking stalker. Cristina hates me. I …" She swallows. Rubs her eyes. Dares to look at him. "How long am I even here for?"

"As long as you need."

"What kind of a non-answer is that?"

Mark shrugs. "It's the only answer I can give that isn't a lie."

"But I'll go home eventually?"

He nods. "Yes."

"Right back to where I left?"

"That exact time," he says with another nod. "Yes."

"Even if I'm a dunce and I don't learn what I'm supposed to learn until I'm eighty-seven?"

"Even then, but … Meredith … you're not a dunce." He smiles at her. "You're not even close to a dunce."

She sighs. "I feel like one."

"I think that's part and parcel of being human," Mark says. He stares out the window of the Jeep at the old oak tree that gives her driveway shade, and he sighs a weary, timeworn sigh that has so much weight to it even she feels like there's a weight pressing on her shoulders. "Derek feels like one all the time. It's fucking exhausting."

She blinks. "He … does?" she says, dumbfounded.

"I can read minds. Remember? And he takes self-flagellation to a whole new level, sometimes."

She swallows. "You've seen him? Since you …?"

Mark's watch beeps, but it's a different kind of beep than before. He raises his wrist to look at the time. He frowns. "Shit," he says. "Meredith, I have to-"

"No," she snaps, interrupting him. She snakes her arm across the parking brake and grabs his meaty bicep, sinking her nails in as she tightens her grip. "No, please," she begs. "Please, don't go. Please, don't leave me here. You just got here."

"It's an emergency," he says. He pulls loose from her hand like she's a twig to his gale, like her muscle strength is laughable in comparison to his phenomenal cosmic powers, or whatever it was that Genie called his own abilities in Aladdin. "I have-"
"What will I be going home to?" she demands before he goes away. She can't let him get away again before she gets the answers she needs. "What happens if I screw everything up while I'm here?"

"The only thing that would be irreparable is if you die, Meredith."

"So … you can fix anything I mess up."

"Yes."

"Will you?"

"Yes, Meredith," he says in an exasperated tone. "I said the point is to help you, not traumatize you."

But she still … can't quite believe what she's hearing. And he's still being vague as crap. "So … like … say my actions cause this Derek to get drunk, fall off a ferryboat, and drown."

"The only thing that would be irreparable is if you die," Mark says. "That's the only rule, Meredith. I wasn't kidding. None of this is permanent. It's real, but it's not permanent. You can't change where you've already been, only where you plan to go once you get back to 2012. Do you have any idea the paradoxical nightmare that would ensue if you could edit your past with a pen instead of a pencil?"

"No," she snaps, "because you suck at explaining things!"

He sighs. "Look, I'm sorry, okay?" He gives her an apologetic look. "But I really have to go."

She frowns. "What kind of emergency is it?"

Didn't he hint that he was doing this same rigamarole with Derek, too? Hell, Mark pretty much confirmed that when he spilled the beans about Derek's state of mind. Or, maybe, she's reading too much into things, and Mark just meant in general. Like when he's off for the day and figures, hey, I'll swing down to Earth and check on my still-alive buddy, Derek.

"I'll be back; I swear," Mark says, and she blinks, yanked from her mental tangent.

She has a chance to say, "But-"

And then he's gone again.

And she's alone.

Again.

Derek doesn't call Meredith that day, though it's not like she expected he would. When she heads into work on Monday, she still hasn't seen or heard from him, but she's not thinking something is dramatically more wrong than it should be until she finds herself assigned to Mr. Levangie, but Dr. Nelson - Shadow Shepherd, not Derek - is the one working on the case with her.

On a lark, she tries to call him. Derek. She doesn't expect him to pick up, though, and, of course, he doesn't. Caller ID. One of the many major curses of cellular phones.

She's not quite sure what to do.

When she bumps into Richard in the bright, bustling hallway, though, inspiration hits. Richard is
Derek's friend. At some point. She can't remember when their relationship shifted from close professional colleagues to people who fish together, but ... it happens eventually. And Richard is a meddler with the people he cares about. Which means ... she might be able hurry things along. Plant some seeds. Whatever.

"Have you seen Dr. Shepherd today?" she says in what she hopes is an innocent tone. Because Derek's shown he's pretty damned skilled at avoiding her when he wants to. There's a chance he's orchestrated his vanishing act solely with respect to her, and not the world at large.

Richard looks up from the chart he's reviewing, and he frowns. He flips the top page down. "No, I haven't. Why?"

Her heart sinks. Crap. "He's supposed to be here today, isn't he?" she says.

Richard's frown deepens. The distant sound of a phone ringing marks the passage of a moment. Another. "Yes ...."

Meredith raises her eyebrows. "Well, did he call in sick?"

"I'd have to check with Patricia," Richard says. "Why do you want to know?"

"You don't think it's odd that he hasn't called in sick?" Meredith prods.

"Well, I don't know if he hasn't called in sick until I talk to Patricia."

Meredith bites her lip, not quite sure how to continue. She could tell Richard that she and Derek have been spending time together outside of work, and thus she knows he's not doing so great in a mental sense, but ... she imagines, if Derek finds out she's babbling to his boss about a friendship he currently doesn't think exists, he'd mark some more tallies in the Meredith-is-a-stalker column of his bad-things-I-know-about-Meredith list. And that's a column that already has far too many items scratched into it.

At least, she has the reassurance from Mark, now, that if she sends herself up Crap Creek with no paddle while a bunch of hungry alligators are chasing her, her predicament won't be permanent, which is enough to stave off panic. She'll get her kids back. She'll get Her Derek back. Well, as long as the alligators aren't literal. Literal alligators swimming in Crap Creek probably means dead Meredith. All she needs to do is find the epiphany Mark wants her to find, and she's golden.

"I just ...." She sighs. "He's seemed ...." Broken.

"Yes?" Richard prods, leaning closer.

She shakes her head. Even if Derek never speaks to her again, his life is a lot more important to her than his privacy. And, even if none of this is permanent, she doesn't want Derek to die. Not in any timeline. Not in any reality. And, while Derek hasn't seemed suicidally depressed ... why risk it?

But ... maybe, she can be circumspect.

"I just think ....," Meredith begins, stalling as she fumbles for an explanation. "I think that, right now, it's really important that you ... confirm ... he's ... at least ... answering his phone."

"I see," Richard says in a low, suspicious tone, and she can see the wheels turning behind his eyes. Screw planting some seeds - at this point she seems to be watering a whole damned garden. Richard folds his arms. "Do you want to be more specific?"
"No," she says.

His eyes narrow. "Dr. Grey ...."

"Please, just ... make sure he picks up the phone?" she says. And with said garden in full bloom, she yanks her pager off her waistband and jumps like she's felt it vibrate. "Oops. I have to go. Talk to you later, sir!"

She leaves Richard behind her before he can muster a response.

"Hey," Meredith says to Izzie, Alex, Cristina, and George as she sits down at the lunch table with them, slapping her lunch tray onto the slightly sticky metal surface.

Despite Izzie's forced, perky, "Hi, Meredith!" Meredith can't help but notice the hush that falls over the table. Alex is sitting at the end of the long table staring into space with a troubled look on his face, his chin propped up by his elbows. George peers down at his lap and his lunch tray to avoid eye contact. Cristina acts like Meredith's not even there and offers no acknowledgment whatsoever as she munches on her pizza slice.

"What's wrong?" Meredith says to Alex, frowning, but Alex only shrugs.

"Annie died on the table," Izzie says. A haughty gleam sparks in her gaze. "Alex is having an unprecedented sensitive moment."

"Dude, I am not," Alex snaps.

"You so are," Izzie replies imperiously.

"Would you shut the hell up about the pager battery?" Alex snarls. "I'm sorry you had to have a big scary experience without my help, but I didn't do it on purpose. Jesus."

"You accused me of glory hogging," Izzie counters. She snorts. "And I didn't say a word about the pager battery."

"Whatever," Alex says. "You're just a giant prima donna, grinding the axe because it makes you feel all superior and better than me."

"And you're an arrogant jackass!" Izzie counters.

"At least, I'm direct," Alex replies. "And I don't hold stupid grudges over accidents."

Izzie rolls her eyes and takes a nibble from her giant slice of chocolate cake. She's already demolished the rest of her lunch. Her expression collapses into bliss when her fork hits her tongue.

Meredith blinks. "Um. Okay ...." She scrapes her brain, trying to remember context. Any context for this mess. "What?"

"I had to open up a sternotomy by myself," Izzie replies around her chocolate mouthful. She wipes her lips with her napkin. "Bedside." She jabs her thumb at Alex. "And he didn't charge his pager."

"Which you then threw on the floor and smashed by jumping on it," Alex says. He snorts. "That's mature."

Meredith frowns. "Annie is the sternotomy patient?"
"No. The giant tumor lady," George mutters. And then he cups his shoulder and rotates his arm with a grimace. "The giant heavy tumor lady."

"The tumor was giant," Izzie adds. "Not the lady."

"And what does that have to do with the sternotomy?" Meredith says.

"Nothing," George says. "Except it happened at the same time Annie died."

"Oh," Meredith says.

She met the "giant tumor lady" earlier in the day, but she'd been bumped off that case to deal with Mr. Levangie, and she'd forgotten Annie's name only minutes after learning it. She vaguely remembers the whole giant tumor ordeal from the first time around, but it's wisps of impressions coiling like mist in her brain. It was just … so long ago.

She sighs and picks at her taco. It's soggy, not crunchy. And she's not sure the meat is beef or … something else. She takes a not-crunchy bite of the mystery, and greasy juice spills everywhere.

"Cristina," Meredith says. "Can you pass the napkins?"

Cristina, who's sitting by the napkin dispenser, doesn't even look at her. Grease drips from her shiny, gooey pizza as she takes another bite.

Meredith rolls her eyes, rises to her feet, leans forward, and snatches the dispenser from in front of her former person. Her feet hurt. She's spent all day worrying about Derek, who's still a mysterious no-show, and her isolation is killing her. She's had no one to talk to except Derek, and now she doesn't even have Derek.

She has nobody.

"Look, Cristina, I get that you think I'm scum, and I'm not asking for friendship," Meredith grumbles as she wipes up all the sauce that spilled, though not before she gets a tiny orange-y stain on the front of her scrubs, "but I'd appreciate it if you could at least treat me like a person."

Cristina takes a bite of her pizza and doesn't reply.

"Why does she think you're scum?" George says in a soft voice.

Meredith blinks, turning to him. It's the first real conversational thing that George has directed at her since she turned him down a few weeks ago. She gives him a small quivery smile, and he gives her one back, albeit hesitant. A weight lifts as she identifies the olive branch being presented to her.

"She thinks I stabbed her in the back," Meredith says.

"Oh?" Izzie says.

Meredith considers for a long moment. She remembers this being a whole big mess last time, because she kept everything a secret. But that was then. She didn't know any of them back then. Not that well. And, now … she … really wants somebody to talk to again. Anyone who's not Derek. If only for some freaking balance.

"I slept with Dr. Shepherd the night before work started. I didn't know who he was at the time. We met at Joe's after the intern mixer. It was supposed to be a one night stand. I didn't find out he was
my boss until I saw him at work the day after. Cristina has decided that I did it on purpose to nab surgeries or whatever, and that I've wasted her time as a result." She glances at Cristina. "Which I didn't. All I did was meet a cute guy in a bar for some anonymous fun. I didn't even know his name until the morning after."

Alex breaks from his melancholy long enough to give her an appraising, appreciative look. He gives a soft laugh. "Dude."

"Seriously?" Izzie adds, blinking.

"Yeah," Meredith admits with a scowl. "And, now, De…rr. Dr. Shepherd vacillates between avoiding me entirely and …."

"Not … avoiding?" George suggests.

"Yeah. It's … frustrating to say the least."

"You could file an HR complaint," George adds.

Meredith shakes her head. "No, no, he hasn't been harassing me or anything. Nothing like that." She sighs. "If anything, I've been harassing him," she admits.

Cristina snorts.

"Look, he's just …." Meredith sighs. "He's a really nice person. We hit it off. And I've been lonely."

"Oh, my god," Izzie says, wide-eyed. "You're falling for him."

Meredith doesn't even bother denying it. She slumps and says, "It's not really so much active falling at this point as it is that I'm already the freaking coyote squashed under an anvil. And I know I shouldn't, because he's my boss, and he knows we shouldn't, and he's been pushing me away, but …."

"Damn it," Izzie says with weighty sympathy, shaking her head as her big doe eyes well with feeling, "you poor girl."

"You know, it's just that he's so …." Not Her Derek. "And I'm just …." Homesick. Going insane. Frustrated. Meredith sighs again. "I'm having a hard time."

"Wow, you're all, uh, mushy and … warm and full of secret feelings." Izzie pushes her plate at Meredith.

Meredith stares at the offering, and she glowers. History seems determined to keep some things the same no matter what she does. "Your cake is mean," Meredith says.

Izzie shakes her head. "My cake is good. And perfect for stress eating."

"I hate your cake," Meredith says.

"No, you don't," Izzie says, at which point Meredith gives up and takes the fork. It is pretty good cake. Way better than her not-crunchy mystery-meat taco.

"Thanks," Meredith grumbles.

Cristina rolls her eyes, crumples her napkin, gathers up her refuse, and heads for the trashcan with
her crap without a word. Meredith watches her go, frowning, but Izzie grabs her attention again.

"Don't worry about her," Izzie says. "She doesn't matter."

"I wish she'd stop hating me."

"Oh, she hates everybody," Izzie says with a dismissive wave. "So, tell me about Dr. Shepherd."

George groans. "Must we have details?"

"No, we definitely mustn't," Meredith replies, unable to stop a grin from spreading across her face. Small progress, but progress nonetheless. "How about we talk about something else?"

"Like what?" Izzie says.

"Tell me about that bedside sternotomy," Meredith suggests. "That sounds exciting."

"It was traumatic," Izzie replies.

"Oh, come off it," Alex snaps. "It was awesome, and you know it."

At first Izzie's expression stays neutral. She manages that for a few moments. Then her lip twitches into a full smile, and a spark lights her eyes like wildfire. She bounces in her seat for a second.

"Okay, I admit. I was a rockstar," she says.

Then she launches into an animated narrative, and Meredith leans back in her chair, happy to listen.
Dear Readers,

I don't mind criticism about my stories. Seeing other POVs helps make me a better writer. But if you have nothing nice to say, please don't bother saying it. I don't get paid for any of this. I spent six months of my life writing this story. I did it for the pleasure of creating, and the thrill of solving a complex puzzle, and the fun of sharing that creation, and the satisfaction of knowing I provided lots of people with some good old fashioned entertainment that made them smile and cry and laugh and feel in good ways. It's a joy. Really. But when you can read eight or nine or however many chapters and can only muster the will to pick things apart, or to tell me my feelings aren't valid, without at least thanking me for my time, or also telling me what you enjoyed, you literally suck all that joy out of it for me. Remember that I am a person, that I am providing a service to you that took literal weeks from my life, and that I'm doing it utterly free of charge.

I'm not beholden to you, and I do have feelings. Failing to express yourself to me in a way that acknowledges those two facets of my existence is rude. So, please, don't do it anymore.

Sincerely, Aria

A fierce yawn cracks Meredith's jaw, and tears well up in her eyes. She lifts her hands from the steering wheel to scrub at her eyes with her knuckles. The sun hangs low over the horizon, barely recovered from its battle with night, but it's creeping upward by the minute, and as she turns toward the east end of the sprawling parking lot, sharp daggers of light stab at her eyes.

She squints, still hunting.

Interspersed among the economy cars driven by poor residents, nurses, administrative staff, and struggling internists, the expensive cars that scream the presence of well-to-do surgeons stick out like gleaming wolves among mud-spattered sheep. Camaro. Lexus- She perks up at that sighting, only to realize it's not quite the same shade of black as Derek's. More of a … grayish … something dark. She shakes her head and keeps looking. Jaguar. Corvette. Maserati. Mercedes. Mercedes. Mercedes. Lotus. Row after row after row. Several Lexuses. None are Derek's. Not any of them.

"You missed a spot," George says from the back seat as he doodles on his phone. The little keys click as he pushes them. "Oh, and another." Click, click, click. "Another. And-"

"Why are we driving in circles?" Izzie says, frowning. She rubs her eyes, too. George yawns noisily in the back seat.

Meredith sighs. "No reason."

"Are you looking for something?" George says.

"Dr. Shepherd," Izzie adds with excited gusto, like she wants to see the next episode of her favorite
soap opera. "Are you looking for Dr. Shepherd?"

"No, I am not looking for ...." Meredith grimaces - Izzie's nodding at her with a knowing sure, you're not glint in her eyes. "Fine, I'm looking for Derrrr." Meredith's grimace deepens as she adds a wince. She clears her throat. "Dr. Shepherd."

"You've got it so bad," Izzie says with a snort.

"No, it's not that. It's ...." Meredith sighs. "I'm just ... worried."

"Worried?" George says. He puts his phone into his backpack and leans forward, resting his arms against the two front seats.

"Well, he hasn't been to work in a week." Meredith completes her circuit of the massive parking lot, slumping. Crap. Double crap. Derek's not here today, either. And he's not picking up his phone. And this is bad. This is badder than bad. "It's not normal to take a week off with no notice. I mean ... he can't just ... not show up. He can't do that!"

"Maybe, he did give notice, Mere," Izzie says. "Just not to you." She pats Meredith on the shoulder as she tries to offer comfort. "And I'm sure he'll be back soon."

"Yeah," George adds. "Maybe, he went back to New York for a bit. He must have family there."

Meredith sighs. Derek going back to New York right now is about as likely as Derek joining a hula dancing club. One that dances in public. In skirts. She rolls her eyes at that thought and yanks left on the steering wheel, pulling into the first spot she sees. It's not until she's yanking the key from the ignition that she realizes she's slipped her Jeep into a spot right next to Cristina, who's fiddling with her motorcycle.

The air is crisp and smells of earth as Meredith slides out of the driver's side and bumps the door closed with her hip. "Hi, Cristina," she says.

Cristina regards her with drooping eyelids. "Hello," she says in a weighty tone, looking even worse than Meredith feels, but at least she says hello, which is ... maybe progress? Circles hug Cristina's eyes, and her hair is an unkempt, black wildfire attached to her scalp. She zips up one of the saddle bags on her bike and stands with a tired grunt.

"A run?" Izzie says, incredulity dripping from her tone as Alex trots up to them in red warmups, looking infuriatingly chipper. Like Derek does, even without coffee. "You run?" Izzie continues.

"Every day, babe," Alex says, preening. "Every day."

Meredith laughs. "Not suffering enough?"

"What doesn't kill you, makes you stronger," Alex says.

Cristina rolls her eyes. "Don't go acting all indefatigable," she says. "You're dragging like the rest of us."

"Oh, what is that?" Alex taunts. "Professional weakness, Dr. Yang?"

"It's called the flu," she snaps.

He snorts. "Yeah, right."
The five of them walk toward the hospital in a staggered almost-clump. Meredith bites her lip. Cristina's dragging her feet like she wants to collapse right there on the pavement, and something niggles. Something Meredith should know. Some memory. What was …? Hmm.

"Are you okay, Cristina?" Meredith says.

"Does it look like I'm okay?" Cristina grumbles.

Meredith holds up her hands. "Sue me for caring."

Cristina rolls her eyes, and they all trudge to the locker room to get ready for what's shaping up to be a long freaking day.

"Late night, Grey?" Dr. Bailey says without sarcasm as they round the corner. George, Cristina, and Alex have already peeled off from the group to head for the clinic at Dr. Bailey's instruction.

Meredith shakes her head as her yawn cracks her jaw. "No, I think my coffee was defective." She shakes her head and rubs at the crick in her neck. Being an intern categorically sucks. "Sorry."

"There's a consult in the pit," Dr. Bailey says. "Girl with a fever and abdominal pain."

Meredith blinks. She remembers this. Sort of. She remembers this, sort of, and she remembers Dr. Bailey rattling off a list of busy work that would keep any normal person occupied well into the following century. "That's it?" Meredith says, unable to stop herself.

Dr. Bailey frowns. "Did you want there to be more?"

"No, no," Meredith rushes to say. "That's okay." And she vacates.

Cristina can barely keep her breath as she slogs down the steps past Dr. Bailey and Meredith, and her face is about six shades too pale.

"You all right, Dr. Yang?" Dr. Bailey says with a frown, interrupting Meredith's diagnosis of Claire Rice.

"Fine," Cristina replies, her nonchalant tone ruined by her chuff-y panting. "On my way back to clinic." And she keeps on trucking like no one stopped her.

Meredith frowns. "I think Claire got some kind of surgery done in Mexico," she explains to Dr. Bailey as she watches Cristina disappear into the crowd on the promenade area below. "She has four laparoscopic scars on her abdomen and won't say what they're from." The mom is …. Meredith remembers this case, now, at least. The girl's gotten her stomach stapled to appease her awful, domineering mother. A mother who practically gives Meredith PTSD flashbacks of Ellis, from the way she speaks to Claire, right on up to the way she knocks all of her husband's suggestions flat like they're bowling pins. Which is probably why Meredith forgot this stupid case in the first place. Because who the hell wants to remember that crap? "The parents have no idea what the scars are from and can't explain it, either."

Dr. Bailey nods. "You order up for a CT?"

"Yes," Meredith says.

"Well, keep an eye on that," Dr. Bailey says.
Meredith raises her eyebrows. "That's all?"

"You're acting like I'm not giving you enough work, Grey," Dr. Bailey snaps. "Don't act like I'm not giving you enough work unless you want more work. Do you want more work?"

Oh, hell, no.

"Sorry," Meredith says, shaking her head. "Sorry, it's just …." This is the weirdest déjá vu she's ever experienced so far. Not quite remembering why or how things happened but knowing they're not right, this time, either. "I'll go, now."

"You do that," Dr. Bailey says with a tight nod.

When Meredith turns to go, she spots Cristina and Dr. Burke walking in the direction Meredith also needs to go. So, she's not snooping or anything when she it's not really tiptoes when one isn't on the tip of one's toes, is it? behind them. And it's not like Cristina and Burke are having this conversation not in public, so … it's fair game right? Or, if Meredith were to be honest with herself, she's a snoopy snoop who snoops, and she needs to get some ideas on how to fix her epic friendship. A friendship she sorely misses.

But she's not honest.

She keeps walking, taking care to stare at her notebook as she jots fake notes with her - oops. She uncaps her pen and continues her ruse.

"Got the flu?" Dr. Burke is saying.

"Yeah, and thanks for it," Cristina grumbles. "It's making my life so much easier."

"I didn't give it to you," Dr. Burke says. "It's all over the hospital. You should be in bed."

Cristina gives Dr. Burke a bland look. "Disease, diagnosis, and prescription from one man," she observes.

"Seriously, I'll give you a ride home," Dr. Burke says.

"This is not gonna make me go home," Cristina insists. "You go home." And she stalks off.

"But I feel fine," Dr. Burke calls after her. And then he frowns. And then he palpates his lymph nodes like he's double checking that they're not inflamed. "Dr. Grey," he says with a nod as he walks past in the opposite direction, frowning.

Meredith looks up her from her fake notes and says, "Dr. Burke."

And then he's gone. Meredith watches him go, eyes narrowing. So, that's apparently started. The whole Burke and Cristina thing. Meredith couldn't remember the exact timeline. And ….

Oh, my god, she thinks as her deductions wander to their conclusions. Cristina doesn't have the flu.

Cristina has **morning sickness**.

Just before lunchtime, Meredith almost plows over Derek on her way back to CT.

"Shit," he grumbles under his breath as he leaps backward from her like he's been scalded.
Her eyebrows lift, but the flash flood of relief at seeing him is quickly doused by concern at seeing him in public like this. He looks terrible. Dark, fleshy circles puff up the skin under his eyes. His messy hair looks like it hasn't seen a comb in … days. It's a knotted, twisted mess. His stubble, which was already looking quite beard-ish the last time she saw him, is well on its way to morphing into an honest-to-god face afro if he doesn't at least clip it with scissors, soon. And his clothes are wrinkled like he left them wet in the washer for hours.

If Meredith didn't know better, she'd assess him with Cristina's 'flu.' But he doesn't have the flu any more than Cristina does. An ever-so-faint whiff of alcohol whispers of hangovers and the drowning of sorrows.

Meredith bites her lip as she watches him right himself. "Shit?" she says.

"I'm late," is his gruff reply.

He fails to meet her eyes. He's got this weird, distant look on his face, like he's trying to dissociate from reality. The leather of his briefcase creaks as he grips it more tightly. And he wobbles into a weak stride. Hell, he doesn't just look bad. He looks like he's about to faint.

She fights the urge to reach for his arm and steady him. "Derek, have you eaten?" she says. But he doesn't answer, just keeps shambling like the walking dead, and she feels compelled to follow. He's heading toward …. She's not sure where he's heading, but it isn't neuro, and it isn't the locker rooms. Where in the hell is he going, if it's not to hide in his office, or at least change out of his reeking clothes and into his scrubs? Her chest tightens. "Are you avoiding me?" she adds.

"Yes," he says, point blank, flat. And then he stops. He regards her for a long moment. "Would you, please, leave me alone?" he asks in a quiet voice.

But …. "We're not going to talk about this?" she says.

"Nope."

"About me running away, and …."

"I don't need to talk about it," he says. "I experienced it. In Technicolor, hangover 3D."

"I know this is getting complicated," she replies slowly.

"Complicated for me," he snaps. He looks left and right with a cautious expression. When he confirms that they're alone, his voice dips to a harsh whisper, and he adds, "I'm the one being stalked by an intern."

"Derek, I'm not stalking you."

"Then give me another fucking explanation, Meredith."

Except she can't, because, "I came across time for you, Derek," just smacks of The Terminator, and he'll never believe it. Ever. She knows he won't.

Her fingers curl around her tiny spiral notebook until the wire cuts deep into her flesh. It hurts, but it's a peripheral, distant feeling. What in the hell can she say, here, to fix this? There has to be something that doesn't equate to spying for the CIA. But her normally racing thoughts betray her, and she's left with nothing. Not a single idea. Not even a wisp of thought that could, if planted in sunshine, fed, and watered, could grow into an idea.
"I …. I …," she stammers. *God, damn it, brain. Think.*

"Yeah," he says with a derisive snort. "That's what I thought." And before she can even complete a full step, he adds, "Stop following me."

She swallows around the horrible, painful lump in her throat. "I won't follow you," she assures him, voice thick. "I promise I won't."

And she won't cry in this hallway, either. She will not cry in this hallway. To show him she means what she's said, she forces herself to walk in the other direction.

Holy freaking hell, has she screwed this whole thing up. At least, she knows, now, that it's temporary, and that Mark can fix it, or … undo it … or … whatever the hell he meant. But … she doesn't want Mark to have to fix it. She wants to fix it, so she can learn whatever crap she's here to learn, and go home before she's geriatric.

But … how?

She has no idea.

She tries not to worry.

She tries not to let her brain churn about Derek.

She'll just … stay away from him. Far away. Give him plenty of space. It'll be like … the Grand Canyon divides them.

Until something comes to her. Some idea to save her ass. And it will come. But she's about as successful at not stewing as a marshmallow is at trying not to melt in hot chocolate.

And who is she kidding?

She needs a *deus ex Markina* to get her out of this mess.

She wonders how long Mark's "emergency" will take.

"Grey," Dr. Bailey says.

What the hell is she going to do? Seriously, what the *hell* is she going to do? Their relationship has backslid to a point where it's even worse than the first few weeks, when all he wanted was for them to "be professional." Even worse than when she said she loved him after their one night stand, because at least that had a logical explanation. Well, sort of logical, anyway. Logical enough for Derek to believe, at least.

"Grey!" Dr. Bailey repeats, snapping this time.

Meredith flinches. "I'm sorry. What?"


Meredith swallows, trying to pull herself together. She rubs her eyes and clears her throat. "Her stomach's stapled," she says in a throaty tone that speaks of weeping, and she clears her throat again. "She had a gastric bypass."

Dr. Bailey nods. "And a bad one, at that."
"Dr. Grey, please report to Chief Webber's office." Patricia's voice is crackly and tinny over the intercom, but it's unmistakably Patricia, and there's a gravity to her tone that isn't normally there. "Dr. Grey to the chief's office."

Meredith frowns. She doesn't remember this happening.

"What did you do?" Dr. Bailey says, neutral expression sinking into a glare.

Meredith's eyebrows knit as her frown deepens. "I didn't do anything."

Dr. Bailey folds her arms.

Meredith shakes her head. "I really didn't do anything. I have no idea what this is ab-

"From the look on your face, you must have done something," Dr. Bailey says in a flat tone.

Meredith swallows. He wasn't heading to neuro. He wasn't heading to the locker rooms. Richard's office, though - based on Derek's wavering, faint-y trajectory, that was a possible destination.

Her stomach sinks into her shoes.

Was this bad enough that Derek reported her?

He wouldn't do that. He wouldn't do that to her. Would he?

Her Derek wouldn't do that. Not to anyone. He'd try to work it out quietly, behind the scenes, and, failing that, he'd try to remove the problem without making a huge fuss. That's what he'd do.

That's what he'd do, except when Her Derek is being the Depressed Murphy Timeline Derek he's being right now. And then he does self-destructive, out-of-character things, like get perma-drunk and smash beer cans and engagement rings with a bat, and punch Mark in the face for sleeping with Lexie, and blame Meredith for his own choice to tank his career, and act, in general, like a vindictive, self-righteous asshole.

"Well, go!" Dr. Bailey says, making a shooing motion with the CT scan.

Crap.

Meredith turns to head to Richard's office.

Richard sits across his desk from her, hands steepled. "Have a seat," he says with gravity, gesturing toward the rolling chair that's waiting for her across the desk, arms wide like it wants to hug her. Which is stupid. Because it's a chair. And chairs don't hug.

Richard looks … troubled. Appalled, really.

She gulps. Crap, Derek really did turn her in. He's going to have her fired, exactly like she was afraid of when she was first debating how to pursue him without getting in trouble. He's going to-

"I'll get straight to the point," Richard says as her butt is settling into the squeaky vinyl cushion. "And I want to assure you that nothing you say here goes beyond this room."

She bites her lip. "Yes, sir?"
"Has … anyone on the staff here, treated you inappropriately? Anyone at all?"

She blinks. This is …? Wait. "Er … what?"

Richard leans forward in his seat. "Has anyone-

"I heard what you said," she replies, interrupting him. "I just … why on earth would you think that?"

"Please, answer the question," is all he says in reply.

She shakes her head. "No. No one's treated me inappropriately. No one."

Richard gets an uncomfortable look on his face. He shifts in his seat. Fiddles with a pen on his desk. "Now, please, understand," he begins, "I don't just mean someone being cruel to you, or-"

"You mean sexual harassment," she says bluntly.

She thinks, if he could blush like she can, he'd be the shade of a tomato. "Yes," he says. "Yes, I mean that."

She regards him for a long, long moment. What … in the hell? "No one has sexually harassed me," she says, careful to enunciate. "If someone had harassed me, I'd have filed a complaint, which, as I'm sure you know, I haven't."

"You'd feel comfortable submitting a complaint about a superior?" he says.

"Yes," she replies. "Here, yes. If I needed to. Which I don't and never have."

Richard slumps like he's relieved.

She folds her arms. "Sir, can you please tell me what this is about?"

"Dr. Shepherd just filed his two-week notice," Richard says.

Meredith blinks. "Um. What?" Her mouth does this funny thing where it opens and closes and opens again, but no sound comes out except this odd, croaky squeaking. This …. "He what?"

"He quit."

She blinks again. "And he told you him quitting was my fault?" she says, incredulous. "That we had some sort of torrid affair, and he can't be near me anymore, or …?"

She could have seen him tattling if he was in one of his aforementioned vindictive moods, but … what would be the point when he's also leaving? That's not vindictive so much as akin to a pyromaniac burning the whole freaking house down, which isn't Derek, Murphy version or otherwise.

And, meanwhile, the tiny voice in her head is screaming …. He's leaving? You better freaking fix this. You can't have any freaking epiphanies about your relationship with him if he's not in the same freaking state.

"Dr. Shepherd was conveniently mum when I mentioned you," Richard says. His lips form a flat, displeased line. His chair creaks as he leans forward. He rests his elbows on his desk and sighs. "Usually, when something like this happens so suddenly, it's because there's something being
covered up, and ...." He clears his throat. "I had to make sure."

She frowns. "What makes you think I have anything to do with this?"

Richard raises his eyebrows, and she can see the incredulity dripping off his face like sweat. "My brand new intern comes to me, wondering if Dr. Shepherd is out sick," he says slowly. "She very not subtly asks me to check on him, implying he might be mentally unstable at the same time. Nobody else on staff noticed this supposed instability. Not one. Which tells me she's been spending time with him, maybe, more than everybody else." He gives her a wry look. "It wasn't hard to do the math, Grey."

"Oh," she says. A lump forms in her throat. "He's my friend," she says. "That's all. He hasn't done anything to me. He would never."

Richard nods. "Okay." He slumps like he's relieved. "Okay, good."

The analog clock on the wall ticks, filling the ensuing silence. The bustle of the hospital beyond the walls of Richard's office seeps through the windows and underneath the doorway.

He puts his head in his hands, and he sighs, and he rubs his eyes. Like he has a massive headache or something. And then he gives her a tired but hopeful look.

"I don't suppose, since you're friends, that you can talk him out of this?" Richard says. "I tried, but ...."

"Did he say why he wants to leave?" she asks.

"He says he doesn't like the work environment, here. But I've seen plenty of two-week notices. Enough to know an intentionally vague bunch of bull when I see it. That's why-"

"That's why you thought he was covering something up," she says.

Richard nods.

She swallows. Shakes her head. "I don't think ...." She sighs. "I don't think he'll be all that receptive to me, right now. He hasn't been ...." Crap. "We had a fight," she blurs.

"A fight," Richard repeats flatly.

"Yes," she says, a harsh whisper. "It was bad." Hello, understatement.

Richard's eyebrows creep up toward his hairline. "You're telling me that one of the best neurosurgeons in the country just submitted his two-week notice less than two months after I hired him because .... you had a fight?" He glares. "You're the bad work environment?"

"Well, I mean, he has other stuff going on!" she replies defensively. "It could be any number of things, really." Which sounds flakey and stupid and lying, because she is. She's joined Derek in the scummy ranks of lying liars who lie. She only barely manages to resist the urge to squirm in her seat.

Richard sighs. "Of all the ...." he begins, but he never finishes his sentence. He steps around his desk to her side and looks down at her. "Come with me, Dr. Grey," he says.

"Where are we going?" she says, unable to stop her mind from racing.

Richard doesn't answer. Instead, he leads her to the conference room next door. She spills into the
dark room, stumbling. Derek's sitting at the glossy wood table, slouched over, looking chastised and
glam, just like she feels.

"Look," Richard says. "Whatever the hell it is that happened between you two, work it out. Please. I
don't need my staff acting like children. It gives me heart palpitations." He glares at them. "I don't.
Like. Heart palpitations. Do you like it when I have heart palpitations?"

Derek says nothing. Just glowers.

Meredith looks at her feet. "No, sir."

"Good," Richard says. "So, fix it."

Then Richard slams shut the door on them and leans back against the molding, like he's intending to
stand guard until they've made some progress.

Which means Meredith and Derek are trapped in this fishbowl of a conference room like guppies.

As if Meredith's day couldn't get worse.

Crap.

The silence stretches like a rubber band that won't break in two no matter how hard it's pulled, and
the longer the silence goes, the greater she knows the painful snap will be when the band does finally
break. She bites her lip. Derek looks as awful as he did that morning. Maybe, worse. He fusses with
his cuticles, fixating on them with laser focus.

"I tried to keep you out of it," he mumbles at the table.

She can't help but laugh. The sound is a wretched, awful thing in the tense atmosphere. "I guess
we're both crappy liars."

He doesn't laugh with her. Or look up. Or anything.

"Thank you for … trying," she concedes awkwardly.

"I didn't do it for you," he snaps, and she flinches.

His elbows thump as he presses them against the table and pulls his fingers through his hair, and she
can see it. Why he did it. In his posture. In the way he won't look at her.

"I never meant to embarrass you," she says in a soft voice.

He doesn't reply. She reaches for the light switch. This would be a better conversation in the light,
maybe.

"Please, keep it off," Derek says. He rubs his eyes. "My head hurts." A definite check in the
hangover column, then.

"Okay," she says, the word soft, and she takes her seat in the chair across the table from him. The
silence stretches like that stupid rubber band again. Derek's not the one who breaks it, though.
"Please, don't quit," she says when she gathers her nerve. "Don't run away. Running away doesn't
fix things. It never fixes things, Derek."

"I panicked. Okay?" she says, taking a calming breath, and then another. "I panicked. And when I panic, I run. And I get that you're panicking, now, and I get that I caused it. I get that, and I'm sorry. I'm really sorry I freaked you out."

"Panicking doesn't begin to cover it, Meredith," he says in a tense, upset tone. "I passed panicking a few exits ago."

She can't think of a response to that. "I'm really sorry."

He gives her a tiny shrug that means nothing and everything at the same time. It tells her that her apology is pointless, because he won't be accepting it without a hell of a lot more than a sorry. It tells her that he's beyond words, and he has no idea what else to say. It tells her she's wounded him. Mortally.

A lump forms in her throat. "Where will you go?" she says.

He blinks. "Go?" he says. Like it's an idea that never occurred to him.

"Are you going to leave Seattle?"

He gives her another one of those dejected shrugs. "I don't know."

"Derek-"

"I can't make plans right now," he snaps, cutting her off. "I ...." His eyes close. He rubs his temples. Like the mere idea of forethought gives him a migraine.

"Well, you can't just hibernate," she replies.

He gives her an incredulous look. "Can't I?" Because that was totally his plan. Getting drunk and hibernating forever. She can see it written all over his face.

"Derek, please don't do that," she says. "Please, don't let yourself rot alone in that little trailer."

"It's not like anybody would miss me except you," he says.

He says the word you like he's equating her with dirt on his boots or something. She resists the urge to feel righteous and snap something back at him, something equally mean, because, now, more than ever, she can see that he's ill. He's mentally ill right now, and he's not capable of viewing the world in an honest light.

"That's not true. People would miss you," she says. "Your family loves you very much."

"What do you know about my family?" he demands, bristling.

She winces. Crap. "Just what you've told me, Derek. And they don't sound like people who wouldn't miss you."

"Oh," he says, hackles lowering.

Her eyes burn, and she blinks. "Derek, you are sick right now, and that sickness is lying to you. That's what depression does. It lies."

"You're lying," he mutters. He sniffs and pulls his fingers through his hair.
"I've never lied to you, Derek," she says. Not exactly, anyway.

"Tell me the thing that you don't think I'll believe," he counters.

She licks her lips, not sure what to say at first. "It's not just that you won't believe me," she tries to explain. "It's that you'll think I'm crazy, Derek - any sane person would - and if I tell you, you'll push me away even further." She sighs and slumps. "Hell, even I think it's crazy. Sometimes, I feel like I'm in the middle of a big freaking delusion, myself. I mean, early-onset Alzheimer's runs in my family. Maybe, I'm stuck in Alzheimer's Lake in a leaky boat with no life preserver or whatever. My only counter-argument for that is that I'm aware that it's nuts."

He regards her for a long moment. A brief sliver of concern flashes across his face, but she can't figure out if it's concern for her or concern about her. Not before he buries it behind stone she can't read. He swallows.

"Why don't you tell me the crazy thing, and let me be the judge," Derek says.

She wants to. She wants to tell him the whole story. But her horror scenario replays through her head again. The one where she tells him, and he freaks out even more. "Derek, I can't!" she replies.

"Yes, you can," he assures her in a pleading tone. A small sliver of hope is blooming in his expression. "Meredith, I promise to listen. I promise you."

"That's the problem," she replies with an affronted sniff. "Your promises mean crap to me - they have for years - and with what I have to tell you, that's a huge promise you just made." Which … isn't fair, exactly. Because she's talking to him again. Her Derek. Not this weird Murphy Derek. But …. Damn it.

He gives her an odd, disturbed look, and she winces, realizing what she's just said. Great. Good way to make him think you're not a stalker, Grey, the little voice says. God, damn it.

"Well, then, I guess we're at an impasse," he says.

She regards him with a flat expression, though she feels like her insides are getting scooped out with a spoon. Her heart aches. "I guess we are," she agrees in a small, wavering voice.

He sighs. It's a barbed, thick sound that tells her he's an inch from that insides-scooping feeling she's already suffering from. He pulls his fingers through his hair and pushes his chair back. The chair legs squawk against the tile floor.

"I need air," he says in a desperate, choked voice.

Crap. "Derek, please, can we talk?"

"What is there to talk about, Meredith?" he demands. "I already told you what I need, and you won't even negotiate."

She has no response to that.

He stalks to the door and raps on it with his knuckles like the door is something he'd rather be punching. Richard steps away and opens it a crack. Derek mumbles something Meredith can't hear. Richard replies, equally unintelligible. Derek's expression collapses into a hateful glare, and his words get more heated. Meredith catches sight of Derek's thumb, jabbed in her direction, which … yeah.
No hope of convincing Richard she's not the "bad work environment" anymore, though it wouldn't have taken a genius to figure that out, based on the scene that just played out in this freaking conference room. Richard sighs like he knows he's lost the battle for now, and he steps aside, letting Derek out.

Derek stalks away.

Richard glares through the conference room window at her. The door creaks on its hinges as he steps through it. "I said fix it!" Richard snaps, "Not break it more!"

"I tried," she replies. She sighs, eyes wet. "I'm trying. I don't want him to leave, either. I have a marked investment in making him stay. Trust me."

Richard slumps into a chair beside her with a sigh. "I know …," he admits. "I …." Another sigh, a hefty one that says, Good grief, I did not need this today. "I don't suppose your mother knows any neurosurgeons looking for jobs?"

"No," Meredith says, the word flat. Her mother doesn't know anyone anymore. She swallows around the lump in her throat. "Look, I'll keep trying," she says. "Maybe … I can think of something."

He nods. "Well, you have two weeks. There's still some time."

Silence settles over the room like newly fallen snow.

Meanwhile, all she can think is two weeks. Two weeks. Two weeks. How in the hell is she going to fix this in an eon, let alone two weeks?

She wishes Mark had a freaking pager.

The lunch table is a tense, silent nexus, despite the rumbling noise of chatter all around them. Silverware clinks. Chairs groan as they're shoved around. People laugh.

Alex, Izzie, and George have surely all heard the dirty gossip, by now. Hell, they probably heard when Meredith was summoned to Richard's office over the intercom. It wasn't exactly a private thing. George and Izzie are exchanging heated, animated looks, like they're having a fierce argument without words, and Meredith rolls her eyes. Alex is the only one eating without a care on his face.

"I can see you talking, you know," she says huffily.

The silent argument comes to a screeching halt. "What?" Izzie says, blinking. "We didn't say anything."

Meredith shrugs. "You're thinking at each other very loudly."

She takes a sip from her juice box. Apple juice. Less stringent on the stomach than orange juice. She doesn't have any food. Her stomach is churning like a butter maker, and the mere idea of solids just churns the butter faster. She sighs.

She's in such a deep pile of crap at this point. She's not sure there's a big enough shovel other than Mark to get her out.

"Do you … want to talk about it?" Izzie suggests, her tone a little desperate.
Alex shrugs. "Nah, she's screwed."

Izzie elbows him in the ribs. "You can't say that, you jerk."

He gives her an eye roll and takes a bite of his hot dog. "You mean the thing I just said?"

Meredith waves her hand. "Whatever. It's fine."

George raises his eyebrows. "Fine?"

"In what universe is any of this fine?" Izzie chimes in. "Dr. Shepherd is quitting. Dr. Webber is demanding that you make Dr. Shepherd un-quit. What in the holy hell happened!?"

Meredith regards Izzie's diatribe with a bland expression. Yep. Nurse Debbie's been at it again. The Seattle Grace Gossip Network is intact.

Meredith licks her lips and takes one more sip of her juice before setting the box down on her empty tray. "Say something totally crazy happened to you," she says.

Izzie blinks. "What the hell does that have to do with Dr. Shepherd?"

"Just … work with me," Meredith says. "Say something totally crazy happened."

George snorts. "Like someone let us do more than hold a retractor?"

Meredith shakes her head. "No, like totally crazy," she says. "Like … widely regarded as impossible."

"Someone letting us do more than hold a retractor isn't impossible?" Izzie adds.

Grr. Meredith grinds her teeth. "No, I mean like …." She bites her lip, thinking. "Let's say George had a baby. Like literally gave birth."

Alex's eyebrows creep toward his hairline, and he barks with a quick laugh. "That's impossible?"

George glowers. "Hey!" he snaps. "I am not a woman!"

"Since when is being a woman an insult?" Izzie snaps back at him, glaring.

"Just … just …." George blinks, and he looks at his lap. "I'll just shut up, now."

"Smart man," Alex says with a shit-eating grin.

"So, say George had a baby," Meredith continues. She turns to George. "How would you convince people that you had a baby, George?"

"Uh … I'd … show them the baby?" George says.

"That's proof that you possess a baby, but that's not proof you gave birth to it," Meredith counters. Izzie frowns. "This conversation is weird."

"I know it's weird, but … humor me, people," Meredith says. "Please."

Alex pops a chip into his mouth and crunches, thinking.
"Does he have pictures of the birth?" Izzie says.

"That's a disturbing image," George mutters.

Izzie gives an exasperated sigh. "Well, does he?" she says.

"Nope," Meredith says. "No pictures. Nothing. Just his word that this happened."

"I don't think you can prove it," Izzie decides. "Not if you don't have pictures of the birth."

Meredith's heart sinks. "That's what I was afraid of."

"Why the hell do you want to prove a man had a baby?" George says.

"I don't ...." She huffs an exasperated sigh. "It's just an example."

"An example of what?"


"Why do you care about proving an impossible hypothetical predicament?" Izzie wants to know.

"Just a … philosophical debate I'm trying to win."

"Oh, fun," Izzie says. She takes a bite of her muffin and chews thoughtfully.

"Yeah. Yeah, totally fun," Meredith grumbles. "It's a barrel of laughs."

"If we win the debate, does Dr. Shepherd un-quit?" George asks.

"Yeah," Meredith says. "Theoretically."

"We'll keep thinking," Izzie says.

Meredith pinches the bridge of her nose, wincing as a headache begins to throb. "Thanks," she says. But even knowing Izzie and George are there, trying to pick up some slack, Meredith's never felt more helpless in her freaking life.

Waiting for Mark is not a solution. Not a tenable one, anyway. Not when a few minutes for him can turn into a month or more, here, and who knows how long this "emergency" of his could take? She might be forty by the time he shows up again.

Her fate, it seems, is spinning out of control like a car crash on black ice.
Superman Need Not Apply

Chapter Notes

Sorry for the delay. A medical emergency with my cat ate the last four days (and a considerable portion of my wallet). Anyway. I hope you guys like this chapter - it's one of my favorites :) Happy 4th to those who celebrate it!

"This guy belongs in Psych," Cristina says, shaking her head as she stares at the CT scans clipped to the backlight. "What are you doing, turfing him here?"

"He's my gift to you," says Dr. Sen. "Had a seizure two days ago, and another one this morning."

"What are you talking about?" Meredith says as she skims down the chart. "It says right here, 'He talks to dead people, and his family thinks he's dangerous.' They had him committed. That's psych, not neuro."

The three of them stand in the hallway across from the room housing the patient in question. Meredith sighs. She doesn't like to have medical consults when she's jammed in the middle of the hallway with three other clots of doctors and a bunch of sick patients all in close proximity, like packing peanuts in a tiny box or something. But … you're an intern, she tells herself. You're a tired, incompetent, lowly intern, and you don't get dibs on anything but the last dregs of space. You're an intern, so, suck it the hell up. At least, Meredith supposes, Cristina's being professional and not openly hostile like she's been doing in the past.

"Man, didn't you go to med school?" Cristina says, oblivious to Meredith's musing.

Dr. Sen glowers. "Yes," he says, slowly, like he thinks he's talking to a misbehaving four-year-old, "and unlike the correspondence school you attended-"

"Oh, that would be Stanford, right?" Cristina says, bristling.

Dr. Sen rolls his eyes. "I learned not to jump to conclusions. Sorry, ladies. We can't take him back until he's cleared."

Cristina sighs. "So, you're dumping him on us?"

"He thinks his seizures are visions," Dr. Sen says.

"Hello, they're not seizures," calls Mr. Duff from the room, where he's sitting in a hospital bed, body draped over his knees. His interjection drags both Meredith and Cristina's attention away from Dr. Sen. "I'm psychic."

"Of course, you are," says Cristina, "and I'm a chicken." She turns to Dr. Sen. "Hey, genius …"

But Dr. Sen is long gone, already rounded the hallway corner, abandoning them like some sort of stealth Dr. Batman or something. Meredith didn't even see him go.

"Okay, Mr. Duff," Meredith says with a sigh as she and Cristina enter the room. "We're gonna start our workup, now."
"Work me up, work me down," Mr. Duff says with a shrug. "I'm telling you; it's a waste of time."

"Okay, well, humor us," Cristina grumbles as Meredith checks his eyes with a penlight. "Can you grip my fingers, please?"

Mr. Duff's big blue irises seem like they grow even bigger, and he stares off into five-thousand yards of nothing. Like he's in a trance or something. He makes a chewing motion with his mouth, which is a classic sign of complex partial seizures.

"Cristina," Meredith says, looking pointedly at Mr. Duff.

"Mr. Duff?" Cristina says.

"Mr. Duff," adds Meredith. "Are you okay?"

She shakes his shoulder. At first, he doesn't respond. Then his eyes snap back into focus. He glances up at her, down at his lap, and then forward.

"Someone . . .," he mumbles with a sigh.

Meredith frowns. "Someone what?"

"Someone's gonna check out. Bye-bye."

"Oh, man," Cristina says with a groan. "He's nuts."

"I'm dizzy, not deaf, lady," says Mr. Duff in an irritated tone. "And I'm telling you, someone on the fourth floor is gonna die."


A crash team runs past the open doorway. Meredith and Cristina stare at each other for a long moment, and then they walk out of the room before Mr. Duff can say anything else. Meredith's not sure what to think.

"You take him," Cristina says as they move out into the hallway, and she jams her pen back into her pocket. "Please. This is completely ridiculous, and the case doesn't need two of us. I'll tell Bailey I need something else, and that you can handle this."

Meredith frowns. "Well, he did just predict-"

Cristina snorts and rolls her eyes. "Don't tell me you're the kind of bleeding-heart Care Bear who believes this crap! Do you have any idea how easy it is to predict someone in a hospital will die? Hospitals are death central!"

But Meredith's had a near death whatever in which her mother said goodbye. And she's been sent back in time by her husband's dead best friend. If those two things aren't big checkmarks in the evidence-that-anything's-possible list, she's not sure what should be.

Meredith folds her arms. "I'll take the case for you on one condition."
"Oh, god, what?" Cristina says with a put upon sigh.

"Stop punishing me," Meredith says. "Believe me when I say that backstabbing was never my intent. I only slept with Dr. Shepherd once, and it wasn't to get ahead."

"Fine; I believe you," Cristina says dismissively. "Can I go, now?"

"That's not the condition," Meredith says.

"Well, what is it?"

"I'm joining you for lunch for the next two weeks," Meredith says. "And you're not allowed to avoid me or give me the silent treatment."

"Why do you want me to be your friend so badly?" Cristina replies, incredulous.

Meredith gives Cristina an innocent shrug. "Is it that hard to believe you're friend material?"

That response seems to fluster Cristina into speechlessness. She makes a face, but she doesn't reply for a long moment. Her mouth does this funny open-close thing, like she's trying to come up with something to say, but her brain is failing her.

Finally, Cristina looses an exasperated sigh and says, "Fine; deal."

And then she stalks away.

Though Meredith's willing to admit anything is possible, she's not an idiot, either. She's not just going to take any Tom, Dick, or Harry at his word that he sees the future. Cristina is right, in that respect. Mr. Duff's "insight" about the death on the fourth floor is more likely to be a lucky guess than anything else. Meredith squares her shoulders as she reenters Mr. Duff's hospital room with a pen and his chart.

Mr. Duff is contorted on the mattress like he's doing yoga or something. He's slight. Not short, but slight. The resultant bed pretzel is nothing but a twisted tangle of bony limbs and hospital gown.

She resists the urge to make a face. "Mr. Duff, can you, please, sit up straight, so I can finish this?" she says, pointing to his chart.

He snaps back into a regular sitting position and looks at her. His eyes are piercing, and Meredith finds herself feeling like she's having layers peeled off - not in a sexual way; an onion way - when he stares.

His eyes narrow. "You're worried he won't believe you when you tell him."

"Vague much?" Meredith retorts. The way Mr. Duff's looking at her makes her … uncomfortable. "I'm sure that's what all the psychics do. Throw out something vague-but-wriggling on a hook and wait for the idiot guppies to bite."

"Lady, I'm not a palm reader," says Mr. Duff. "I just … see things."

"Uh huh."

"You're not from around here," he says.

Meredith sighs. "Yeah, like it's really hard to tell I've spent lots of time in New England." Her many
years in Boston have had way more than a passing effect on her accent.

Mr. Duff shrugs. "Well, that, too, but I more meant here as in now," he says. "You're not from now. You're too old for your current body."

Meredith freezes. Blinks. "What?"

"I told you," Mr. Duff says. "I see things. You should tell him. Give him a chance."

"Who?" she says slowly.

"Him," Mr. Duff says. "The doctor. Sheep, was it?" He raises his eyebrows. "Shepherd?"

Vague. Mr. Duff's being so vague. And Meredith mentioned Derek in the hallway when she was talking to Cristina. Mr. Duff could have heard that. He could .... Wait. Did Meredith say Derek's last name? She can't remember.

But ....

She licks her lips and sits down in the chair beside the bed. The cushion sinks under her weight. Mr. Duff won't stop staring with those piercing eyes.

"Mr. Duff, you're here because the psych ward thinks you have a neuro problem," she says.

He leans a bit closer. "So?"

"So, my point is, you tell people you see things, and look where it got you," Meredith says. "Either you're crazy, or you have a tumor. So, how, exactly, do you expect me to convince Derek that I time traveled, simply by telling him that I did?"

"Well, how did I just convince you I really see things?" Mr. Duff says.

"You didn't, yet, but I'm freaking desperate."

Mr. Duff nods contemplatively. He rubs his bearded chin with long, lithe fingers. "Hmm," he rumbles. "I don't know."

She takes the break in the conversation to check his pulse and his breath sounds. She works her way down the chart, checking boxes, writing figures. Blah blah. She signs her name.

"I thought you were on the right track when you told him you knew he threw out his wedding ring at the Blue Bar," Mr. Duff says out of nowhere as she's stuffing her stethoscope back in her pocket.

She gapes. There is no way. No way he could know about that. She daydreamed telling Derek that. "How did you …?!"

Mr. Duff gives her a mischievous smile. "I told you." He taps his temple with his index finger. "I see things."

"The Blue Bar thing won't work," she replies. "I can't just tell him things only he knows. All that will get me is him assuming I'm Big Brother, which would be even worse than what he thinks now."

"Big Brother is worse than bunny boiler?" Mr. Duff says.

She folds her arms. "Very funny. Derek doesn't think I'm a bunny boiler." Does he? Crap. Does he?
"Just an ordinary, vanilla, completely-non-vengeful-"

"Stalker," Mr. Duff says with a nod. "I know."

She draws her lips into a flat line. How in the helldoes Mr. Duff know all this crap? It's not like she's been running around with a picket sign - Fair McJudgments Heal Relationships! - explaining her woes.

Mr. Duff shrugs. "Just … tell him something nobody knows."

"Um." She frowns. If nobody knows it then how …? "Like what do you mean, exactly?"

"The past is …. Well …. Like you said," he says, giving her an acknowledging gesture. "If I tell you … hey … Mr. Bun Bun doesn't like being stored in that box, well, you'll always have that niggling assumption that I could have gleaned the location of your childhood stuffed rabbit with terrestrial methods." She finds herself gaping again, speechless. How in the helldoes he know about Mr. Bu-

"But if I tell you someone is going to hit you with a gurney when you leave my room, and then you get hit," he continues, "you might be a bit more inclined to believe me after that. Particularly if I don't just tell you about the gurney, but about the fact that you'll have a chance to talk to Dr. Sheep again in a few minutes, even though he's avoiding you. And, perhaps, you'll believe me even moreso, if I remind you about the clot."

"The clot," she repeats in a flat tone.

She gives herself a little shake. She just time traveled. She is residing in the past, when she should be in the future. Her guardian angel is a dead ex-manwhore. And, yet, the more Mr. Duff opens his mouth, the more holy crap, this can't be real she feels.

Mr. Duff nods and pats her on the shoulder. Like he knows her thoughts are on a runaway train to Holy Freaking Hell, and he's trying to comfort her. "You'll know the case when you see it, I'm sure," he says.

"Right. Well," Meredith says. She clears her throat. "I have to …. Get the hell out of here and think. "… check on your lab results. Okay?"

"Whatever strikes your fancy," Mr. Duff says in a blasé tone.

She gathers the rest of her things, feeling like she's been flattened by a falling piano or something. He can't be real. He can't be. Can he? He watches her with those big, piercing eyes, not speaking, and the hairs on the back of her neck raise on end. She darts toward the door.

"Watch out," he calls after her as she flees.

"For what?" she has a chance to say as she steps into the hall, before an orderly pushing an empty gurney nearly runs right into her. "Hey!" she snaps as the gurney screeches to a halt, millimeters away from bruising her hip. "Watch it!"

"Sorry," says the orderly. "Didn't see you." He steers the hulking bed awkwardly around her and continues down the hall. The big bed's wheels squeak as he goes.

Meredith turns back to peer at Mr. Duff.

He shrugs. "I see things, Dr. Grey," he says with an enigmatic smile. "Just tell him."
As it turns out, Meredith doesn't have time to check on Mr. Duff's labs before she's paged. Oh, well. Mr. Duff's case isn't urgent. She can juggle two patients. Hell, as an intern, she's often juggling half a dozen.

She jogs to the bustling emergency room, and the nurse directs her to a man lying on a gurney. He's wearing a neck brace and a hospital gown. His legs and feet are bare, and he's staring at the ceiling with a worried expression. She glances at his chart. He's young. Fit. She glances at the guy again.

She recognizes him. Sort of. Why does she recognize him?

She squints at the chart. She recognizes Derek's distinctive handwriting, which, even after nearly ten freaking years of practice, she still has trouble reading. The man may have many talents, but pretty McPrint? Not one.

So, this is Derek's case.

She frowns. Why in the hell would Derek want her on a case right now?

*You'll have a chance to talk to Dr. Sheep again in a few minutes. Even though he's avoiding you.*

No way. No … way. Way?

*Crap,* she can't think about that right now.

She puts her index finger on the page to hold her place as she reads with gritted teeth. Good lord, she's glad they've moved to tablets for patient charts in the future - Times New Roman or whatever is far kinder than Shepherd 12 Point. Which makes her pause. And sigh. She misses her iPhone. And her iPad. And her kids-husband-friends-job-house-Top Chef-gigantic flatscreen television-favorite vibrator-everything. She misses everything.

Her heart squeezes with ache at the brief intrusion. But she shakes her head and forces her mind back to the problem at hand. She catches the words creeping paralysis something something as she skims Derek's running case notes. Creeping paralysis. Creeping paralysis. Why does creeping paralysis sound familiar? She glances at the patient and then back at the chart, and then she tucks the chart into its metal slot at the end of the gurney.

"Hi, Mr. Walker," Meredith says. She offers what she hopes is a reassuring smile, despite the fact that *déjà vu* is making her brain itch. *"I'm Dr. Grey. I've been instructed to take you up for an MRI."

"Okay," Mr. Walker says as Meredith steps around to the head of the gurney and starts to push the bed toward the elevator. Mr. Walker swallows. *"Dr. Shepherd can fix this, right?"* he says, tilting his head back to look at her. *"He can fix me?"

*"Dr. Shepherd is one of the best neurosurgeons in the country,"* she says with another reassuring smile. A non-answer answer that sounds like a yes. A skill she's honed over the years. She reaches forward to squeeze Mr. Walker's shoulder. *"You're in great hands."

"Really?" Mr. Walker says.

Meredith nods. *"Really."

Which seems to be enough to convince him. The man visibly relaxes. The elevator dings as the doors trundle open. She pushes the gurney into the elevator.

Off to radiology, they go.
If Meredith was under any illusions that Derek wanted her on this case - and she's not admitting she was, not under any circumstances - said illusions are stomped on by massive, angry elephants the second he walks through the open door to the imaging room and sees her. A fleeting expression of panic crosses his features before he stuffs it behind his patented *I need to tell you that you have cancer, and I don't want you to know how bad it makes me feel* mask. A mask she's seen so many times over the years, she knows it by heart.

When all he does is stand there in the doorway and stare with his *you have cancer* face, saying nothing, she breaks the silence for him. "I was … surprised … you asked for me."

That seems to shake him out of his stupor. He takes a step forward into the tiny room. "I didn't."

"You didn't."

He sighs. "I told the nurse not Dr. Grey."

"Oh," Meredith says. She looks down at the computer's keyboard. Crap. Crap, crap, crap. It's one thing to know he didn't want her there. It's another thing entirely to know he didn't want her there so badly that he requested specifically not her. "I guess they misheard."

"I guess they did."

"I'm sorry," she feels compelled to say.

He shakes his head. "Look, let's just … get this done. We're professionals. We can … ."

"Be professional," she finishes for him.

She doesn't miss how stiff he looks. Or how, despite his interest in the MRI results, and the fact that he's stepped closer to see them, there's still an irrefutable bubble of space between them, where before, in another life, she knows he'd be leaning over her, hand resting on her shoulder. Maybe, he'd give her a squeeze. Maybe, he'd kiss her temple or her neck. Maybe, he'd even stop for a hair sniff.

She can't believe she misses hair sniffs.

He bristles like a pissed off porcupine. "Why are you looking at me like that?" he says, tone bleeding hostility.

"Like what?" she says.

"Like you think you know me," he says. "You don't know me, Meredith. You don't."

She swallows, lump in her throat. *You should tell him*, she can hear Mr. Duff say in the back of her head. *Give him a chance.*

"I … ." She sighs.

*Tell him something nobody knows.*

She slumps. "I wasn't looking at you."

"You were looking at me," he says. "And you watch me. And … ." His voice trails off, and a deep
sound loiters in his throat. Like he just swallowed something that disgusts him. He glances away from her and stares at a fixed point on the floor, temples dancing as he clenches and unclenches his jaw, over and over.

_Déjà vu_ hits her like a train. God, it is so weird to have their entire romance playing out like it's Opposites Day or something, with shoes on other feet, romance replaced by revulsion, and chasees chasing chasers. _It's not so fun being stalked and sexually harassed with the roles reversed, is it?_ she's tempted to snap. But that would be useless. And, at this point, petty. And, at least, now, she knows why the hell he was so intent on doing the harassment thing, and it wasn't remotely the reason she thought. Not that that makes it okay - nothing makes harassment okay - but … understandable, at least.

_Just tell him._

_I can't_, she wants to scream. _What the hell am I supposed to say?_

"Derek," she says. And then she sighs. "Dr. Shepherd. Look. I promise, I wasn't looking at you." She shakes her head. "I mean I was literally looking at you, but only because I'd just said something, and I was expecting a response. But not because …. Not because it …. Not like how you mean."

He pulls his fingers through his hair, shifts from foot to foot like he's having an inner debate, sighs a clipped sigh, and peers back at the computer screen, finally, with a thoughtful expression. "Hmm," he rumbles. Not one reference to his outburst or her response.

Talk about awkward.

"The guy's films look clear to me," she says, trying to fill the silence.

"Me, too," he says. He frowns. "It's just so surprising. I expected an intrusion into the spinal space, or a bony spur in the nucleus pulposus."

Which … sparks another intense bout of _déjà vu_. She can hear him saying that in another time, another place, yet still here, and it's jarring, to say the least. She racks her brain. Why does she remember this? What was important about this case?

She kind of wants to hit Mark for not giving her a "while you were in 2005" dossier or something before he dumped her here. It's hard to remember crap from nearly a decade ago, particularly specific casework from the life of a woman who handled multiple cases a day while exhausted and run ragged, for over a hundred hours a week, fifty-two weeks out of the year, barring time off for appendectomies, bomb blasts, and death by drowning.

"So, what now?" she says.

He takes a long deep breath. "Now," he says, "I need to think about this. And I need to do it not around you. Can you have the films sent to my office?"

He's acting like she's freaking Typhoid Mary again. The lump in her throat aches. Be professional, she tells herself. Just be professional, like they agreed. No matter how hard it is.

"Okay," she says, struggling to keep her voice even.

And with that, he slips out of the small room, and back into the bright hallway.

"So, in addition to crazy predicts-the-future epilepsy guy, I have guy-with-mysterious-creeping-
"paralysis," Meredith says around a mouthful of peanut-butter-and-jelly sandwich as she and Cristina sit together in the busy cafeteria.

Cristina doesn't reply to Meredith's rambling, though, and Meredith peers across the lunch table at her not-exactly-willing companion. Cristina's staring at the meager contents of her lunch tray like they're a pile of worms instead of potato chips. She sits hunched over, hands wrapped around her midsection.

Meredith frowns. "Cristina, are you okay?"

Cristina shrugs. "Just … not hungry."

"Still have a touch of flu?" Meredith prods.

"Hmm?" Cristina says as she looks up from her lunch, gives herself a little shake, andadds with a nod, "Oh, yeah. Flu."

Meredith frowns. She has very little doubt, now, that Cristina's pregnant. Maybe, that could be an avenue back into friendship. Maybe. "You can talk to me, you know," Meredith says. "If you want." She puts her PBJ on her lunch tray and leans forward. "If you need a person or something for … whatever."

Cristina frowns. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"Nothing," Meredith is quick to reply. She picks up her sandwich again and stuffs her mouth. Peanut butter sticks to the roof of her mouth, and she chokes it down with some soda.

A lunch tray slaps down onto the table beside Meredith, and Izzie sits down, looking beautiful and frazzled and every bit the ex-model that she is. It's jealousy-inducing. "Hey, guys. How's it going?" she says. She glances at Cristina, who's gone back to staring woefully at her lunch tray, and then to Meredith, who's still gagging. "That great, huh? Oh, by the way, Bailey put me on the Mr. Duff case. Said you'd been requested to work on another case."

"Yeah," Meredith rasps, finally getting everything down.

She blames Zola for this stupid flight of nut fancy. Zola is allergic. Was allergic. Will be allergic? Anyway, Meredith and Derek can't keep peanut butter in the house anymore, because Zola blows up like a balloon if she even comes in contact with it, and Meredith's freaking missed it. Thought she missed it, anyway. She sighs and takes another sip of her Coke, trying to wash the stickiness down. Peanut butter. Definitely a victim of rose-colored glasses.

Ugh.

"So … any progress with Dr. Shepherd?" Izzie wants to know.

"If, by progress, you mean the vehement conclusion that I'm a walking, talking gross misdemeanor, then, yes, tons," Meredith grumbles.

Izzie gives Meredith a sympathetic look. "He still thinks you're a total stalker, huh?"

"I can't even look at him anymore without him going ballistic. I have no idea how I'm gonna fix this."

"I kind of love that Dr. McDreamy thinks you're nuts," Cristina says, taking a jab out of nowhere. She smirks.
"Yes, karma's a bitch," Meredith snaps in retort. "It's a huge, horrible, fickle, bitchy bitch. And I'm paying, okay? I've been paying, and paying for months, now, and I'm sick and tired of having my accounts cleaned out. Plus, stress is giving me acne or something. Is that not enough for you? Can we stop with the snarky comments and get on with the making friends thing? I'm so done with your hostility, Cristina."

Cristina arcs an eyebrow imperiously. "You think this makes us even?"

"Yes, Cristina, I do," Meredith snaps. "More than. So, cut it out."

They share a long, silent look. Cristina's eyes narrow. In that moment, a well of fury explodes in Meredith's gut, and she wants to crot to the whole table that she knows Cristina the McHypocrite is boinking Burke, pregnant, and doing the same bull crap she's accusing Meredith of - wasting the time of other people competing for surgical procedures.

Rise above, Meredith tells herself. Rise above. Rise above. Just … rise above, and get on with the friend making. When she comes back to herself, she sees Cristina peering at her even more intently, eyes narrowing further.

"What?" Meredith snaps. She can't help it.

"Okay," Cristina says with a shrug.

"Okay?" Meredith says, boggled. "Just … okay?"

Cristina shrugs again. "Okay."

"You mean we're good?"

Cristina sighs. "I'm feeling magnanimous." She stares down at her plate of chips. "Or possibly just nauseated."

"You should try some saltines instead of chips," Meredith suggests. "Those are easier to eat when you have mor-" She cuts herself off with a choking noise. Crap. Crap, she sucks at subterfuge. Sucks. "Um. I mean when you have mmm … mooore … flu-ey badness. Flu-ey is the word that I meant to say. Because you have a touch of flu, and are therefore flu-ey."

"Stop saying flu-ey," Cristina snaps. "It sounds like loogie, and I'm already fighting back projectile vomit."

"Sorry!" Meredith says.

Cristina stares at Meredith for a long moment, eyes narrowing. And then she stands and walks away.

"Jeez, what is her problem?" Izzie says.

"She's just not feeling well," Meredith says.

Izzie shrugs. "That's no excuse to treat everybody like crap."

"She's just …."

Meredith swallows. "She's Cristina. She doesn't have much in the way of people skills."

"Well, that's abundantly apparent," Izzie adds with an eye roll.
Still, Meredith watches as Cristina goes. In seconds, though, Meredith realizes Cristina isn't running away. She's heading back to the cafeteria line. With a few expert dodges, she wends through the crowd to the big pots of soup. Today, the soups of the day are tomato and minestrone. But Cristina doesn't grab a cup to fill with soup. She snatches a couple of the wax paper packets from the big bin next to the soup pots.

Each packet contains two saltines.

Cristina took Meredith's advice.

Meredith lets herself smile.

"Any changes, Mr. Walker?" Derek is saying as Meredith returns to work, somewhat rejuvenated after her small success with Cristina.

"I can't move my legs at all, now," Mr. Walker says in a panicky tone.

His wife is here, now, standing next to his gurney with her arms folded over her chest. She looks worried, and haggard, and who can blame her? "He said he was moving his legs when he came in," the wife says. "What's wrong with him?"

Derek glances at Mr. Walker's chart with a grim expression. "I don't know," he says. "The paralysis is moving very quickly, and there was nothing in the MRI to explain it."

_This guy has a spinal hematoma_, Meredith can hear Derek saying.

And she can hear herself insisting, _We don't know that._

That's it. That's it. Spinal hematoma. The **clot**.

_You'll know the case when you see it, I'm sure_, Mr. Duff said.

She barely resists the urge to jump. She remembers this case. She **remembers it, now.** It's the one where she tried to talk Derek out of doing a blind spinal surgery, but he did it anyway, and he saved this guy's life. Well, she won't talk him out of anything, now. She'll even don her pom poms and give him a good shove toward his crazy, life-saving leap-of-faith.

"Maybe, a spinal hematoma?" Meredith chimes in with a pleased grin.

Derek frowns and looks at her. "You saw the MRI. There's nothing on it," he repeats slowly.

"You mean, you didn't come to an amazing epiphany in your office time out?" she says, frowning.

Derek gives her the strangest look. Like, **lady, what are you smoking?** He turns back to Mrs. Walker. "Has Tommy been under any stress, lately?" Derek says to the wife.

"Hey, that was my line," Meredith says. Derek glances at her, but only to glare. And then she realizes what Derek just said. "Wait, **you** think it's psychosomatic? **You**?"

"You know what's making me stressed?" Mr. Walker snaps, hysteria tingeing his tone. "Is being here and not being able to move. And what do you mean, psychosomatic? Are you telling me I'm paralyzing **myself**?"

"Well … not exactly," Derek hedges.
"It is not in your head, man," says Mr. Duff as he pops through the neighboring cubicle curtain. "I believe you!"

"Mr. Duff," Izzie says. "Please." She guides Mr. Duff back to the bed, gives Meredith a who on earth dug up this kook? look, and then pulls the curtains shut again.

Derek frowns. "Who was that?"

"Psych sent him down," says Meredith. "He has visions."

"Oh," Derek says.

"So, is that it?" Mr. Walker demands. "Am I crazy?"

"No, of course, you're not," Meredith says. "We'll order a higher-level MRI."

"Dr. Grey …," Derek says in a low, threatening tone.

Damn it. Damn it, damn it, damn it. She sighs. "Sorry! I'm sorry." She gives him a repentant look and schools herself. "Dr. Shepherd. Should we order a higher-level MRI?"

From the look on Derek's face, he's about to say no, but when he opens his mouth, it's Mr. Walker's voice that snaps, "Yes. Do that. I want a higher-level MRI. I'm not crazy!"

Derek sighs, and then he throws up his hands. He shoves the chart into Meredith's hands and pushes past her. And then he stalks away.

"Was that a yes?" Meredith calls after him.

But he doesn't answer before he rounds the corner, and then he's gone. Meredith can't remember ever seeing him act so unprofessional before. Not in front of a patient. It's like he thinks he's got nothing to lose, anymore, so who the fuck cares?

She's torn. She wants to run after him and, maybe, talk him down off whatever dark and twisty ledge he's scaling. But … she can't. He'll just go ballistic again. She's sure of it.

Stop following me, she can almost hear him snap. Why are you following me?

God, she feels helpless. She turns back to Mr. Walker.

Mr. Walker and Mrs. Walker are both staring at her with deepening frowns.

"I'll just … um …." Meredith sighs. "I'll put in an order for that MRI."

"I thought you said this guy was one of the best neurosurgeons in the country," Mr. Walker says.

"He is, just …." She swallows. "You know how those geniuses are." A nervous laugh bubbles loose from her chest. "They're all a little … unique."

"Right," Mrs. Walker says. "I want a new doctor on this case. Right now."

"Ma'am, I-"

"Don't you ma'am me," Mrs. Walker snaps. "My husband is sick, maybe even dying, and he's being treated like he's making it up. This is not acceptable!"
"Right," Meredith says. "Right, I understand your-" The woman glares, and Meredith slumps. "I'll just … I'll get the chief for you. Right after I put in the order for the second MRI."

"You, do that," says the woman.

_Holy crap_, Meredith thinks as she flees toward the admitting desk. This … went really wrong. And this guy is, maybe, going to die, if she can't get Derek to start thinking like the dyed-in-the-wool optimist he's supposed to be. Mark said none of these changes were permanent, but she doesn't feel comfortable deliberately gambling with someone's life on the double-or-nothing bet that she understood exactly what Mark meant when he explained the rules. Mark took a giant cryptic pill, after all.

So ….

Now, what?

"I promised you lunches, not dinners," Cristina grumbles as Meredith collapses next to her in the cafeteria.

"I know, but you're feeling magnanimous, remember?" Meredith says. "Plus, I've had a terrible day. No. No, make that a terrible year." Murphy Timeline, Regular Timeline, it doesn't seem to matter. All have universally sucked. "And I just …." Her voice chokes off into silence. She wipes her pricking eyes. No wetness comes back on her skin, but ….

Richard talked Mr. And Mrs. Walker down off the ledge. Richard is excellent at that sort of thing. But Derek's still off the rails somewhere, Richard's practically begging her to fix it, this patient is going to die unless she can convince Derek, or somebody - anybody - to operate, and she's so stressed out, at this point, she thinks she might throw up.

"I have no idea what to do," Meredith says. "This guy is going to die, Cristina. And Derek won't listen to me. He wants to wait for the second MRI, but MRI is backed up, which, since nobody but me is convinced this is an emergency, means it could be hours." She sighs. "Mr. Walker doesn't have hours."

Hell, if she remembers right, they're already in overtime. The guy experienced complications on the table the first time, and that was when Derek had taken Mr. Walker into surgery immediately. How will he fare when he's not already under the knife if the same thing happens again?

Cristina rolls her eyes. "Why did Dr. Shepherd even request you on this case if he thinks you're his McStalker, anyway?"

"He didn't," Meredith replies. "He requested not me, but apparently the nurse had hearing problems or something, which … you know … now, that I think about it …."

Her gaze roams across the busy cafeteria. Olivia's standing in the cafeteria line with a gaggle of chattering nurses. She grabs a salad and stacks it next to a green apple and a bottle of spring water. The whole meal is a giant salute to good health. Why does the sight of a healthy lunch niggle? Wait. It's not the healthy lunch. It's …. It's Olivia. Syph Nurse. Syph Nurse. As in syphilis."That might actually be a thing, given that half this hospital has syphilis right now," Meredith continues. Syphilis could cause hearing loss if left untreated long enough.

"Syphilis?" Izzie says as she sits down next to Cristina with a tray.

George follows suit on Meredith's side of the table. He has a salad, just like Olivia's, and an apple,
just like Olivia's, and a bottle of spring water, also just like Olivia's. They have so much in common, it's silly. Right down to the mumbling, inarticulate shyness when it comes to members of the opposite sex. Why didn't they work out? Meredith can't remember.

Her eyes narrow. Wait, was it the syphilis?

"Who's got syphilis?" George asks as if he's read Meredith's mind.

"A bunch of people, at this point, I'm sure," Meredith says.

Her mind is churning. Syphilis has a three week incubation period, roughly, before rashes start showing up, and it would take a little while after that for the hospital to figure out they had a genuine outbreak amongst their staff, since it takes more than one incident to make an outbreak. Meredith figures they'll be giving that stupid banana condom lecture about four to five weeks after the time of the first infection.

She doesn't remember when the Seattle Grace Staff Syphilis Outbreak happened in terms of dates, but she does know it happened right around when Addison showed up, and Addison showed up about three months after Meredith met Derek at Joe's. You must be the woman who's been sleeping with my husband. Yeah. Indelible moment right there.

Meredith's been stuck in the Murphy Timeline for a bit more than two months, now, so … it's inevitable that the people who suffered in the outbreak mostly already have the disease and just haven't gotten the rash, yet. She thinks. Maybe.

She blinks when she realizes Izzie, Cristina, and George are all staring at her. "What are you looking at me like that for?"

"Meredith," George says in a polite, mumbling voice, as he peers shyly at his lap, "do you … have something you … maybe … want to tell us?"

Izzie holds up her hands. "No judging. We swear."

"Oh, I'll totally judge," Cristina adds with a snort.

"Whatever. Olivia," Meredith replies. "The point is-"

"Yes," Meredith says. She frowns. "Wait. Are you and her already …?" She waves her arms in a vague motion that says a whole lot of nothing.

"Syph Nurse?" Izzie says. "Who the hell is Syph Nurse?"

"Whatever. Olivia," Meredith replies. "The point is-"

"Olivia as in Nurse Olivia," George says, eyes widening.

"Yes," Meredith says. She frowns. "Wait. Are you and her already …?" She waves her arms in a vague motion that says a whole lot of nothing.

"You and Nurse Olivia are having sex?" Izzie squeals before Meredith can continue with actual words. Izzie folds her arms and gives George an affronted, betrayed look. "George, why didn't you tell me? Are we not friends?"

"No!" George says. Izzie gapes. And then he winces. "I mean yes, we're friends. Of course, we're friends. You and me. Are friends. Not me and Olivia. Olivia and I are not friends. I mean we are. Sort of." He hunches over his lunch tray. "But Olivia and I are not. Having sex," George insists.
And then he reddens. "Well, not, yet." He sighs. "Okay, we just … we had a moment. And-"

"For innocent puppy dogs like you two, that's having sex," Cristina interjects.

"I resent that!" George replies primly. "She said I had smooth moves!"

Cristina shrugs. "I don't care."

George gives them all a panicky look. "Well, how do I un-date her?"

"Seriously?" Cristina says with a snort.

"What, you think I want syphilis?" George says.

"Hi, George," says Olivia with a shy smile as she walks past with her lunch tray.

"Hi," George says. But as soon as Olivia walks away and joins her fellow nurses at their table, he starts shifting in his seat like he might explode. "Oh, god. Oh, god. What do I do?"

"George and Syph Nurse," Cristina taunts. "Sitting in a tree."

"Syph Nurse!" Meredith exclaims. "The outbreak!" Her chair roars as she pushes it back with her knees and stands.

The epiphany is like a lightning strike.

Tell him something nobody knows, she can hear Mr. Duff saying in her head. Nobody knows there's going to be a massive syphilis outbreak. Nobody knows they'll be required to attend an embarrassing seminar on safe sex with Patricia at the helm. And what faux psychic would ever guess that Seattle Grace would have a syphilis outbreak? It's so improbable, a successful outbreak prediction would be like guessing the lottery numbers.

It's bomb proof. Derek has to believe her.

Meredith glances at George. Not only did she do a good deed and possibly save George from infection, she's finally figured this out. George wasn't ground zero, just the last incident in a long line of them, as is typical of STDs. So … the outbreak will happen. It is happening. It has happened. And it will be discovered. Soon.

Except everyone is staring at her like she's insane.

"Syph Nurse!" Meredith repeats to them. "That's it. That's how I can convince Derek I'm not stalking him, and that's how I can convince Derek to operate."

Silence.

Izzie's mouth opens and closes and opens again, but George is the one who says in a mystified tone, "Can you … uh … run that by us again?"

"Just …." Meredith grins. "That impossible thing I couldn't prove."

"The thing about George having a baby?" Izzie says, frowning.

"I feel like I've missed an important conversation," Cristina interjects.

"Yes, that," Meredith says, ignoring Cristina. "I can prove the impossible thing, now."
"With … syphilis," Izzie says slowly.

"Yes!" Meredith replies. "I …. I have to go. Right now."

"To tell Dr. Shepherd about syphilis?" George says.

She nods. "Yep. To tell Derek about syphilis. Or, well, at least, to tell him I'm going to tell him about it when there's some actual time to tell him things."

"Was that English?" Cristina says.

But Meredith only shrugs. And then she runs. She has a life to save.

More than one, perhaps.

She can't find Derek.

He's not in his office. Or on the catwalk brooding. Or anywhere.

As a last resort, she dashes back to Mr. Walker's ER cubicle, only to find Derek already there, exchanging words softly with the prone man. She slams to a halt at the foot of the bed, panting.

Derek looks up at her, but he barely acknowledges her before turning back to Mr. Walker. At least, Derek seems to have recovered his senses and a teaspoon of his normal empathy, though. She doesn't care if Derek treats her like crap right now as long as Mr. Walker gets the help he needs.

And Mr. Walker needs help. Right now.

"Let me know if you feel this," Derek says. He pokes the man's palm with the tip of a syringe. Mr. Walker shakes his head, terrified. "How about that?" Another frantic head shake. Derek remains calm, though. "Here? Anything here? Up here?" More head shakes. "Okay. Nothing on this side?" Derek sighs, caps the syringe, and puts it back in his pocket. "All right. I'll be right back."

He steps away from the bed toward the nurses' station. Meredith follows.

"I really think he has a clot somewhere in his upper spine," Meredith says.

"On what basis?" Derek wants to know.

Meredith folds her arms. "I need to talk to you in private," she says, employing her best Mom-means-it voice. She hasn't ever noticed it working on Derek before, but she's willing to pull out all the stops.

"Now?" he says.

She nods. "Right now."

Derek regards her for a long, long moment. He glances at Mr. Walker in the distance. And then back at Meredith.

"It's about this case," Meredith insists.

"About why you think this man has a spinal hematoma."

Meredith nods. "Yes."
He's waffling. She can see it in his eyes. He doesn't want to follow her anywhere, because she's a crazy stalker, and he knows he'll regret it, but he wants to follow her, because … because … because … He's working on the because. He can't come up with a because. She's given him no good because to use.

The Mom-means-it voice might not work with him, but she knows what sometimes does. Admittedly, sometimes, it doesn't - *Pick me. Choose Me. Love me.* And when it doesn't, it doesn't in a spectacular, humiliating fashion, but … she's not above doing it in this particular instance, not when it means she'll save a life she flat out *knows* is savable.

She swallows, trying to make it look like she's about ready to burst into tears, and she looks up at him, and she lets her expression collapse into abject desperation. At first, she's just acting. She's ready for her Oscar.

But then she thinks about how badly she wants to save this guy. How badly she wants to fix the complete mess her and Derek's relationship has become. How badly she misses him. Her Derek. How badly she misses their kids, and everything about the future she left behind. She misses being an attending. She misses, barring the nuclear wasteland she and Derek have made of their marriage, feeling like she's almost got her life figured out. She misses being in the part of her life where she's already grown up.

And then she's not acting. Not even a little.

"Please, Dr. Shepherd?" she pleads around the expanding lump in her throat. "Please, let me talk to you in private. Please."


He slumps. "Okay," he says, sounding defeated. He looks unhappily toward the opposite end of the ER. "I think conference room four is open."

"Come on, then," she says.

He slinks along behind her like she's walking him off the plank.

Conference room four is empty and dark and silent. She flips on the lights, but doesn't bother to take a seat. She turns as soon as she's inside the room, and as soon as he's inside, too, she steps past him, closes the door, and locks it. He stares at the doorknob with a deepening frown.

"Dr. Grey, that makes me … very uncomfortable," he says in a soft voice as he backs away from her until they're separated by the whole conference table.

Oh, for crap's sake. She sighs. She tries to think about how she'd feel if her stalker were trying to lock her in a room with him, and she *tries* to empathize with Derek's plight. She does. But there's just no freaking time. She flips the lock back open, making sure he can see what she's doing. Knowing Murphy, someone will walk in, hear her at just the wrong moment, and commit her to the loony bin, but …

"The reason I know this man has a clot in his spine is the reason I know all that stuff about you," she says without preamble as she turns back around to face him.

"How are those two things in any way related?" he says, incredulity dripping from his tone.
"Trust me," she says. "They are."

He snorts. And he folds his arms defensively across his chest. "Trust you."

"Would you let me finish before you go all Judge-y McJudgington?" she snaps. "God, you're so freaking self-righteous, sometimes."

He gives her an angry look. "You know, between the two of us, I think I do have the higher ground, here."

"Whatever!" she says. "Just let me finish!"

"Oh, please, do," he replies nastily. "I'd like to hear this."

She opens her mouth to retort. A scathing, hating syllable sticks in her throat, coiling there like a snake. She almost yells back at him. Almost. But she takes a deep breath and blows it out slowly. Rise above, she tells herself. Rise above. Rise above. She's so tired of fighting with this man. And, in this case, at least from his point-of-view, with his reality-limited set of information, he does … sort of have a point. And ….

Whatever.

She takes a deep breath. And another. And another.

"I'll tell you why I know everything," she says slowly when she's calmed herself down. "And I swear on my life that it isn't stalking."

"It's not stalking. It's just crazy."

She nods. "Right. It's crazy. I acknowledge the crazy."

He raises his eyebrows. "Well … I'm waiting."

"I'll tell you, Derek."

"Don't call me that," he snaps. "You lost the right."

She sighs. Rise above. Rise above. Rise above. Rise above. She'd be a hissing, clawing pile of nasty if she thought her stalker were trying to be too familiar, too. "Dr. Shepherd," she corrects herself, evenly. "I promise. I'll tell you everything, crazy and all, but, first, can we help Mr. Walker?"

She bites her lip, waiting for his response, hoping he'll take the carrot on the stick for what it is. A genuine peace offering. But … his gaze remains cold as stone.

He shakes his head. "That's not enough. Tell me, now." He nods toward the door. "Or get out."

She sighs. "Dr. Shepherd, please. Please, I'm begging you. I want to tell you. I do. I want to tell you right this second. But it's not really a, hey, by the way! thing. It's a long discussion, you're probably going to be incredulous, you're probably going to want to get as far away from me as fast as you possibly can while you process what I have to say, assuming you're willing to process it at all, instead of just laughing at my crazy until you're blue in the face, and this poor man doesn't have time for you to freak out like that. I'm surprised he's not already dead." He would have been. In the old timeline.

For a moment, Derek's expression is unreadable. The silence stretches. She's so stressed out she feels
nauseated. But he's not saying anything, yet. And that's way better than him saying no.

She hugs herself, and she stares at him, trying to figure him out. He's playing all his cards close to his chest, and she gets nothing. Nothing in his eyes. Nothing on his face. Nothing. It's like he's checked out of the room to do his thinking.

Silence.

More silence.

Still … silence.

She's almost about to prod him a little. Call his name to make sure he hasn't slipped into some crazy depressed denial fugue or … something. But then he speaks.

"Why did you suddenly change your mind about telling me?" he says, tone cautious.

He's thinking about trusting her. He's thinking about it! Hope flutters in her chest. She resists the urge to pump her fist or cheer. "Because I think I know how to make you believe me, now," she tells him.

"And you didn't before."

She shakes her head. "No. I swear. It's not … a very believable thing."

"But you can't tell me right this second," he says slowly.

"Der-" Crap. She shakes her head. "Dr. Shepherd, you will flip out when you hear it-"

"Stop," he snaps, interrupting her. "Stop acting like you know how I'll-"

"I'm not!" she snaps, interrupting him right back. "This isn't about you. Any rational person on the planet would flip out. Anyone. So, unless you're trying to tell me you're an irrational freak of nature, stop assuming I'm trying to bank on familiarity, here. I'm not."

He frowns. "It's that crazy?"

"Yes," she replies. "That crazy and then some. And I promise to tell you. Just … after."

He regards her for a long, long moment. She doesn't know when it happened, but … he doesn't have his hands folded over his chest anymore. And he's moved a few steps closer. She's really …. Hope keeps fluttering. She's really making headway. She's not sure how she pulled it off, but she is.

"And you really think Mr. Walker has a clot that the MRI missed," Derek says. He takes another step closer.

She nods. "In his upper spine. T2."

He snorts. "Oh, you know it down to the vertebra, now?"

She refuses to let up. "Dr. Shepherd, I swear," she says. "I swear, it's there. Please, trust me one last time. Please. Please, will you do it?" For me, she wants to add, but then she thinks better of it. That would work on Her Derek. But not this one. "For Mr. Walker? Please? He really needs you to believe me right now."

Derek shifts from foot to foot, agitated. He pulls his fingers through his hair. "I could get sued," he
says, the words soft. "If you're wrong, and he gets hurt, because I opened him up." His expression darkens. "Or if he gets killed. Meredith, I might kill a man, because I trusted you, and that's ...." His voice trails away. He looks up at the ceiling like why, god, why, are you testing me like this?

"Then let me do it," she replies just as softly. She dares to close the gap between them. Not too far. She still leaves space. But she looks him right in the eyes, unblinking, when she tells him, "I'll fix it myself."

His eyes narrow. "You."

"I know how to fix a freaking spinal clot," she replies. "I'll do it. And I'll take full responsibility if it goes to hell. You can disguise it as a FUBAR teaching moment, if you want."

"You've never-"

"Yes. I. Have," she replies. "More times than I can count. Probably, almost as many times as you have. Maybe, more, actually. I mean, it's not like you're a spine specialist."

"Meredith ...." His gaze is pleading. She almost has him. Hell, he's calling her Meredith again.

"It's part of the crazy thing that I swear I will tell you. After," she insists. Maybe, if she keeps driving it home, he'll budge. "Please. Please, Derek."

He sighs. He gives a pleading look toward the ceiling again. Runs his hands through his hair twice. Paces up and down the length of the table like a caged tiger.

"Please," she repeats. "Please, trust me. Please. Mr. Walker will die if you don't."

Derek's pacing grinds to a halt at the edge of the table, closest to the door. For a moment, she thinks ... crap, he's going to make a run for it. But he swallows. And he turns. And he squares his shoulders.

"I'll do the cutting," he says, a bare murmur that's hard to hear. "Not you."

Relief is a tidal wave. "Thank you," she says. "Derek, thank you."

He opens the conference room door and steps out into the busy ER again. "Nurse, cancel the second MRI for Mr. Walker," he calls. "Call down and prep the OR immediately."

"Derek, thank you," Meredith repeats.

He stops. He swallows. The look he gives her is bleak and wet and devastated. "Meredith, if you're fucking with me again, I ...." He doesn't seem to know how to finish his sentence. He shrugs. And then he says, "Please, just ...."

"I'm not, Derek," she says. "I swear."

He looses a bitter laugh. "Yeah, I thought I was fine with Addison, too," he says. His expression darkens even further. "I don't want you in my OR," he adds. "And I don't want you in the gallery, either."

"Okay," she says, unwilling to push, now that she's won. "It's T2."

He nods. "T2."
And then he walks away.

Meredith's chest hurts as she watches him go. But, at least, he's going in the right direction, now. Toward the operating room. And, once he sees that Mr. Walker has a T2 hematoma like she says he does, maybe, Derek will be willing to play ball with a bit less bitterness, and a bit more faith.

Maybe.
Am I a Dumbass for Loving You?

Chapter Notes

Several of you have mentioned how desperate/pushy Meredith has been in this story, and that it hasn't sat well with you in places. The desperation/pushiness was an intentional choice of mine.

I think it's important to remember that from chapters 1-9, Meredith was under the impression that failure to restore the timeline might mean Bailey flat out isn't born. When you throw on top of that the idea that if she isn't successful on this trip, her marriage will dissolve (remember, she was told that divorce is inevitable without this 2005 detour), I think the stakes are high enough to justify her being pretty frantic to get things on the right track. And, of course, she still has unresolved feelings with respect to Her Derek that sometimes get in the way of how things unfold with this Derek, so that's an added wrench in the works.

These factors combine to make a delicious narrative cake of poor decisions and impulsive/desperate behavior.

Now that Meredith knows changes to the timeline aren't permanent, she's backed off a bit in 10 and 11 and in future chapters. But again, there's still the idea that the success of her marriage is riding on the success of this trip, and she still hasn't even figured out what will make this trip a success. She's exhausted. She's isolated. She misses her family. She can't go back to her family until she's succeeded at a heretofore unknown goal that's so unknown to her she's not even sure where the goal posts are.

So, there's always going to be some level of helplessly flailing extremity to her actions that wouldn't, out of this context, fit with her character.

You may or may not agree with me, but I hope my reasoning at least makes sense.

She waits. For hours, she waits. Her shift is long over, she's exhausted, and she should be taking this opportunity to sleep, but she waits, instead. And waits, and waits, and waits.

Derek doesn't want her in the gallery or in the OR, so, she's left in this awful blind place, where she's not sure what's going on, but she wants to know so badly that her yearning for omniscience makes her hurt. At first, she's not sure how to jettison her anxiety, and she paces just outside the door to the OR, out of the way of the window in the door, so Derek won't know she's there. Any time someone comes out, she has a brief rush when she thinks, it's Derek! But it never is. It's a nurse. Or a surgical technician. Or ….

What if Murphy strikes again, and Mr. Walker doesn't have a clot? What if Mr. Walker does have a clot, but he dies before Derek finds it? Everything else is going wrong in this timeline. Why not that, too?

What if?

What if?
What if?

Eventually, she drives herself so crazy that she has to leave. She settles on waiting outside, in the dark, in the cold, perched on one of the benches near the hospital entrance. If Derek's parked in the parking lot, he'll pass this way before he leaves. If Derek's walking to the ferry, he'll still pass this way, to access the street that leads down to the waterfront.

And she waits. And waits. The one benefit of all this waiting, at least, is that she thinks of other things besides syphilis that she can use as evidence. Richard's tumor. Addison's return. Joe's aneurysm.

She glances at her watch.

It's after midnight. It's been hours. Way longer than this surgery should have taken, particularly when she gave Derek the location of the clot down to the specific vertebra where it would be found.

Maybe, Derek's not going home, tonight. Maybe, she should head back inside and look for-

Someone sits down on the bench beside her, and her gaze jerks to the left. A breeze billows, making her teeth chatter. Though it isn't raining, excess water pats through the rustling tree leaves.

"Hi," she says.

He's staring into space. "Hi," he replies in a weary tone. He slumps on the bench, looking dark and mysterious and ominous. The silence stretches for a moment. "Mr. Walker's fine. He had a clot. T2. Just like you said. I stayed with him until he woke up. Did a neuro check. He's moving again. Even his toes."

Meredith wilts with relief. "Oh, thank god. He's okay?"

Derek nods. "He's okay." He looks at his lap. "You were right."

She can see what he's thinking, though he's not saying it. She swallows. She risks scooting closer. She puts an arm over his shoulder. He lets her. He lets her do all of that.

"Derek," she says softly, "you're sick, and you're not thinking very straight. It's not your fault." Hell, the first time he did this operation and succeeded, it was on a whim. On faith. It wasn't based on any kind of science. "It was reasonable to assume the problem was psychosomatic." That's what she'd assumed, the first time. All they'd done was switch roles. "On any other day, you would have been the one pushing to operate, even despite the evidence or lack thereof."

He snorts derisively. "You seriously believe that?"

"I know that," she replies. "Derek, I know it. It's part of the crazy thing."

He leans into her. Presses his face into her hair. Sighs like it gives him some sort of comfort, despite everything.

"Please, tell me what's going on," he pleads. "You promised."

She nods. "I did." She licks her lips. How the hell to begin?

"Well?" he says.

She elbows him and rolls her eyes. "It's crazy, remember? I'm trying to think of how to start. Gimme a second."
She can imagine that if this were Her Derek, and he were in a good mood, he'd laugh, and he'd tease her. This Derek, though. All he does is stare into space. "Okay," he says, like he's saying yes to plastic instead of paper at the grocery store, and not something huge like his maybe-stalker explaining herself.

Which only adds to the pressure. Because he's sick, and therefore unpredictable.

It takes her almost ten minutes to organize herself. To step back from the oh, my god, is Murphy going to push me off? ledge and relax and think like a reasonable human being. Derek's going to be incredulous, sick or not. She's sure of it. Which means … starting backward, she thinks. Evidence first. Explanation last. Or she won't get a chance to say everything she wants to say.

"Sometime in the next few weeks - I forget exactly when - there's going to be a syphilis outbreak," Meredith says. "Patricia is going to give a lecture about condoms to the whole staff. She'll use a banana as a penis prop."

Derek frowns. He looks at her for the first time since he sat down. Looks her in the eye. "Um," he says with a disbelieving huff of laughter. "What?"

"The crazy thing. I'm going to tell you," she says, meeting his eyes, staring him down. "But you'll think it's crazy, so I'm telling you the evidence, first. That way, when you stalk off, I'll have already said what needs to be said."

He tilts his head and gives her one of those Looks. The ones that say, Meredith, I adore you, but I have no idea what you're talking about. She's seen it so many times it's uncanny, and the déjà vu that hits her this time is a positive thing. If he still likes her enough to give her one of those Looks, despite how exasperated he is, despite the fact that, up until a few hours ago, he thought without a doubt that she was stalking him, there might be even more hope than she thought.

"Meredith, I'm not going to stalk off," he says.

She gives him one of her Looks in return. The ones that say, Derek, I adore you, but you're pretending to know way more than you actually know, and it's making you look like a puffed up peacock. Cut it out.

"You say that, now," she replies.

"I pr-"

"Please, don't," she rushes to say, interrupting him. She sighs. "Don't promise me you'll stay, because when you don't stay, it'll just hurt more, and I can't handle hurting more right now. I've had an awful few months, I miss my kids, I miss … you. I miss you. She keeps that one inside, though. She doesn't want to wreck this when he's finally listening, all brain cells engaged, full speed ahead. "Just don't."

For a moment, he's speechless. His jaw works, but no words escape. He settles on a wary, "… Okay."

"Sometime soonish, you'll notice Richard's dropping tools in surgery, and he'll be squinting a lot. You'll get suspicious. When you make him get an MRI, you'll see that he has a tumor pressing on his optic nerve."

"Meredith, that's …"
"Serious, I know," Meredith replies with a nod. "But you try convincing Richard to take time off for a diagnosis when you don't even have ammunition. Go ahead, try."

"He wouldn't."

"He totally wouldn't," Meredith agrees. "And it'll all be okay in the end, so … I figured I'd just let that one play out."

"Okay …," Derek says. The wariness in his tone is deepening.

"And then there's Joe."

Derek frowns. "Joe?"

Meredith raises her eyebrows. "Bartender Joe?"

"Oh, him," Derek says. "I remember him."

Meredith lets herself smile. "I was just a girl. You were just a guy."

"Yeah," Derek says.

She doesn't miss the wistfulness in his tone, or the tiny grin that's trying to pull at his lips, though he's doing his damnedest not to let it. There's hope, here, she tells herself. Real hope. She might fix this after all. Once she gets him past the hump of believing in freaking time travel.

"Joe's going to need brain surgery, soonish. He has the aneurysm equivalent of Godzilla stuck in his head."

Derek opens his mouth to speak, but she cuts him off before he can, because she knows him, and she knows what he's thinking.

"And again," she says, "you try walking up to someone you hardly know out of the blue and telling him he has a medical condition that could kill him, and the only way to diagnose it would be subjecting himself to a test that costs thousands of dollars. See if he believes you. See if he'll take the test."

"Did you, at least, try?" Derek says.

"No," she admits, "but I honestly only remembered the Joe thing today. We can try to convince him, if you really want to. We have a few weeks until it happens."

"If you're serious," Derek says, "then, yes, I do want to. Aneurysms aren't something to fuck around with, Meredith. Neither are tumors, but at least they're not ticking time bombs."

"Okay," she says. "We'll try. We can even try with Richard, if you want."


"And then this one …." Meredith takes a deep, cleansing breath. The air is wet and chilly and makes her shudder. "I'm not sure whether I should tell you this one, because you'll probably just think I'm colluding with her, but … in the interest of honesty …."

"What."

"Addison."
He stills. "What about Addison," he says, a question but not a question, tone dropping low into his deepest, most threatening registers.

"She's going to turn up soon," Meredith admits. "She'll start calling you on your phone. Richard's going to ask her to come to Seattle to deal with a TTTS case. And she'll swear she's just here for that. But then she'll start trying to reconcile with you, and … um."

She swallows. This is still painful. Even after nearly a decade. But, at least, she gets it, now. After all this time, she gets why he didn't tell her, and there was nothing mean or conniving or planned-as-in-with-conscious-forethought about it, and that's …

"Meredith …," Derek murmurs, yanking her out of her musing.

She sniffs, and she wipes her eyes. There's a lump in her throat, now, and she's having trouble with the whole using-her-words thing. Still, she pushes herself to continue. She's set the stage. Now, all she needs to do is start the play - crazy, drunk Shakespearean tragedy that it's likely to be.

"And I know you're not going to believe me right now when I explain this," she offers as a preface. "You don't have to. I don't expect you to. Just … watch for the proof I listed. Okay? Swear you'll, at least, give me that much?"

He nods. "I swear."

She takes a deep breath. Here goes nothing.

"I'm from the future, Derek."

Whatever wacky, half-cocked explanation he expects, that isn't it. A hitching noise catches in his throat, like he's so befuddled he's thinking about giggling, but it doesn't turn into a giggle. It turns into tense, awful silence, and he won't look at her. She forces herself to barrel onward before he can come up with enough coherence to get angry at her for messing with him again and walk away.

"I know you just met me, but I've known you for almost a decade, Derek," she says, babbles, regurgitates. "I mistook you for the guy who has my kids, because he's you. In 2012. And he's not my ex. He's my now. You're my now. And that's why I know all these things about you - that you're a neat freak with a kale fascination who lives in the middle of nowhere in a tiny trailer. They're not lucky guesses, and I wasn't stalking you. They're things I know about my husband because he's my husband." She swallows. "You're my husband, Derek. You're the father of my children. Not now, obviously. But you will be. And I've been trying to fix things, so they go the way they went the first time we met, because I want that back. The husband-y father of my children thing, I mean."

"Meredith … that's …"

"Ludicrous," she says with a bitter laugh. "I know. You can bolt, now, if you want. I've said what I needed to say."

He doesn't move from the bench. "I'm … not bolting."

She frowns. "You're not bolting."

"No," he says softly.

"Why aren't you bolting?" she demands.
He looks at her. Gives her a brief shrug. "I would have," he admits. "A few hours ago, I would have."

"But not now?" she prods.

"Meredith, you just - out of the blue - told me my patient had a clot in his upper spine - a clot the MRI didn't even catch - and he did. I even asked Mr. Walker after the surgery if you'd taken him for another MRI or some other test that you hadn't told me about, and he had no idea what I was referring to."

"He could have been lying," Meredith suggests. Why did she suggest that? She's not devil's advocate tonight! Of all the self-sabotaging, stupid-

But Derek shakes his head. "He was too stoned to lie that coherently."

"Oh," is all she can think of to say.

The silence stretches for a moment. He gives her a long, unreadable look. "Is it working?" he says.

"Is what working?" she replies.

He shrugs. "Fixing things."

She laughs wryly. "No. No, Derek, it's not working for crap. If anyone was stalking the first time, it was you, not me. And you were practically living at my house by this point. And we were having a lot more sex than only that one time when I was just a girl, and you were just a guy."

He looks … like he's not sure what to say to that. Flustered, to say the least. Silence stretches. She lets him alone to process that. A pair of tired, fleshy-eyed nurses slogs down the walk toward their cars. She watches them instead, until their car doors are thunking quietly in the distance.

"We were happy?" Derek says eventually, in a tone that suggests someone who's not an ace physicist trying to conceptualize string theory.

She nods. "We were. Well, until Addison. You … didn't exactly tell me about her. Until she showed up, that is." Meredith doesn't think there's much use in pointing out how miserable they are in the future right now.

"Oh," he says with appropriate weight, but that's all he says.

That's it.

He doesn't run away, though, either, so …. She's not sure what to make of this. Any of this. The minutes march past like tired soldiers returning home at the end of a too-long war. He doesn't say anything, but he doesn't run, and ….

"You don't think I'm crazy?" she says in a small voice when she can't stand the silence or the uncertainty anymore. "You believe me?"

He glances at her with a mysterious expression. She still can't figure out what's going on behind his eyes. "I think …," he begins, but his voice falls away into silence. "I think that …." Another false start, and he slips back into silence. Maybe, she prodded him for thought too soon after he overloaded. He looks at his lap. Futzes with his cuticles.

"I believe that … you believe … what you're saying," he says diplomatically, like he's trying to
balance on wet rocks as he crosses a choppy, churning river. "And ...."

Which .... She deflates. He doesn't believe her. How could he? But, at least, he's not running away. He's not yelling. He's still here, and he's still listening, and he hasn't turned into the scowling, snapping porcupine he's been, lately. He's .... Wait.

"And?" she prods.

"I …," he begins. He winces. "Um." He cuts off into an upset croak. Like he's overwrought.

"Yes?" she prods again. "You …?"

The look he gives her is like cut glass. "Your version sounds nice," he admits.

She blinks.

"I mean, not the part where I lied to you, but …." He rubs his eyes with the heels of his palms and sniffs. "The part where we're happy. That does." He swallows thickly. His lower lip trembles. "I'm so unhappy, Meredith ...."

He looks away. Like he doesn't want her to see … this. Whatever … this … is. He's not crying, but he's acting like he sincerely thinks he's going to burst into tears at any second. If it weren't dark, she imagines she would see him blushing in embarrassment.

She gapes, not quite sure what to say.

You were like coming up for fresh air she can hear him murmuring in her head. It's like I was drowning, and you saved me. Over and over and over, she can hear him. And she believes him, now. Down to her bone marrow. He wasn't purple prosing things for the sake of sounding lyrical. He was serious.

She settles on touching a palm to his shoulder and giving it a rub. A little, hey, I'm here. If that's what he needs. He doesn't acknowledge the gesture, but he doesn't shove her away, either.

Eventually, he collects himself. And he takes a clipped breath. And he wipes his eyes again. And then he takes a deeper, longer, cleansing breath. And another. And another. And then he nods, like he's satisfied he's reined himself back in. Only then, does he dare another look at her.

"Meredith, will you let me give you an MRI?" he says softly. "And … a blood panel? And … um …." He squints, looking up at the sky like he's trying to think of more diagnostics, but he's so tired, so flabbergasted, that he can't.

Her eyes widen. "You think I have a brain tumor?" She almost wants to laugh. She can hear herself talking to Mr. Duff. So, my point is, you tell people you see things, and look where it got you. Either you're crazy, or you have a tumor. She predicted her own damned fate. At least, Derek didn't opt for thinking she's nuts. She supposes there's that. Small gifts.

Derek pulls his fingers through his hair, and he shifts in his seat. "Meredith, I don't know what to think. About any of this. But-"

"Okay," she says before he can finish.

He looks at her. "Okay?"

She shrugs. "Derek, I'll even submit to a psych eval - you can even watch - if it will help convince
you. Hell, give me a syphilis test, too, if it floats your boat. Whatever you want." It's not like she's not used to sharing the results of private medical stuff with him. They're married.

"I just … want to …. I …," he stammers. "I just ….

She can't think of a time she's seen him so inarticulate. She grabs his hand and squeezes it. She gives him a smile.

"C'mon," she says. "It's late. We should sneak in all these tests while it's not crowded."

He gapes at her like he's not quite sure what to make of her. "Keep the gawkers from gawking?" he says after a pause.

She nods. "Something like that, yes."

He regards her for a long, long moment, a comical, flummoxed expression pasted on his face. But then he stands. They walk back into the hospital side by side.

She doesn't miss, as they step over the threshold, that he squeezes her hand, too.

She takes all the tests he wants her to take. A blood panel. A psych eval with the on-call resident. And, yes, even a syphilis antibody test. The MRI and head CT are last.

"Well?" she says as she steps into the dark imaging room.

Derek's staring at one of the monitors with an intense look of consternation. "I don't … see a tumor," he admits. He gives her a long look. "I don't suppose you'd let me do a cerebral angiography?"

She folds her arms. A cerebral angiography is a way more invasive test than she'd planned for, but … she's determined to make him believe her. "If that's what you need to see to believe me, I'll do it," she says.

He glances at the screen again. His unhappy look is unmistakable. He wants to run the test. He wants it badly. But he's also a doctor. And a cerebral angiography is an invasive, expensive test. She'd need to be anesthetized, for one. And then they'd have to cut into her. Also, it's a big enough test that there's no way Derek would be able to slide it in under the radar, which, in the cases of the MRI and the CT, he's able to do by not getting printouts of the results, and instead diagnosing them on the computer screen.

"If I were your patient, would you recommend me getting a cerebral angiography done?" she prods, because she can see him waffling.

He slumps, and he puts his head in his hands. "No," he mutters into his palms. "No, I wouldn't."

She nods. "So, I'm not crazy, and I have no visible brain tumor."

"But the blood work won't be done until later this week," he counters.

She nods again. "But the blood work won't be done until later this week," she agrees. She yawns again. "So, is there something else you want me to do, or can I go to bed, now?"

He glances at his watch. It's almost 3 a.m. at this point. His sclera are bloodshot and watery, he's got baggy, fleshy circles hugging his eyes, and his face is pale like a sheet.
"You should go to bed, too," she prods.

"Yeah," he agrees softly. "Yeah. Sorry to keep you up."

"It's okay," she says. She bites her lip. The ferries don't run this late at night. "How will you get home?"

He shrugs. "I'll probly juss crash in my office," he says, slurring as exhaustion overtakes him like he's a runner lagging in a race.

"Oh," she replies. She nods. "See you tomorrow?" she can't resist adding in a hopeful tone. All that gets her, though, is another shrug. Not, she thinks, because he's trying to be a jerk, but because he's dead on his feet. She watches his head dip forward an inch before he catches himself. If this were the future, she'd offer to help him back to his office, or at least walk with him to make sure he gets there, but this isn't the future, and she doesn't have that familiarity with this Derek. Plus, she's in the middle of trying to prove she's not a stalker, and it's not like he's in a dangerous place where his safety while unconscious is a concern.

So, all she says is, "Goodnight, Derek."

And all he replies with is, "Hmm."

And then she leaves him there. Semi-conscious in the imaging room. And she slogs back to her car to drive home and get a few winks.

She's not sure how much headway she's made with him. He no longer seems determined to jump down her throat and call her a stalker, or insist that she doesn't know him, at every opportunity, no matter how small. But does he think she's not a stalker anymore? She has no idea. And she's exhausted. She has all of three hours until her next shift starts.

"So?" Izzie demands as Meredith stumbles into the kitchen the next morning. Izzie's at the stove, making herself an omelette in the frying pan.

Meredith squints. It's still dark outside - far too early for human beings to be conscious. She's only gotten about two hours of sleep, if that. "So, what?" she croaks.

"So, how did it go?" Izzie replies.


Izzie sighs. "The syphilis thing," she clarifies. "Did you convince him?" She waves the spatula at the coffeemaker. "Coffee's in the pot."

"Thanks," Meredith grumbles, and she slogs in that direction. Once she's poured herself a cup and collapsed at the kitchen table to nurse herself into consciousness, she rasps, "I have no idea if he's convinced. Literally none."

Izzie flips her omelette onto a clean plate and comes to sit at the table across from Meredith. Meredith blows on the steaming liquid in her mug, hoping she can take a gulp soon.

"So, he's still quitting," Izzie says, a question but not.
Meredith gives a halfhearted shrug. "I don't know. Maybe? I hope not."

Izzie sighs. "C'mon Meredith," she says, her tone descending into something slightly whiny, and Meredith winces. "You were out until after 3:30 last night." Izzie takes a bite of her omelette. It's got cheese and mushrooms and … green things in it. "You can't expect me to believe nothing happened."

"Oh, stuff happened," Meredith says. "It definitely did. I just have no idea if it was good."

"Oh," Izzie says. She frowns. "Well, was it bad?"

Finally, Meredith tips her mug back and inhales some of her pick-me-up. The scent is acrid, the taste is bitter against her tongue, and the fluid is warm enough that she can feel it going all the way down into her stomach. It's bliss. Just … bliss.

"Well," Meredith says, "there were a few hours where he didn't treat me like a criminal anymore, so …"

"Hey, that's positive!" Izzie says. "Does he believe the impossible thing?"

Meredith shakes her head. "Not yet," she says, and she takes another sip of her coffee.

Izzie raises her eyebrows and leans forward on her elbows. "But you have hope?" she prods.

"Yeah," Meredith says. "Yeah, I do." She really does. And she can't wait to see him today, see how he acts when he's had some sleep and some time to process.

"She has hope, George!" Izzie calls over Meredith's shoulder as George stumbles in.

His hair is a mess, and his eyes are glazed, and he's not exactly walking so much as shambling. "That's nice," he says in a distant, low, sleepy tone that says he's not really understanding the universe enough for conversation, yet. He yawns. "Is there coffee?"

Both Meredith and Izzie point at the coffeemaker and say, "It's in the pot."

Derek's not at work that day. Meredith looks everywhere. Finally, she breaks down and asks Patricia if Dr. Shepherd is coming in that day. Patricia says that he called in sick again.

Crap. Meredith's not sure what to make of that.

Derek's still not there the day after that.

He called in sick.

Again.

The third day, when Meredith can't find Derek anywhere at work, she's almost ready to break down and give him a call. The only thing that stops her from doing it is thinking … maybe he's taking this time off to process what she's told him, and her calling him would screw everything up again. He's calling in sick, at least, so he's alive, and he cares enough about being alive to call Patricia, so … it's not like he's in some drunken downward spiral or something. It's not like that.

Right?
Her heart squeezes. She hates how precarious this all feels. And she hates that Derek's so not Derek-y right now that worrying about his mental health is an actual thing that she's doing.

She sits in the swing on her porch, sipping from a glass of zinfandel as she reads in the waning light. Well, rereads, anyway. The curse of zapping herself back in time is that she's read all the books on her shelves, and thanks to her job, she's too exhausted in her free time to bother schlepping to a bookstore to find something new. She supposes there's Amazon, but … she likes to have physical books to browse when she's trying to find something new.

"Night … Pleasures?" a familiar male voice says slowly.

She sets her book and her wineglass on the end table. She looks up at him. "Yes, Mark. You can read titles. Congratulations."

Mark snorts. He's standing there, arms folded, wearing a shit-eating grin. "Am I … interrupting something?" he says in a suggestive tone.

She rolls her eyes and doesn't dignify that with an answer. So, she appreciates trashy romances. Sue her.

A cool, damp breeze ruffles her hair, and she shivers. Bird calls are slowly shifting into a symphony of crickets. A car drives by, interrupting the peace with a rumble and a whoosh as wet tires meet wet pavement.

Mark sits on the swing beside her. The wood creaks with the addition of his weight. Which is … weird. That he has physical presence.

"So, how's it going?" he says.

She sighs. "I hope you don't have a timetable for this."

"I don't." His gaze follows the distant bark of a dog. "Like I said. This is for as long as you need."

"Might be a while," she replies in a grim tone. "Because I think my epiphany is a stubborn bastard who's avoiding me."

He frowns. "Derek's avoiding you?"

"Isn't that what I just said?" she replies.

Since he wasn't here long enough last time to receive one, she gives Mark a quick summary of what's happened since he dumped her here.

"You have to admit, time travel's a hard pill to swallow," he says. "You didn't believe it at first, and you've done it."

"I know," she says with a sigh. She looks at him. The last hint of dusk is trading for darkness, leaving only the barest sliver of sunlight to see by, and Mark's … freaking glowing. Not like a rave glow stick or anything but … there's a luminescent quality to the human-shaped space he occupies. Wow. "I don't suppose you could …." She waves her arms in a vague, flitting motion. "Poof in and set him straight?" Though … would that help? This Derek might not be that receptive, given that the poofing would be done by Mark. Still … it's hard to deny the holy crap! of it all once you've seen said poofing in person, no matter who poofed. "He'd probably be more inclined to believe me, then, what with the …." More handwaving. "The poofing … thing."
"I wish I could, Grey, but there are rules about visitations."

She raises her eyebrows. "Like what?"

"It's usually look but don't touch," he says. She doesn't miss the wistfulness in his tone. Like … he's done a lot of looking where he wishes he could touch.

She frowns. "Then how are you-?"

"You're my assignment. I … filed a flight path, and only that path is approved, I guess you could say."

"But I thought you were assigned to Derek, too," she says. "Two birds with one stone, you said."

"I am," Mark replies patiently. "But not this Derek."

"Oh," she says. She looks at her lap. Her heart squeezes when she remembers why Mark left before. An emergency. She swallows. Looks up at him. "Is my Derek okay?"

Mark nods. "He's fine, now."

"And our kids?"

"They're fine," he assures her.

"Okay," she says with a nod. "Wait." She frowns again. "What do you mean, my Derek's fine, now?" Her chest tightens. "You mean there was a point at which he wasn't fine?"

"Crisis of faith," Mark says. "That's all."

Like it isn't a big deal that Derek needed emergency divine intervention. Seriously? "Faith in …?"

"You."

"Me?"

"Well … not you, specifically. Happiness in general."

A lump forms in her throat. Maybe, he misses her as much as she misses him. "Because I'm gone?" she says.

Mark makes a strange face. "Not … exactly," he hedges.

She straightens. "What the hell does that mean?"

"Look, it's not like I had a closet in Limbo for spare people storage," he replies. "How else was I going to make room for you to be here? And it worked out for my purposes, anyway."

She gapes. The crickets chirp. Leaves rustle as the wind fingers through them. He cannot be intimating- "Are you saying … that 2005 me … is in the future with 2012 Derek?"

"Yes."

"So … I woke up after a one-night stand … to a marriage and two kids?"

Mark winces. "That about sums it, yes."
"You warned me, right?" she asks warily.

"No ….

"Oh, my god," she snaps, and she hits his shoulder hard enough to make him sway with the blow. She tries to picture how she would react if she woke up in a house she doesn't recognize, in bed with a man she doesn't know beyond one night in a bar, and two children who call her Mommy greeting her at the bedroom door. Holy crap, she'd think she'd been roofied into the house of a psychopath with psychopath kids, and she'd spare no expense in telling the psychopath what she thought of that. Assuming she didn't go straight for the keys and flee. Or worse. Straight for the keys and a weapon, and flee. She might have hurt …. "Seriously? You put ….

" She can't even form words as heat crashes into the space between her ribs. She grinds her molars. "Since you didn't warn me, you warned him, right? You warned him his wife was going to go batcrap crazy on him, right?"

"No," Mark says. "That was the whole point."

"The point?" she almost growls. Derek practically has a phobia about her getting Alzheimer's. And this would be so much worse. No wonder he freaking needed divine intervention. "You said the point wasn't to traumatize people."

"Meredith …," Mark says in a quiet tone.

"What?" she snaps, panting.

"Everything is fine," he says. "Trust me, okay? I know it's hard for you to do that, but ….

"Why in the hell should I trust you when you just told me-"

He meets her eyes. Looks into them. She feels like she just slammed into a ton of cement bricks, and it's enough to make her gasp like the breath's been knocked out of her. If she'd had any doubt that he was otherworldly, that sensation would have smacked it gone in an eye blink.

"Have I ever lied to you?" he says, staring at her with that piercing gaze. "Ever?"

*He has all the guile of a watermelon,* Derek said. Even this Derek, who hates Mark. She's found that to be true, too. That this man doesn't have a deceitful bone in his body.

She shakes her head.

"Then trust me," Mark says slowly, "and believe that this is what needed to happen. For more reasons than one."

She licks her lips. "I …." She swallows. Crap, crap, crap. "You swear?"

He nods. "I swear."

She sighs as the fight bleeds out of her from gushing wounds. A lump is stuck in her throat. "I want to go home," she says in a soft voice. "I miss him. I miss my kids."

"I can take you back, now," Mark says, tone cautious. "If that's what you really want. Is it?"

She rubs her hurting eyes. "No." She wants to save her marriage. She wants the epiphany she's supposed to get. Why does loving someone have to be so freaking hard? "I just …." Her lower lip quivers. "I'm really tired, Mark."
He wraps his arms around her. He's warm, and solid, and with her eyes closed, she can pretend. She pulls tents of his scrubs into her clenched fists. "I know you're tired," he says, a soft murmur against her ear. "This is hard work. You're doing great, though. Keep it up."

His watch beeps. She wants to scream and scream and scream until she can't scream anymore. Instead, all she says is, "Don't go." She doesn't want another month to pass without seeing him. He's her only lifeline.

He squeezes her shoulder. "I really should get back."

She swallows. "Another coffee break?"

"No."

She looks up to find him giving her a pointed, weighted look. "To my Derek," she says. A question, but not.

"Yeah," he confirms.

He needs to get back to Her Derek. Who's dealing with a maybe insane spouse. She can't keep Mark from that. She can't. Not when her only problems are that she's lonely and tired and wishing this stupid Murphy Derek would freaking believe her.

She doesn't protest when Mark dislodges her hands from his scrubs, and he stands. The swing creaks. She rubs her nose. And her eyes. She sniffs.

"Hey, Mark?" she says before he has a chance to disappear.

He turns back to her, eyebrows raised. "Yeah?"

"That look but don't touch thing."

"Yeah?"

"Do you ...." She swallows. The lump in her throat aches. "Do you visit a lot?"

He regards her for a long moment. A beautiful, warm smile blooms on his face. His eyes crinkle around the edges a bit like Derek's do when he's happy.

"Of course, I do," Mark says. "Congrats on kid number two."

And then he's gone again.

"McDreamy's still a no show, huh," Cristina says on day four, while she and Meredith are eating lunch. Well, Meredith's eating, anyway. Cristina's staring at her sandwich like it'll leap off the plate and bite her at any moment.

"Yeah," Meredith says. "He's still a no show." She tries to pick the poppy seeds off her bagel. She's not a poppyseed bagel fan, but that was all that was left, and she felt like a bagel. Screw it. If she lathers it with enough butter, maybe the poppyseed taste won't be noticeable. She picks up one of the butter packets she grabbed and tries to peel it open. And then she frowns. "Wait, what do you care?"

"I don't," Cristina rushes to say, not looking up from her plate.

Meredith's eyebrows knit. RIiight. "How are things?"
"Fine," Cristina says.

"You're sure?"

Cristina nods. "Yep."

Meredith sighs, and she goes back to picking at her bagel. With Cristina? She'll call that progress. Now, if only she could make some progress with Derek, too, she'd finally feel like she's got herself back on the right trajectory.

Izzie, George, Cristina, and Meredith are sitting on the decommissioned gurneys in their favorite hallway, quizzing each other, when Alex pops through the double doors with a bag of chips in hand. He's smirking like a cat who just snarfed up a whole feast of canaries.

"Dude, you guys missed out," he says, nonchalant as he finds an empty space and sits down. The mattress squeaks as his weight settles. His chip bag crinkles as he opens it.

Izzie frowns. "Missed out on what?"

Alex shrugs. "I got dibs," he says. A crunch echoes in the hallway as he pops a chip into his mouth and closes his jaws. "He already said I could scrub in when he's ready to cut."

"He who?" Meredith says.

Cristina glares. "Burke?"

"Scrub in to what?" George adds.

"What are you talking about?" Izzie snaps, irritation dripping from her tone.

Alex glances at them all, still smirking. He looks so smarmy like that, like a used car salesmen or something. Meredith's not fooled, though. It's an affectation meant to keep people away. Nothing more. And, truthfully, she's glad for at least one familiar thing in this hellacious crap fest of a timeline.

Alex devours three more chips before replying, "If you guys hurry up to imaging, you might get some scraps."

Izzie, George, and Cristina all share a look. And then they're launching off the gurneys into a full sprint, leaving Meredith alone with Alex. Meredith sighs, and scoots off the mattress at a more sedate pace.

"You don't care?" Alex says.

Meredith shrugs. "I care," she says, without much heart. Derek's still missing, Cristina's ambiguously situated in the not-friend-but-not-enemy zone, and Meredith's still stuck losing sleep over holding retractors for people she far outranks in terms of experience and knowledge, "learning" stuff she's already learned.

"It's him, you know," Alex says.

Meredith frowns. "What?"

"Your boyfriend."
Meredith blinks. "Derek?"

"Isn't that what I just said?" Alex replies.

Derek's here today? "What's the surgery?" Meredith replies.

But Alex only shrugs and says, "Dunno, yet, but it'll be something big."

Meredith slips into the imaging room where a young technician is sitting at the computer, collating
images. Meredith's panting, out of breath from racing to catch up, and she spends a few gasping
moments, hanging off the doorframe. When she rights herself, she looks through the window into the
room where the MRI machine resides.

A heavyset man wearing a hospital gown and covered in a sheet, lies on the gurney, and a dark-
haired doctor is talking to the prone man. The doctor's arms are folded over his chest. It's Derek -
Meredith would know him anywhere at any angle. He shifts on his feet, showing his profile to the
imaging room instead of his back, revealing his identity to the rest of his observers.

"Is that Dr. Shepherd?" George says, staring at the doctor.

"Is that Joe?" Izzie adds, staring at the patient.

"Oh, my god, look at that aneurysm," Cristina says, staring at the computer screen.

The two of them shift to look at what Cristina's looking at. George's eyes widen. "It's huge!"

Meredith frowns. How did Derek get Joe to come in? Or, maybe, this timeline was proceeding in its
standard out-of-whack fashion, and Joe collapsed earlier this time than he had the first time. Or-

"That thing is the size of a golfball," Izzie says, goggling. "Look at it!"

"I take it you're trolling for surgeries?" a soft voice murmurs behind them.

All four turn to find Derek standing there in the doorway, leaning against the frame. His arms are
folded over his chest, much like they were when he was speaking to Joe. Derek doesn't look any less
terrible than he did a few days ago - it seems like he and sleep haven't had a good relationship lately.

Meredith frowns. He's not looking at her. Why is he not looking at her?

"What surgery?" George says. "There's no way to clip something like that."

Cristina snorts. "Not without magic fingers, anyway."

Derek regards them with a flat expression. "Or a standstill operation."

Izzie gapes. "Seriously?"

Derek nods. "Yes," he says. "And I've already given the intern slot to Karev. You'll have to watch
from the gallery." He turns to go before anyone can say anything else. And then he's gone, lab coat
flapping behind him like he's some kind of scrubs-clad superhero in a cape.

Meredith bites her lip. What the hell is going on? Why won't he look at her? Not even a glare? It's
like he's entered Derek Conflict Resolution Mode, Mach 2: Flee and Avoid. At least, he's doesn't
seem to be in Resolution Mode, Mach 3: Say Mean Things at It and Hope It Goes Away.

"What are you waiting for?" Izzie hisses behind her. She nudges Meredith forward. "Go after him!"
"Dr. Shepherd," Meredith says as she steps out into the hall. He's fast. More than fast. He's already almost around the corner. And he doesn't stop when she calls after him. "Dr. Shepherd!" she repeats. He slips into a stairwell, and she follows at a sprint. She reaches the doorway before it closes all the way. He's already up on the landing, halfway to the next floor. "Derek, would you just wait?" she snaps, panting at the exertion of trying to keep up with him.

Finally, he stops. The stairwell is empty and quiet, absent of the frantic bustle of the hospital beyond the doorways. Muted sunlight streams through the windows.

"Your labs came back clean," he says, not meeting her eyes.

"That's great," she says. Unsurprising, though. She knew they would. She tromps up the stairs to the landing, so she won't get a crick in her neck from talking. "I'm glad. But-"

"But what?" he interrupts, raising his eyebrows.

"Joe," she says. "What happened with Joe? Did he collapse or …?"

"I convinced him to come in for an MRI."

She gapes. "Out of the blue?"

Derek nods. "Out of the blue," he confirms.

She can't imagine walking up to an almost stranger and saying, Hey, you have an aneurysm. Don't ask me how I know. Wanna let me fix it? Well, she can imagine walking up to a stranger and saying it, but she can't imagine said stranger doing anything other than laughing and telling her to get lost. Even if the stranger is Joe. Well, Joe might not laugh or tell her to get lost. But he'd tell her she's drunk and make her get a taxi. Or something.

Then again, Derek's a schmoozer. He has amazing people skills when he decides to apply them. And he has the stupid sparkle-eye trick. Not to mention, Joe is gay. He's probably as vulnerable to Derek's sparkle-eye crap as Meredith is.

Still ….

"How?" Meredith blurts.

Derek shrugs. "Made up some bullshit story about seeing his hands shake when he was serving a beer, and then asked if he'd been having localized headaches, lately. He said yes. Blurred vision. Yes. Weakness. Yes. I said come in for an MRI. He said no. I said I'd give him the test pro bono. And here he is."

"Oh," Meredith says. Damn. She can't believe she didn't think of that. Tiny aneurysms were typically asymptomatic until they burst, but big ones like Joe's …. Often times, they let you know they were there in some way or another.

"You were right," Derek admits, still looking everywhere but at her. "He has …. You were right." He swallows. "It's huge, Meredith. I'm surprised he's still standing."

"Joe's a bit of a workaholic," Meredith admits. A lot like you, she doesn't add. "He probably figured he'd push through the suck if he pushed hard enough." Also, a lot like you.

Derek has no response to that.
"So," she prods.

He folds his arms. "So?"

"So, I'm not crazy," she replies. "I don't have a tumor. I'm syphilis free. My blood work is normal. And I was right about the Joe's aneurysm and Mr. Walker's spinal hematoma."

"You were," he admits slowly.

She leans forward. "… So?"

"So, what?"

She looses an exasperated sigh. "So, what do you want to do, now?"

His jaw clenches. She watches as his temples dance. He shifts on his feet like he's agitated. He pulls his fingers through his hair. And finally. Finally. Finally, he looks at her. Really looks. The turmoil she finds there, in his gaze, like choppy sea water, is enough to make her stomach drop like she's out there on the waves, clinging to a tossing boat with him.

"Meredith, this is …." He shakes his head as though he's feeling helpless. He glances out the window. Into the sunshine. "You're asking me to believe in magic."

"But you do believe in magic," she replies. "Derek, I know you do."

He opens his mouth and closes it, and his eyes widen a little. She surprised him. He wants to ask, How did you know that? She can see it all over his face. But he doesn't. He doesn't ask.

All he does is say, "I …." And then his voice trails away into silence.

But he's not snapping at her. Not yelling. Not accusing.

"I know it's hard to swallow," she says. "That's why I gave you all the evidence first. I'm not expecting you to believe me right now. It's okay. But ….""

"But what?"

She looks up at him. She risks stepping closer. Into his personal bubble. He bristles at first, but when she doesn't touch him, doesn't do anything other than stand there, he relaxes over the passing moments. And he's still not hissing or spitting.

Maybe ….

"Could you, maybe, not … not believe me?" she says. She gives him a hopeful smile. "At least, for a little while, until you've decided for sure?"

"I …." He pulls his fingers through his hair again and shifts on his feet. "I ….""You …," she prods.

"I need some space," he blurts. "Just let me … take some space."

"Okay," she says, deflating. She steps back. "Sorry."

She watches him go with a sinking feeling. One step forward, two steps back. She can't freaking win with him. And, now ….
She looks at her shoes - an old, beat up pair of black chucks. Derek's not an emotional leaper. He's not. She's not sure why she believed he might jump for some crazy stalker he's trying to get away from.

One step forward. Two steps back.

The question is … now, what?

She doesn't know.

Richard catches her as she leaves the stairwell. She gives him a grim look. "Chief," she says.

"So, our little neuro project," Richard says.

Crap. Crappity crap crap. She doesn't need this right now.

Meredith sighs. "Look, sir, I'm trying." Unfortunately, Derek is more stubborn than a freaking mule, and the story she's trying to get him to believe is insanity. "I'm trying, but-"

Richard nods. "I know. Look, whatever you're doing, keep doing it."

Meredith frowns. "Huh?"

"Dr. Shepherd withdrew his two-week notice," Richard says. He smiles. Hell, there's … almost a twinkle in his eyes. "So whatever you're doing, it's working."

Meredith gapes. The Derek she just spoke to did not seem like a Derek who was planning on staying. Or believing her. Or doing anything helpful toward her Murphy Timeline plights.

"When?" she says.

Richard glances at his watch. "About an hour ago."

"But … he didn't say anything. And I was just talking to him. Just now."

Richard shrugs. "Maybe, he's not sure what to say."

"Maybe," Meredith echoes, frowning. Richard gives her a nod and shuffles off down the hallway toward admitting. Meredith watches him go, frown deepening as her mind churns.

What's more likely, she thinks, is that Derek didn't want her to know.

Fortunately, he hadn't counted on Richard being a Grade A meddler complete with Chatty-Cathy tendencies.

So, why wouldn't Derek want her to know he wasn't halfway out the door, anymore?

So, he can save some face if you rip his heart out and stomp on it, a tiny voice says in the back of her head. He'll say he never believed you, cut his losses, and run.

Meredith bites her lip. Maybe, she's made more progress than she realized. He's got his toe in the water. He has things set up so he can still bolt for dry land if he needs to. But ….

Two teeny tiny baby steps forward.
No steps back?
Singing in the ....

Meredith falls into a holding pattern with Derek.

He treats her nicely enough at work, but as a coworker - not a friend, or a girlfriend, or an anything - and he doesn't go out of his way to utilize her on his various cases. He takes his space. Endless leaps and bounds of space. He doesn't sit with her at lunch, or pursue her in the elevators, or sniff her hair, or flirt - not even for the sole purpose of making himself feel better, like he did before the nuclear stalker bomb exploded. He doesn't smile at her, either, though she thinks that may have more to do with his horrible state of mind than his feelings toward her.

She worries about him. The dark circles underneath his eyes won't abate. He's not his usual bouncy optimistic self. He's glum and serious and acts way more scatterbrained than he should be. Her Derek is fastidious and organized and very Type A. This Derek is a mess who can barely comb his hair or button his shirt straight.

Every morning she goes to work, she has this tense period where she hunts him down. Not to bug him - she keeps her distance like he wants. She just wants to confirm he came to work, and that he's not trying to find a bridge to jump off of somewhere.

But she wants to let him work all of this crap out in his own head, on his own time, of his own volition. She wants him to believe her. If she could print out a sign that said, "Not a stalker. Innocuous. Doesn't bite except when asked," and stick it to her forehead, somehow, she would, but she can't.

All she can do is stay away and hope the distance translates the same way as her would-be sign.

More than two weeks pass.

She sits on a stool at the Emerald City Bar on a Wednesday night, not with Cristina, but moping next to Cristina while Cristina also mopes, by sheer coincidence. Walter hunkers behind the bar, wearing an intense look of consternation as he cleans glasses with a towel. The room is somewhat empty, which isn't odd for a Wednesday at 11.

The happy hour crowd is gone, and all that's left are weary hospital staffers, trickling off shift as the night lengthens, along with a few odds and ends of life. Like the blonde guy, hunched over at the end of the bar. His glasses, coiffed hair, heavily worn Bronte novel - and the fact that he's nursing scotch in a tumbler - scream librarian. His tight leather pants and scuffed shitkickers, though, claim him a biker.

"Is it just me," Cristina grumbles, "or is that guy at the end of the bar a living oxymoron?"

"Nope," Meredith says. "Not just you."

"Definitely not just you," adds Walter. He sets down a clean empty glass with a clink and picks up a dirty one.

Meredith kicks back her second shot of tequila. She picks up a slice of lime from her plate, catches the pulpy side between her teeth, bites, and sucks. The slurping sound fills the conversational space. When she sets down the exsanguinated lime, wincing as the alcohol and lime juice settle, she gives her head a little shake.

"So, Joe's still recuperating, huh?" she says to Walter.
"Yeah," Walter replies. "He'll be back soon. At the moment, though, he can't make it more than a few hours without needing a nap."

Meredith nods in sympathy. "Major surgery like that takes a lot out of a person," she replies. She glances pointedly at the glass Walter is wiping down. "It's nice of you to manage the bar for him while he's down for the count."

Walter sighs. "Oh, you don't even ....," he grumbles under his breath. And then he glowers. "It's not nice of me, it's saintly. The guy is ...." His tone shifts into something nagging. "This goes here, not there. That goes there, not here. This glass has spots. You de-alphabetized my liquor. Blah, blah, blah, bleh."

Meredith snorts. "He's nitpick-y?"

"To say the least."

George sidles up to the bar beside Meredith. "Can I have a beer, please? Whatever's on tap."

Walter nods and turns to fill up a mug for George. Meredith glances down at her bowl of peanuts and fiddles with the shell casings. Then she looks at Cristina, who's nursing an ice water like it's beer and her life is ending tomorrow. Walter sets a filled mug in front of George. George looks .... His posture is slumped. He almost looks more dire than Cristina.

"Hey, let's play a game of whose life sucks the most," Meredith suggests to break the ice. "I'll win. I always win."

Cristina snorts and peers at Meredith over the rim of her water glass. "No, you don't want to play with me today."

"I do!" Meredith insists. "Spill. Why does your life suck?"

But Cristina only glowers and doesn't answer. George seems similarly unenthused. He takes a foamy sip of lager, saying nothing. Pool balls crack in the background.

"I'll go, then," Meredith offers. She sighs. "Derek said he wants space. But that was over two weeks ago. How long is it appropriate to take space before a relationship simply becomes ... not a relationship, anymore?"

Cristina frowns. "I thought you didn't have a relationship."

"We don't," Meredith says.

"Well, how can it become not a relationship, then?" Cristina says. "Wouldn't it simply be status quo?"

"That's not what I meant," Meredith replies.

"Well, say what you mean, then," Cristina grumbles.

Meredith sighs again. She's pleasantly buzzed. Enough for the room to be a little spinny, everything to feel a bit too warm, and bleak things not to seem quite so bleak. She yanks at her shirt, trying to lower the neckline a bit. The cool air feels good against her chest.

"I mean ....," she says, "how long is it appropriate to take space before a maybe, we can be friends becomes a tacitly understood no, stay away forever, you freak?"
"I think more than two weeks, Mere," George adds.

"Well, how long would you say?"

"It's kind of like …." George looks up at the ceiling, thinking. "Say you find out Derek has syphilis, and you're not sure if you want to deal with the kind of person who has syphilis, except he's really attractive, and he likes you, and-"

Cristina snorts.

"I'm not gay, Cristina," George insists.

"I am," Walter says with a shrug. "So, what?"

George chugs his beer, slams the empty mug onto the bar, and sighs before putting his head in his hands. "Yeah. I'll just … uh … be over here. Taking a bite out of my foot. Don't mind me."

Walter rolls his eyes and looks at Meredith. "I think what George is trying to say, is that it can take a while to come to terms with whether a deal breaker is a deal breaker, particularly when there are big positive factors to weigh said deal breaker against."

Meredith nods. She picks up a peanut shell and fiddles with it. "I hope my thing isn't a deal breaker."

"I'm sure it won't be," Walter adds in a conciliating tone.

"Oh, shut up," she says. "You just want me to shower you with money while I drink more tequila and stew."

Walter has the decency to grin. "A classic Meredith-Grey-sized bar tab would certainly offset Joe's desire to nitpick me into an early grave." He sets down the glass he's been polishing to a bright sparkle and holds up his thumb. "So, we have a nagging, perfectionist boyfriend," he says, pointing to himself. He holds up his index finger next and points to Meredith. "A distant boyfriend."

"I wish he was my boyfriend," Meredith replies before Walter can finish.

"A nagging, perfectionist boyfriend, a distant, fantasy boyfriend, a-"

"Hey, he is not a fantasy," Meredith protests. She flicks her peanut shell back into the bowl. "He's very real. Just ….

Walter raises his eyebrows and leans forward on his elbows. "Distant, ambivalent boyfriend?"

Meredith shrugs. "I guess that's accurate." She glances at her empty shot glass, sighs, and adds, "Oh, hell with it. Fill me up, Walter." It's not like she has to work tomorrow.

Walter laughs and pulls out the bottle of Gran Dovejo Reposado that Joe keeps behind the bar for his tequila fanatics. "So, a nagging, perfectionist boyfriend," he says as he pours. "A distant, ambivalent boyfriend." He looks at Cristina and then at George. "What have you two got?"

"The only girl who's shown any interest in me has syphilis," George says, glowering into his beer mug.

Walter nods. "Nagging, perfectionist boyfriend, distant, ambivalent boyfriend, infectious girlfriend-"

"She is not my girlfriend," George insists.
"But you want her to be?" Walter prods.


"Nagging, perfectionist boyfriend, distant, ambivalent boyfriend, infectious not-a-girlfriend, and …?" Walter says, looking at Cristina.

"I'm pregnant," Cristina replies without pause. She glances at Walter. "I hate children," she adds as if to clarify for him.

"And … virile boyfriend for the sucky life win," Walter replies. "I think that's settled."

Meredith takes her next shot, this time, to hide her smile. Making progress with Cristina, at least. Only the crap with Derek remains stuck in what feels like perma-neutral.

The OR lights are bright and harsh, and Richard keeps blinking and squinting. Meredith frowns as she watches him. She stands to his right, holding open the abdominal cavity with a retractor. The poor man on the table got stabbed in an alley when he intervened during a mugging, and Richard and Miranda have spent all morning fixing him up. Well, as much as he can be fixed, anyway. He'll have a long, painful recovery.

Meredith glances over her shoulder to the gallery. Derek's sitting up there in his navy scrubs and his ferryboat scrub cap, alone, working on post-op notes, engrossed and not really paying attention. She's not even sure he realizes Meredith's standing in the OR below him. She thinks, if he did notice her, he might vacate as part of his whole taking-space campaign.

Her back is to him, though. She doubts he knows her well enough already to peg her identity by the shape of her head. And thank goodness for that.

Meredith can't remember the specifics of Richard's brain tumor beyond the fact that it screwed with his vision, but she remembers it started a bit like this. She suspects that now might be go time. And … if it is go time, Derek needs to see this to set the events she remembers into motion.

She sighs and looks back to Mr. Nguyen, the man on the table. She wishes she could be doing more than holding a freaking retractor. She's getting more and more disillusioned every time she finds herself stuck in the OR in intern mode.

The first time Meredith was an intern, Bailey was an infallible, scary god, who knew everything, saw everything, was everywhere. But, now that Meredith's an attending stuck in an intern's body, she's able to see all the little things Bailey's doing wrong. She's not in danger of a malpractice suit or anything like that - the errors are nothing huge. They just show she's still learning. Still a student. Like clunky stitching. Hesitance. Getting lost occasionally in the big pile of anatomy Jell-O that is the human body. Things like that.

"Retract here," Richard says.

"Oh, this just isn't holding," Bailey replies with a sigh from across the table. The two of them try to clear the visual field without much success.

"Give me a bigger retractor, please," Richard says to Nurse Bokhee.

The nurse grabs the shiny tool from the sterile tray and attempts to pass it off to Richard. Richard reaches. Misses. The metal retractor falls to the floor by Bailey's feet. The resounding clank echoes off the walls and jars Meredith's ears. Meredith winces.
"Sorry, doctor," says Nurse Bokhee.

"It wasn't you," Richard is quick to say. He shakes his head, blinks, and clears his throat. "Dr. Bailey, you can finish this."

"Uh, thank you, chief," Dr. Bailey gushes. "I appreciate the opportunity. I'll just … ."

Richard doesn't even give her a chance to finish her sentence before he steps over to the red biohazard bin, tosses his used surgical gloves in, and leaves the room. Meredith glances up at the gallery again. Derek's put down his pen. He's leaning forward, peering with a frown at the space Richard occupied moments before.

Bingo.

She watches Derek get up and leave the gallery, presumably to chase after the chief and suggest an MRI or something like that. She resists the urge to run after them. Because-

"Dr. Grey, do you have something else you'd rather be doing?" Dr. Bailey snaps.

Because of that.

"No, Dr. Bailey. Sorry," Meredith says, trying to look chastised and small and meek.

Miranda huffs quietly in righteous affront.

And then they get back to work, fixing Mr. Nguyen.

---

An all-hands meeting is called later that day in the main conference room. All elective and non-emergent surgeries are bumped unless they've already been started. Everyone gathers.

Bright sunlight streams in through the windows, in stark contrast to Richard's dark, unamused expression. He stands beside Patricia, who's seated at the conference table with her hands clasped, giving nothing away, save for the fact that a banana and an unopened condom packet are resting on the table by her hands.

Cristina hovers beside Meredith with a bored expression.

Anticipation makes Meredith's heart pound.

This is it. She remembers this. The syphilis outbreak is a go. Everything's converging. Surely, Derek will believe her, soon.

Surely.

She glances over the bustling, thickening crowd, looking, looking, look- Derek wanders in with a curious but unconcerned expression. The room is jam packed with tired, busy surgical staff, and there's nowhere for him to go, so he folds his arms over his chest and leans against the wall by the door.

Richard motions for the room to quiet down, and the roar of clustered voices dulls to a murmur to a whisper to silent. He says to the gathered crowd, "Two interns, four residents, and six nurses on this surgical floor have been diagnosed with … syphilis."

Yes! Meredith resists the urge to pump her fist or jump up and down. Neither would be appropriate, and neither would convince Derek she's not insane.
The crowd titters. Someone giggles. Meredith finds herself glancing at Derek, though, instead of at Richard or Patricia. Derek's not watching the presentation anymore, either.

He's looking at Meredith with a calculating, slightly amazed expression, like Crap, you were right! Or, well, with Derek, she supposes it would be Shit, you were right! She also notes a tinge of horror, though. Like … shit, how are you right? How in the hell …? The deep navy blue of his scrubs turns his eyes a cobalt color as he regards her. He's not even trying to hide that he's looking at her, and that he's doing it with the force of a thousand racing thoughts.

Well, fine.

She won't hide that she's looking back at him, either, complete with her own internal babble.

Hi, she mouths at him, returning his stare.

At which point he shakes himself like someone blasted a bullhorn next to his ear or something, and he looks away from her to watch Patricia and Richard, instead. The holy fuck holy fuck holy fuck holy fuck holy fuck screamingin his eyes doesn't abate, though.

Which means …. Does it mean progress? She freaking hopes it means more progress. She's sick of there being no progress. She's sick of the holding pattern, damn it.

"There are over 70,000 new cases every year," Patricia adds. "undiagnosed syphilis can lead to blindness, insanity, and death."

As though Derek senses Meredith staring, his gaze flicks to her again. He regards her out of the corner of his eye. Fuck fuck fuck fuck fuck is all Meredith can see in his expression. Still, she doesn't look away. She raises her eyebrows, daring him to meet her gaze head on. Hoping he will.

But he doesn't. He shifts on his feet and focuses on Richard again.

"If you're having unprotected sex with another member of the staff, get tested," Richard concludes, barely containing what looks like an eye roll waiting to happen. He sighs. And then the eye roll escapes, and his eyeballs go on walkabout in his sockets. Through grinding teeth, he adds, "Patricia will now give you a safe sex demonstration."

Patricia stands up with the banana in her right hand and a condom in her left. "When the time is right …," she begins.

While Patricia gives the condom demonstration, Derek approaches Richard to whisper something in his ear. The two men exchange quiet words. Everyone is busy sniggering about the banana penis and nobody seems to notice.

Nobody but Meredith, that is.

Derek leaves. Richard, looking somewhat reluctant, follows Derek a few moments later. Meredith wants to chase them to see what's going on. To see if they're talking about Richard's tumor.

She wants. But she can't. She won't. She makes herself stay put.

"At least, George avoided this crap," Meredith whispers to Cristina, trying to distract herself.

"Yeah," Cristina replies with a curt nod. "You know, I think he really liked Typhoid Mary."

Meredith sighs. "Well, not many budding relationships survive a good dose of VD."
"Yeah," Cristina says.

"When the banana is finished, gently peel off the condom, and dispose of it properly," Patricia instructs. The condom slips off the banana with a snapping sound as the latex stretches during removal and then contracts when it's free, eliciting more giggles from the crowd. Patricia arches an eyebrow at her immature audience. "With every fresh banana, always use a fresh condom."

"This blows," Cristina grumbles as she and Meredith sit side by side at the nurses' station, scribbling on charts. "I want a surgery, not a drunkard who needs a paracentesis ...."

"Hey, at least you have a procedure to do," Meredith says. She sighs. "I've got charts." Her pager vibrates in her pocket, sending a zing of sensation into her hip. She flinches in surprise and yanks the pager loose.

"You were saying?" Cristina adds in a bland tone.

Meredith clutches the pager and squints at the screen. NEURO-DCS-117.

"Oh, my god," Meredith says. "It's Derek." She shakes her head. "I mean Dr. Shepherd. Dr. Shepherd is paging me."

Derek hasn't paged her or requested her since he started taking his stupid space. Hell, since he decided she's a stalker. She blinks and peers at Cristina, who hasn't even looked up from her chart.

"Well, don't expect pom poms from me or anything," Cristina says.

"I'm happy with an absence of seething hate on your part," Meredith replies.

Cristina raises her eyebrows. "What about mild disdain?"

"I'll take it," Meredith says with a nod.

This is it. This is really it. This has to be it.

"I gotta run," Meredith says before Cristina can reply.

And then Meredith takes off at a jog.

Room 117 is on the same floor, and the trip there only takes a minute. The door is shut, and there's no window. She knocks first to warn the room's occupants that she's there, waits five seconds, and then heads inside.

The room is dark. Richard is nowhere to be found, but Derek's sitting at the desk, chin cupped in one hand. He's looking at a CT scan on a computer monitor with a blank expression. An expression made more haunted by the dark circles under his eyes and his general demeanor of unkemptness, from his wrinkled white coat to his barely-tamed hair.

She steps behind him, close to the chair back where he's slumped. He's not looking at any old CT. He's looking at a head CT. Richard's. Or, well, if the scan isn't Richard's, it belongs to some other patient with a brain tumor pressing on the optic nerve, and what are the odds of that, given the timing?

Derek doesn't seem to notice she's there.
"You paged?" she prompts in a soft voice.

"Richard," Derek says, like he just can't quite believe it. He gestures at the computer monitor. "He has a tumor pressing on his optic nerve."

"I can see that," Meredith replies with a nod toward the monitor, trying to keep her tone neutral.

"Richard has a brain tumor, and half the hospital is infected with syphilis," he says.

"Okay," Meredith says. "And …?"

"And …. I don't know." He sighs and spins around on his chair to face her. He looks shell shocked. Like he just had a gun go off near his face. He blinks. And he swallows. And he looks up at her. "You'd tell me if I need to get tested, right?"

She folds her arms. "Wait," she says. Oh, this is just …. "You think I have syphilis?"

He looks at his lap, cowed. "Well … I don't know," he mutters at his knees. He pulls his fingers through his hair and sighs again. "We just …. It was just the one time." He opens his mouth as if to add more, but nothing comes out. He meets her eyes again. "Well, four times. During the one time. It's not like …. It's not like we had rules or anything."

Derek Shepherd. Rambling. Now, she's heard everything.

She grabs a chair, pulls it next to his, and plunks herself into it. "I'm an intern," she says. "My life consists of sleeping, eating, and being here, at work. When would I have time to go out and get syph-"

"Two interns have it," Derek counters before she can finish. "Richard said."

She snorts. She reaches out with her foot to give his chair a playful kick. He rolls back an inch on impact. "Shut up," she says.

She doesn't miss the flash of amusement crossing his gaze before he stuffs it behind the weird shell shock-y mask. Maybe, he's not so shell shocked, after all? Or, maybe, a tiny voice says, you're fantasizing. She stuffs the tiny voice in her mental car trunk and sits on the lid. "Besides," she adds, "you tested me for syphilis antibodies already. And we used condoms. All four times."

"But not in the morning when we started … you know. And tests aren't always …." His voice trails away.

"It wasn't a false negative," she says calmly. "Derek, it wasn't. The only person I've had sex with for the last almost decade is you."

A panicky look crosses his face. Like that wasn't what he wanted to hear. That they've been married for almost a decade. She bites her lip. She hates this. Should she keep driving her point home? That she's time traveled? Will that help him break through this weird fog? Or will that do more harm than good? She can't freaking tell.

"Sorry," she mutters.

He shakes his head. "Never mind." He stands and puts some ominous space between them. But … then he gestures at the computer screen. "Do you want to … help? With the chief? Or …?"

"Sure," she replies without hesitation. "I can do that."
"This needs to be hush hush," he cautions.

"I can keep a secret." You just have no freaking clue how to lie, the tiny voice adds as it makes a daring escape from trunk space, so let's hope nobody asks you point blank.

Oh, you, shut up, too, she tells it.

Derek nods. "Okay."

She lets herself smile. "Okay."

His gaze softens. Progress, indeed. "Okay," he repeats in that soft, reverent tone of his. The one she hasn't heard in … too long.

She wants to leave this moment on a good note, and she wants not to push him before he's willing to be pushed. Nudge, yes. But not push. So, she settles on giving him a nod, and then she stands up to leave.

He stays in the room behind her, staring at the CT again with that blank look. Like … he can't quite consider time travel, yet, without his brain rebooting. Not that she can blame him.

"Derek?" she calls, hand paused midair over the doorknob.

"Hmm?"

"Just for the record," she says. "I don't want that one time to be the only time. I'm still …." She swallows, trying to gauge his reaction. Nothing. He's giving her nothing. Nothing but a profile view that's impossible to interpret. "I'm giving you space. Like you want. No pressure. But I'm still here."

He peels his gaze from the screen. The moment he lays eyes on her, his whole demeanor changes. His gaze softens. His tension relaxes. His lips turn up at the corners into a tiny, tiny smile. He seems more … open. The shift this time, while small, is unmistakable, and her breath catches. She's … missed that look.

A lot.

"Four times," he replies.

She frowns. "Huh?"

He shrugs, and his gaze takes on a playful cast. He winks. Freaking winks! And then he says, "Four times, during the one time."

She can't resist a laugh. "Yeah. I don't want those times to be the only ones."

Me, either, he seems to want to say, but something stops him. He takes a deep breath, instead. "Meredith-" he begins, the word soft, like he's about to launch into one of his patented, heartrending speeches. One of the ones that can send her in either direction, toward chest-bursting, lifting-off-the-floor elation or soul crushing, sinking-into-the-mud desolation. Or, hell, even start with one mood and then curb stomp her into the other. Like ….

I wanna live to 110. Blah blah. But what if I find someone else?

Blah.

But then his cell phone rings, and she doesn't get a chance to find out what kind of speech his
Meredith will tumble into. He reaches for the offending, noisy device, pulling it from his pocket, and he glances at caller ID. All the positive, forward motion she achieved in the last few minutes splashes away like the forward motion was the puddle, and she just slapped on some galoshes and jumped into it with a shriek. He pales, and his shoulders curl, and his breathing tightens like he’s thinking about having a panic attack.

"I have to go," he says abruptly. The phone beeps as he jams his thumb on the end-call button, repeatedly.

"What?" she has a chance to say.

And then he's pushed past her, yanked open the door, and fled.

She finds him an hour later, holed up in his trash heap of an office. Or, at least, she thinks she's found him. The lights are on - she can see a sliver of brightness escaping from the tiny gap underneath the door. She knocks on his door with the backs of her knuckles. When no answer arrives, not a, "Come in!" or a, "Go away, Meredith!" she grips the handle, turns.

The door isn't locked.

He's sitting there, resting with his head on his desk, inches from an old plastic container that might, once, have contained a salad, but, now, only contains disintegrating, somewhat smelly remnants. He's breathing softly. He doesn't look up when she enters.

"Derek?" Meredith says, the word soft.

At first, he doesn't move.

"Derek?" she repeats a little louder.

He flinches like she woke him up. In his surprise, he knocks the salad container with a flailing hand, and it bumps a few inches across the desk. Crap. She thought he was just moping, not napping.

"It's me," she rushes to say. "It's just me."

He sniffs, shifts, and looks up at her, squinting against the overhead light. "Yeah?" he says in a low, throaty, sleepy tone. Like he didn't just get a mysterious phone call and flee from her like his toes were on fire.

She lets him pretend, though. She lets him have that space. So, she doesn't ask him what that phone call was about, or why he ran off. She sticks to work stuff.

"You never said when we're doing the surgery for Richard," she says.

"What?" he says in a foggy tone.

"You know," Meredith says. She pushes aside a pile of musty papers and sinks onto his couch. The cushions squeak as her weight settles. She smiles at him. "The secret … super sunset … special … silent … surgery … thing? For the chief?"

He pulls his fingers through his hair. "Oh. Um. 7?" Like he's asking her. Not telling her.

She nods. "7 is fine." She leans forward a bit. "Derek, are you okay?"

"No," he admits. He opens his mouth like he wants to say more. But the words die in his throat. She
won't ask about the phone call. She won't ask. She won't ask. Stick to work, she tells herself. Stick to work and professional things and hospital stuff and ….

"Are you nervous or something?" she says.

"Nervous?" he parrots.


Derek shrugs, not even seeming to notice her slip. "It's a complicated surgery," he says. "I make one mistake, I end a fellow surgeon's career. My mentor's career." He looses a bitter snort. "Oh, no, I'm not nervous."

"For what it's worth, I know you'll rock it," she says.

Derek's eyes widen a little bit, but he says nothing. Freaking. He's definitely freaking out about this whole time travel thing. It's his own personal divide-by-zero. He gets to that thought - that time travel is real - and his whole brain shuts down, trying to calculate an impossible math problem.

She supposes that's progress, though. That he's gone from Aggggh! You're a stalker! to I think you're nuts, but I don't hate you to this: Time travel is real. Oh, my god, time travel is real. Time travel can't be real.

"Do you want some help?" she asks.

He blinks. "With what?"

She gestures at his office. "Cleaning up in here."

He swallows. He glances at the torrent of paper and boxes like he's noticing it for the first time. It's the weirdest, most disconcerting thing, seeing him act so disconnected from reality. And she hates that she's caused some of it with her time travel bomb. Mostly, though, she just hates to see him so upset.

The only time she's ever seen something remotely like this from him was in the few months after he got shot. When he was dopey and drugged and hurting and blaming himself for everything. But he snapped out of that, eventually, once he had time to work things out in his head. He'll snap out of this, too.

"I could help you pick up," she adds. "I don't mind."

He gives her a pleading look. "Meredith, I still need ….""

She sighs. "Space?" she says.

"Please," he begs, "please, I need it."

"Okay," she replies. "Space." She stands up and leaves without protest, pausing at the threshold only to add, "See you at 7," in a tone she hopes doesn't sound dejected.

She closes the door behind her.

Cristina's paracentesis patient died. During the paracentesis. Maybe, because of the paracentesis.
His family wants to let it go. Izzie, though …. She doesn't. And she's trying to pressure Cristina into not letting it go, either.

And as much as Meredith prays for a clue of some sort about how this went the first time, she can't remember a thing. She remembers George's syphilis, and Richard's tumor, and, *And you must be the woman who's been screwing my husband*, and threatening to run Derek over in the parking lot, and him having this stupid, flummoxed *What did I do wrong?* look on his face that made her want to punch him in the face ….

That's it.

Meredith, Cristina, and Izzie sit in a row on their favorite decommissioned gurney in their favorite dark, abandoned hallway. Which … Meredith frowns. That seems weird that a major hospital would have an entire corridor that isn't lit at night. The only light comes from cars passing in the parking lot. Which seems like an OSHA violation, because someone with brittle bones could trip and die.

Huh. When in the future does this get fixed?

"I know you, Cristina," Izzie murmurs, sitting Indian style at the end of the bed as she munches on a piece of pepperoni pizza, napkin clutched in her free hand. "You do not want to be known as the new 007. An autopsy clears your name."

"Cristina, no," Meredith says when Cristina looks tempted. "Don't do it."

"What about Franklin's wife?" Izzie prods. "You saw the way she was looking at me. She wants the autopsy. She just didn't want to fight with her daughter. She looked so sad." Izzie pouts, complete with woeful doe eyes and bulging, trembling lower lip.

Cristina gives Izzie an incredulous look. Footsteps echo farther down the hall, in the distant portion that's lit. A few staffers are walking back and forth. All of them enter or turn off before they hit the stretch of darkness, though.

"Izzie," Meredith says with a sigh, "you get too attached to your patients. You've gotta-"

"What?" Izzie snaps. "Pretend they're not people?"

"No," Meredith says, "but remember that you can't help them after you get fired for performing an unauthorized autopsy! I think that's a felony, isn't it?"

"Is it?" Cristina says, frowning.

"Um … yeah." Meredith snaps. "Desecration of a corpse!"

"Autopsies are excepted," Izzie counters.

"Authorized ones," Meredith says.

"The wife will authorize it once she sees the results," Izzie says.

"Izzie …," Meredith says, "you don't know that."

Izzie slaps her pizza slice onto the paper plate by her hip and folds her arms. She looks down her nose at the two of them. "Okay," she adds in a blasé tone, "Cristina Yang, license to kill."

Cristina has a moment. A long moment where she folds her arms and stares up at the ceiling and
grinds her teeth and thinks. And then she succumbs. "I'm in," she says.

"Cristina!" Meredith says, tone scolding.

"What!" Cristina replies. "I want to know if we killed this guy or not."

Izzie nods. "It's important."

Cristina nods. "I am not 007."

"I am so not involved in this," Meredith says, holding up her hands.

"Meredith, this is Fight Club," Cristina snaps, turning to Meredith. "Nobody talks about it. Got it?"

"Fine," Meredith says, rolling her eyes.

"We have to do it when Bailey's not around," Cristina says, turning back to Izzie.

"Bailey's always around," Izzie replies. "She's everywhere and knows everything."

"I guess we have to take our chances."

Meredith sighs. Well, if they're going to do this thing, she, at least, refuses to let them get caught like the idiot felons that they are. She can't remember how any of this went, but she's pretty sure Izzie and Cristina never got arrested. So ….

"Bailey's got something tonight from 7 to 11," Meredith says. "You two will be the last thing she's worried about."

"Uh … how do you know that?" Cristina wants to know. She glances at her watch. Meredith gets a glimpse of the watch face. It's almost 7. Crap, she's due in the OR in a few minutes.

"What kind of something does Bailey have?" Izzie says.

Meredith shrugs and slides off the gurney. "All I can say is that I'm in more than one Fight Club."

She strides across the hallway and reaches the double doors

"Hey, Mere," Cristina calls.

Meredith stops. Turns. Looks at Cristina and Izzie. The both of them are huddled, thick as thieves and planning, and Meredith really doesn't want any part of this. But … Cristina. She's giving Meredith this … look.

"Thanks," Cristina says, tone flat, expression unreadable.

Meredith shrugs. "No problem."

What with the whole taking space thing, and him not allowing her in the OR while he fixed Mr. Walker's spinal hematoma, Meredith hasn't had the opportunity to watch Derek in surgery in a long while.

He's a zombie. A flat out zombie. A surgically proficient one. He's not scaring Meredith into saying something or intervening. Not yet, anyway. But … he's a zombie, nonetheless.

"Did you lock up the gallery?" Richard says, looking up at them from the metal table. He's wearing
nothing but a hospital gown and a sterile shower cap. His EKG monitor bleeps as the anesthesiologist sets up a line.

Derek only shrugs in response.

"How much vancomycin are you giving me?" Richard says, a hint of nervousness encroaching in his tone.

"One gram," Bailey assures him. "Just like you ordered, sir."

Richard glances back at Derek, who's still silent and not giving any appearance of being in the room with them. "You'd tell me if you're too upset to do this, right?" Richard says.

"What do you mean, too upset?" Bailey says.

"I'm not too upset," Derek replies in a flat tone.

"Really," Richard says, doubt dripping from his tone as he regards Derek with narrowing eyes.

"Chief," Derek says. He closes his eyes. Takes a deep breath and blows it out. His surgical mask puffs up when he exhales. And then he looks back to his mentor. "Please, just let me work, so we can get this done."

He and Richard share a long, long look.

"Ready, sir," the anesthesiologist chimes in.

"Dr. Bailey," Richard instructs, never taking his eyes from Derek. "Go grab Dr. Nelson."

"But, sir," Dr. Bailey says.

"The OR is the only place I'm not upset!" Derek snaps.

"Derek, I respect your abilities," Richard replies calmly. "You're one of the best neurosurgeons in the country. Bar none. But we all have bad days, and I don't want the surgeon who's cracking open my skull to be in the kind of headspace where he says things like, 'The OR is the only place I'm not upset.' That, to me, implies you're damned well too upset to be cutting."

Derek's skin flames red. "Oh, come on!" A blustering, angry sigh falls from his lips. He rolls his eyes. "God, damn it. Doctors make the worst patients. I am not too upset to cut!"

"I think you are," Richard continues. "In fact, I'm suspending you from cutting for the foreseeable future."

"If you do that, I'll quit," Derek threatens.

"I won't let you quit until you get your head on straight and decide that's really what you want," Richard replies, glaring right back.

"You wouldn't."

Richard's eyes narrows. "You're under contract."

"You let me go before," Derek says. "You accepted my two week notice."

"That was before I had any idea what was going on with you, and you've since withdrawn it. I can
keep you as long as I damned well please. Just try me."

Tense, horrible silence stretches. Derek stands at the head of the operating table, face red like he spent all day in the sun, speechless. Bailey glances, wide-eyed, back and forth between the chief and Derek. The anesthesiologist stares down at his newspaper like it's a riveting murder mystery. The one scrub nurse they recruited takes a sudden interest in her shoelaces.

Crap.

Derek doesn't say anything else. All he does is stand there, kind of shaking, kind of … not, looking for all the world like he's a volcano about to explode into hot bits of magma. Meanwhile, Bailey tiptoes over to the wall phone, picks up the receiver to mutter something into it. Nelson, something something.

"Nelson's coming in a minute, Chief," Miranda says as she walks back to the table. She glances at Derek. And then back at Richard. She tosses her gloves into the biohazard bin. "I'll … uh. I'll go scrub in again."

Richard nods.

Derek still hasn't spoken.

Meredith glances at Richard. Do you want me to …? She tries to beam her thoughts at him without embarrassing Derek further by saying anything. Richard gets her, though. He nods.

She shuffles around to Derek's side of the table and puts her gloved palm against his forearm. "Dr. Shepherd," she says in a low, soothing tone. "Come on." She grabs his smock and tugs on it. He doesn't budge. "Come on, let's go."

All he does is stare at the table with a blank expression.

She forces herself between him and the table, pushing him back a step. "Hey," she repeats in a soft voice. "Hey, come on. Dr. Shepherd. Come on. Let's go scrub out."


She inches closer to him. Puts her hands on his shoulders. To hell with propriety. "Dr. Shepherd, come on."

"N-no." His weight shifts from foot to foot. He swallows. His breaths tighten like he's about to burst into panic or grief or … something. "No, I …"

"Derek," she says softly, murmuring so the rest of the people in the room can't hear. Well, except maybe the chief. Who's lying on the gurney right behind her. "Derek, come on. It'll be okay. Come on. Derek, come with me. Derek, come on."

Finally, he meets her eyes.

She lets herself smile. "Hey."

"Hey," he replies, tone warbling, almost like he feels sick to his stomach.

"I know this was a really crappy day," she says.

A wry, upset, discordant laugh falls from his lips.
"Come on, Derek," she murmurs. "Come on; let's go. Okay?"

He swallows. Swallows. Swallows again. Like he really thinks he might vomit. Between the mix of paleness from lack of sleep, and the encroaching crimson from embarrassment, he looks ghastly. Feverish.

"Okay," he says in a soft, overwrought tone that tells her he's not thinking much of anything right now.

"Okay," she says with a nod.

She picks up his hand, and he lets her lead him back to the scrub room.

"So," she babbles nervously into the silence as they approach the lobby. Derek's back in his sweater and his button down and his jeans and his boots, but he looks terrible. And blank. And just ….

"Long day."

"Yeah," he replies.

"Look … can we …?" They stop by a row of chairs. It's raining so hard outside she can hear it pounding like thunder on the roof above them, and she can see it splattering against the windows.

"Can we what?" he says.

She steps in closer to him. He lets her. She wraps her arms around him. He lets her. She prefaced what she's about to say with, "If you want space, that's okay. I'll give you more space." When he doesn't budge, she steps even closer, and she slips her palms into his back pockets. "But I think it might help to talk about-"

"Let's go to dinner," he blurts before she can even finish her sentence.

She blinks. "What?"

"Dinner," he says. "You know. With food?"

She peers at him. In an eye blink, it feels like he's shifted gears from monosyllabic to manic. His eyes are fever bright and hoping.

"Derek … are you …?" She's not even sure what to ask. Okay? The answer to that one is kind of a duh.

"Somewhere out there is a steak with your name on it," he continues, looking at the door like the door is the steak, and he's starving. He doesn't smile at her. Doesn't wink. He shifts from foot to foot. He's clearly stressed. Unhappy. But …. "And, maybe, a bottle of wine." He swallows. Pulls his fingers through his hair. "Please," he says, looking everywhere but at her. "Please, I need …."

She frowns.

Maybe, he **does** need this. A timeout. A little walkabout from reality where he doesn't have to think about anything except going on a date with a pretty girl who likes him. Maybe.

"I do like wine," she admits in a cautious tone.

"Then let's get some," he says without hesitation.
She bites her lip, peering up at him. "Derek Shepherd. Are you asking me out on a date?"

"Well, right now," he replies slowly, "I'm asking you to go get shitfaced with me." He has the grace to give her a sheepish look, and the first hint of a real smile shows on his face. "I suppose that could be construed as a date."

She snorts. "Oh."

"You can be just a girl in a bar," he continues. "And I can be just a guy."

"Does this …." She almost doesn't want to ask, but …. "Does this mean you believe me, now? About the time-"

She doesn't even have a chance to finish her sentence. His upset-but-hopeful expression turns from hot to cold, boiling to glacier. He bristles as he looks over Meredith's shoulder. Meredith turns to see what he's looking at.

"You," Derek says in a dark, chilly, dangerous tone. "What are you doing here?"

Addison stands on the damp welcome mat, wearing a stylish black coat and what appear to be shiny, zillion-dollar stilettos. Jimmy Choos? Meredith sucks at fashion.

Addison takes Derek's frigid greeting as an invitation. "Well, you'd know if you bothered to return any one of my phone calls," she replies with an imperious look as she approaches, expensive heels clacking on the floor tiles.

Meredith swallows. She hasn't seen Addison in … years. They'd ended up as friendly acquaintances. Meredith had long forgotten how intimidating this woman was at first. All leggy and fabulous and in control. And so … so very … so very not Derek's type.

At least, not the Derek she met in Seattle. From his stories, he was a bit more prone to navel-gazing and extravagant tastes when he lived in Manhattan. They played a game of naked truth or dare, once, though it mostly ended up being truth, truth, nothing but the truth. After too many glasses of scotch, while they lay on the bed, staring at the ceiling fan going 'round and 'round, he'd admitted, I had a giant stick up my ass before, Meredith. What can I say?

I'm glad you pulled it out, she replied. The stick, I mean.

He'd rolled on his side, propped his head on his hand and raised onto his elbow, and he'd looked at her with twinkling eyes. Me, too.

"A TTTS?" Derek says through clenched teeth, breaking Meredith out of her musing. Meredith gives her head a little shake. "You're here for a TTTS?" he says, a kind of awful no, no, no desperation in his tone.

Addison ignores Derek, stops in front of Meredith, and looks her up and down. "Hi," she says, holding out her hand. "I'm Addison Shepherd."

"I know," Meredith replies without hesitation. "And you must be the wife who's been screwing his best friend."

Addison has the grace to look disconcerted.

It's petty. It's so, so petty. But Addison's shock feels good to Meredith. Like Godiva and strawberries kidnapping her tastebuds or something. She spent weeks after this moment, the first time, coming up
with so many different comebacks that would have made her look less gobsmacked and less dumb and less completely fooled by her lying liar of a boyfriend. It's a freaking thrill to be able to use one after all these years.

"Um," Addison says, an uncharacteristic, hitching stutter filling the silence afterward. She sniffs. "Yes, well ....." She looks away from Meredith and back to Derek. "Yes, I'm here for a TTTS, Derek. Your hair's different."

Derek glowers. "A lot of things are different."

The two of them square off, lasers practically coming out of their eyes.

Meredith frowns. She should go. So they can talk or whatever. And do ... whatever Addison-and-Derek-y stuff they did the last time this happened. She should.

"Should I go?" Meredith says.

Derek grinds his molars and says nothing. Addison gives Meredith a bland look.

"I'll just ...," Meredith says. She inches toward the door. Holy freaking awkward, Batman. "I'll just ... go, now."

Derek nods. "Okay," he says. And he moves to follow Meredith.

Not Addison. Meredith.

She gapes. "Wait. You're coming, too?"

"Yes," he says.

She blinks. "With me? As in Meredith me?"

"Derek, be reasonable," Addison says.

"You know what's reasonable, Addison?" Derek snaps. "Not fucking my best friend, in my bed, on my favorite sheets!"

Addison sighs and rolls her eyes. "Derek-"

But Derek grabs Meredith's hand before Addison can finish. "Come on," he says. "Let's go find some wine."

And then, together, they walk out into the pouring rain.
They run to the car, but there isn't any joy in the act of fleeing. Not like with rom coms, where the couple is giggling and grinning as the heavens throw up on them. She wrenches herself into the front seat of her Jeep and yanks the door shut, panting. Derek follows suit.

And then there's nothing but silence in the car and pounding thunder on the roof. Teeth chattering, she turns on the ignition and flips on the heaters. The air starts frigid, but warms up over a minute or two. And then she sits there.

Dumbfounded.

She glances at her watch. It's almost midnight at this point. There's nowhere to eat, at least nowhere halfway fancy, that would be open right now. 13 Coins, maybe, but Derek's not a native. He wouldn't know about that. Would he? She's not sure what fueled Derek's let's grab steaks and wine plan other than manic desperation for something normal after having a kitchen sink of unbelievable dropped on his head.

Probably nothing.

She glances at Derek. He's soaked to the point that he's dripping. A wet curl hangs down over his pale forehead. His jacket is soaked. His jeans are soaked. His everything is soaked. He's shivering a little, too, but from his blank expression, and his weird demeanor, she thinks, maybe, he's getting shock-y.

"Derek?" she says, a soft murmur in the quiet.

"Richard had a brain tumor," he says. "The whole hospital has syphilis. And Addison came to Seattle. For a TTTS. Just like you said. And she had no idea who you were. She's not that good of an actor."

"I know," Meredith says.

"Richard had a brain tumor," he repeats more insistently. "The whole hospital has syphilis. And my fucking wife is here for a TTTS."

"I know," Meredith repeats. What else is there to say?

"Richard suspended me."

She turns toward him at that. Gives him a sympathetic look. Reaches across the parking brake and puts her hand on his wet thigh.

"I know," she says. "I'm sorry."
He stares at her hand without expression. He doesn't push her away. He doesn't reciprocate, either. The rain tumbles onto the roof of the car.

"I can't do anything right," he says.

"Derek, that's not true," she tells him. "That's not true at all."

"Name one thing I haven't fucked up lately."

She gazes at him for a long moment. He won't meet her eyes. "Joe," she says. "You fixed Joe. You even got him to come in before he collapsed, which will probably make his recovery easier."

"Joe had an aneurysm," is all Derek seems to want to glean from that, though. He looks at her, then, eyes wide like he's a spooked horse. "Just like you said."

She sighs. "I know." He's back to looking at nothing. At the curtain of water tumbling down the windshield. "I know this is a lot to take in."

He's silent for a long moment. He takes a deep breath. One, another, another. Like he's steeling himself or something. And then he says, "Let's go to dinner."

She frowns. "Like this? We look like we just took a clothed shower."

"I don't care," he says.

"Where did you have in mind?" she says.

He shrugs. "Do you know a place?"

She glances at her watch again. Joe's is open until 2. They have a good two hours to get smashed if they go, now. Joe's, however, is not known for its food. Or its wine. And she kind of … she kind of wants to see if she can coax Derek to talk more.

Tipsy is good for talk. Wine is great for finding tipsy. Tequila and scotch tend to drop kick people from sobriety into fall-down drunkenness, ignoring all the gradients between. Tequila and scotch, therefore, are not good for talk. Therefore … wine. Therefore … not Joe's.

She glances at Derek, who's shivering and wet and in her car, after he ditched Addison in less than a heartbeat.

He ditched Addison.

He ditched her without a second thought.

Meredith swallows. And then she nods. "Yes."

13 Coins it is.

13 Coins is somewhat busy, considering the late hour. Probably, because it's the only decent place someone in Seattle can eat after midnight. Their server is a perky Vietnamese woman named Tiên, who doesn't seem to mind working the graveyard shift. Perhaps, she's a vampire. Who knows? Either way, she doesn't give Meredith's or Derek's singing-in-the-rain appearance a second look, which is the only thing Meredith cares about.
Tién seats them in a quiet, back corner. They decide to order cabernet sauvignon to go with their steaks. Meredith suggests the "cheap" bottle, which is still about $30. Derek goes straight for the one that costs almost $150. Which means, when combined with the filet mignon she just ordered, complete with a loaded baked potato, she's looking at an almost $150 tab, and that's before tip.

"Uh," Meredith says nervously as she watches Tiên bounce back to the kitchen with their drink order, "are we going Dutch?" She's still not quite sure if this is a date or not. Like a date date.

"Because I can't afford-"

"I've got it," Derek says before she can finish.

She bites her lip. "Sorry. Intern salary."

"I know," he says. "It's okay."

"I had no idea your wine tastes were that refined."

Which is true. She didn't. He changed so freaking much when he ditched his old life - it's unreal. She supposes, now, away from New York, but still drowning, he hasn't fully dumped his old persona. He's like … half and half. Seattan Derek. Weird.

He shrugs. "I like a good cab."

She snorts. "I'm one of those people who'll drink wine out of a box."

His eyebrows knit at that, like that idea causes him pain. His eyes twinkle a bit, though. "That's sad. It's pathetic. Wine out of a box. A good buzz starts with a good wine."

"Is there really such thing as a 'bad' buzz?" she replies, putting the word bad in air quotes. "I mean, drunk is drunk, no matter how you got there."

"Well, not so much a bad buzz," he admits. "But don't you want your inevitable hangover to be worth it?"

She laughs. "Spending $150 for my hangover doesn't seem like it would do anything but make it less worth it."

"You'll see," he says with a wink. "When the bottle comes."

His tone reminds her of, It comes faster when I push it.

"Right," she replies with a snort. "You know all that wine tasting crap is a bunch of malarkey, right? Blindfolded sommeliers can't even tell the difference between red and white."

"Oh, malarkey?" he says. He laughs. "We're using words like malarkey, now?"

"Hey, I use lots of words!"

"Many of which are not," he replies.

She rolls her eyes. "Oh, you, shut up."

Yes, dear, says his face. It's a recognizable face. And it makes her heart hurt.

"And I don't treat wine tasting like a science, by the way," Derek says. 
"For $150 a bottle, I'd call it voodoo," she mutters.

He looses another beautiful laugh that makes her feel warm inside. He grins with a mouth she'd rather be kissing. "I just know what I like," he says, "and I like a good cab." I'm stripping you naked in my head, and I like it.

"Well, other than the ridiculous price tag, what are you using to decide whether it's good?" Meredith says.

"I know the winery."

She blinks. "Oh."

Wow. Derek. A wine snob. Who the hell knew? She racks her brain, trying to think of a time she saw him buy any special wines. They didn't do the wine and dine thing much, and he always happily paid, anyway, so she didn't devote attention to the costs of their alcohol. He was always ridiculous about picking out his scotch, but ….

Wait.

She blinks again. Maybe, he's been buying crazy wine all along, and she's too much of a wine dunce to know. It's not like she chased down the grocery receipts. Like she said, she'd be happy drinking it out of a damned box, so why care?

"Here we go," Tiên says when she returns to the table, carrying their wine bottle and a corkscrew. She pops the cork while they watch, and she pours Derek a sample portion. He sniffs the glass, takes a sip, swishes it on his tongue, and nods. With that cue, Tiên pours full glasses for both Derek and Meredith, and then sets the bottle on the table between them. "Let me know if you need anything else," Tiên adds. "Your food will be here in a few minutes." Then she trots away to deal with another table.

Derek rests his chin on his elbow and leans forward. "Well?" he says.

"You're going to watch me drink it?" Meredith says, frowning.

"Take a sip," he instructs. "Don't swallow right away."

"Okay," she replies dubiously.

She tips back her glass. The cab hits her tastebuds, and she holds it there like the filling in a tongue taco. The wine starts jammy like any other red. She swishes it in her mouth like she's using some mouthwash, since that's what he did. Still … red. Still jammy. Still … wine. It's good, but ….

Whatever?

She swallows her mouthful. "It's … um … definitely wine."

He laughs at that, and he sits back in his seat. The vinyl cushion squeaks. "Well," he tells her, "I tried." And with that, he takes his own sip.

She grins. "Sorry."

He doesn't seem put off by her crappy palate. All he does is shrug, take another sip, and say, "You're … different."

"Is different good?"
He nods. "It's um …." He clears his throat and meets her gaze.

She sees it, then. All his confusion. His upset. Coiling there. He's been doing a good job at hiding his turmoil since they got here, but, now, it's plain to read. Like a newspaper sprawled across her lap or something. **Derek Shepherd is not okay.**

His lower lip quivers. Just a fraction. He swallows like he's trying to suppress a golf ball stuck in his throat. Down goes another sip of wine.

"It's … really nice," he says in a sad tone that suggests bone-deep longing.

"Really nice, hmm?" she echoes.

He nods again. Takes another sip. "You know how, sometimes, when you have a chronic injury, you forget what it feels like not to be in pain?"

She bites her lip. She knows that feeling all too well. "Yeah," she says. "I do. Derek, can we-"

"Why do you like tequila so much?" Derek says, before she can finish.

Like he knew. Like he **knew** she was going to try and prod them away from talking about superficial stuff. Like he knew, but he also knew he didn't want to be prodded. Not right now.

Definitely still fighting shock, then.

He downs his entire wineglass in a few more gulps, sets the glass back down on the table, and pours himself another. The restaurant around them is a dull murmur. Dishes clank, distant in the kitchen. Soft music plays.

"Well?" he prods.

She frowns. "Well, what?"

"Tequila," he reminds her. "Why do you like it?"

"How on earth did you know I like tequila?" she says.

He shrugs. "You were drinking it when we met. You were drinking it when I had to drive you home a few months ago." **I pay attention to you,** he doesn't say.

"Oh."

And then his eyes widen. And his mouth opens and closes. And opens and closes. A hitching, surprised noise catches in his throat. But he doesn't speak.

"What?" she says.

"You … said it back then," he says.

She frowns. "Said what?"

"When you're from," he says, looking for all the world like he's spotted a puffed up cobra at their table. "You …. Your hypothetical scenario." He swallows. He meets her eyes. Takes a long, long swig of wine. "I thought you were drunk."

"I **was** drunk."
"I meant … ."

She gives him a sympathetic smile. "I know what you meant."

She takes her wine glass and swirls it idly, for lack of something to do with her nervous hands, while Derek tries to find revelation in his cuticles. The awkward, quiet moment stretches and stretches and stretches. She's not sure what to do. Or to say. Or anything.

"You never answered my question," he says softly after a moment, rescuing them from the snake pit where their conversation died.

Oh, thank god. "What question?"

He licks his lips. "Why do you like tequila?"

"I don't really like tequila," Meredith says. Hell, unmixed, it's kind of awful. "It just gets me drunk the fastest." And that was the usual goal when drinking, right? To get drunk? "Why do you like single malt scotch?"

He shrugs. "It tastes good." He glances at her mostly-full wine glass. She takes a sip. "I can't even sniff tequila without gagging," he continues. He grins. "You're made of stronger stuff than me."

"It's good in a margarita," Meredith says.

He nods. "It's good in a margarita," he agrees. And then he gets this sly look on his face. "Been to Tijuana?" he says in a suggestive tone. Like he's expecting some sort of naughty story out of this prompt.

Unfortunately for him, though, his turn at the plate is a swing and a miss. She laughs. "No, actually. Have you?"

He glances at the table, and then back at her, and he smiles. It's a gorgeous smile. She hasn't seen him smile much, lately.

"No," he admits. "Really? You strike me as a Tijuana kind of girl."

Meredith shrugs. "Maybe, I am, but I've mostly lived in Boston. It's kind of hard to get to Tijuana from there without making it a full-blown vacation, and there are better places to take full-blown vacations." Like Acapulco or … whatever. Who'd pick Tijuana over Acapulco? She leans closer, hunching over her wine glass with an easy, flirty smile. "Why haven't you been to Tijuana?"

Derek snorts. He takes a sip of his wine. "Mark tried to make me go, once."

"Oh, did he?"


Meredith perks with interest. This is a story he hasn't told her before. "Oh, that's 'everything,' is it?" she says, putting the word everything in sloppy air quotes.

He gives her a loose, dismissive wave. "Hey, I'm tipsy. Ask me later, if you want an exhaustive list."

"Okay," she replies.

He does have a bit of a space-y quality to his gaze. But, over the course of a half hour, he's loosened
up, and he's smiling, and he's getting some color back. Maybe, this was what he needed - a maybe-date date, and lots of talking about nothing in particular.

"Why'd you go on the road trip?" she says.

He shrugs. "Just wanted to see stuff."

"Stuff," she echoes.

He nods. Laughs. "Stuff, yes. S'why I knew to come out here, y'know. I like the Pacific Northwest stuff in particular."

"What do you like about it?" she says, propping her chin on her elbows.

"The space," he says. "It's … quiet here. And slower. And earthy. And the people are nicer."

"Yeah," she agrees. "I like that, too."

He meets her eyes for a long moment. "Yeah."

"So, Mark tried to drag you across the border … and?"

"And I said no, at first, and by the time I was ready to say yes, he'd already stolen my bike and gone by himself."

Meredith snorts. She can just imagine it. A young, twenty-one-something Derek, standing in the parking lot of his hotel, going, "Dude, where's my car?" Well, motorcycle. Whatever.

"You know … come to think of it …," Derek adds. He stares at the ceiling for a moment. His look is dark when his sentience arrives back in the room. "Mark steals a lot of my shit."

Yikes.

"Um …," is all she manages to say as she tries to recover from the whiplash of the sudden shift in mood.

Tiên approaches with two steaming plates and sets them down on the table. "Here we go. Careful, these plates are very hot," she says. "Do you guys need anything else?" she adds as she wipes her hands on a towel attached to her belt.

"Do you offer redos?" Derek snarks. "For decades we don't like?"

Tiên frowns. "Um," she says. "No."

"Annulments?"

"No."

"Replacement friends?"

"Nope."

"Okay, then," Derek says, and he beams. He picks up his wineglass and downs the whole thing in two seconds - like it contains OJ, not alcohol. Then he pours what remains of the wine into his now-empty glass. "How about another bottle, then? This one's empty."
Tiên's frown deepens. "Um …," she says. "… The same kind?"

"Yes."

She regards Derek with a suspicious glint in her eyes. Like <i>wow, you certainly don't look like you have $300 to blow on wine</i>. Which, given their drowned rat appearance, Meredith can't blame the poor server for thinking. Tiên doesn't speak any of her judgments aloud, though.

"Are you sure you want a whole bottle?" Meredith says.

The major problem with using alcohol to crack Derek open like a nut is that Derek is a dysphoric drunk. He's a happy tipsy. A <b>fun</b> tipsy. But once he crosses the line from tipsy into totally smashed, he gets dark. And glower-y. And mopey. And sometimes malicious.

Theoretically, two bottles of wine for two people is about four glasses each, and that's enough to be pretty I-can't-walk-straight drunk, but not enough for blackouts and ring-batting rock-bottom badness, yet. Well, not for someone his size. But … she's not sure she'd like to risk it.

He's drinking a <b>lot</b> faster than she is - three glasses to her one. But Derek doesn't take her hint. Or, he takes it, but he's determined to drink himself into oblivion, so he ignores her, anyway.

"Yes, I'm sure," he says. He leans right and pulls his billfold from his back pocket. He rifles through it for his credit card, and then slaps the card down on the table for the server. "Charge me, now, if you want," he says.

Tiên shrugs and swipes up the card. "Thank you, sir," she says. And off she goes again.

Meredith bites her lip. "Derek … are you … o-"

"No," he says. "No, I'm not okay." He glowers. "I took the bike back, you know. From Mark. After he stole it."

Meredith's not sure what to say to that. She settles on a nod and an, "Okay."

"I'm not taking her back," Derek insists.

A lump forms in Meredith's throat. That remains to be seen. After all, Derek had been pretty adamant that he and Addison were over the first time this happened, too, but being served divorce papers had snapped him out of his certainty on the matter.

The lump gets bigger when she realizes. Conceptualizes for the first time. That, unless she gets on with the epiphany-having, already, that she might have to live through the Addison Derek Meredith love-triangle angst-fest all over again. Or … maybe, she doesn't. Maybe, this can be a thing she tries to change. But … how?

Derek went back to Addison before, and he had a <b>lot</b> more reasons to stick with Meredith that time than he does in this iteration of the MerDer show, where he and Meredith have hardly even gotten off the ground. Plus, it's not like she's had three months to "pull him up from drowning." He's <b>still</b> drowning. Why would he ditch a chance to undo the failure with Addison that's causing him so much misery, in exchange for an unknown whatever fling with that crazy stalker lady who time traveled?

It's the Murphy Timeline, after all, and Derek doesn't leap.
And … even if she could change things. Should she?

Maybe, her epiphany will be from skipping the stupid "pick me" speech. Maybe, her epiphany will be from suffering through the freaking love triangle with a fresh set of eyes. Maybe, her epiphany will be from a fresh round of prom sex when he hits his breaking point with trying again, and comes back to her. Or ….

Her stomach drops into her shoes.

Maybe, he won't come back, she realizes.

Crap, maybe, he won't.

She hasn't had much of a chance to demonstrate what he'd be coming back to. So … why would he bother? Hell, with how miserable Seattle's been for him, he might hop on the first plane back to New York as soon as Addison convinces him to give it another freaking go.

And what will Meredith do then?

She thought she'd averted the possibility of Derek ending up in another state when she'd kept him from quitting, but ….

Holy crap.

What does she do?

She glances down at the table.

What the hell does she do?

For now, she downs her glass of wine in one long gulp.

"Waffles or pancakes?" Meredith says as the cork pops on the second bottle.

She's calmed down a little. Enough to be able to smile at nothing in particular. The steaks are half gone. The room is warm, she's lost track of everything surrounding the table, she's feeling the buzz, and … it's nice. Being on this weird … quasi-date … thing.

He's "getting to know her," and she's happy to let him. The more he asks for exposition, the more chances she has to lobby for herself. The more she lobbies for herself, the less he fixates on how miserable he is, and focuses on how much better Meredith makes him feel, instead. Which, regardless of whether she decides to try to change things, will help her situation.

She hopes.

That's her theory, anyway.

"Pancakes," Derek says. "You?"

Meredith frowns. "Am I allowed conditionals?"

"Sure, why not?" he says.

"I prefer waffles, except when you make them. Then I prefer pancakes."
He blinks at that.

"I like to fill up all the little squares to the brim with syrup," she clarifies. "But you make really good pancakes."

Except he's never made her pancakes. Not in this timeline. He seems not to know what the hell to do with that information. Worse, she still hasn't determined if it's better to pound in the time travel stuff like a hammer to a nail splitting wood, or leave it alone.

"Y'like my pancakes?" is all he says after a long pause.

She nods. "Love them. You introduced me to buckwheat, and you do this thing with honey in the batter, and it's …." He's looking at her. Looking looking. "… What?"

He tears his gaze away from her and fixates on his plate, which has a fascinating, half-eaten cut of New York strip on it. He shifts in his seat like he's unsettled by this revelation - that she has a fetish for his pancakes, or that she knows he puts honey in them, or … something. He takes a swig of wine. She watches his Adam's apple roll down his throat as he swallows.

"Nothin," he says as he puts his glass down. "Favrit sport?"

"Oh, oh," she says, bouncing in her seat. Wine makes it entirely too easy to bounce. "Show jumping."

"Show jumping?" he says. The incredulous look on his face makes her giggle. "Show jumping like withhorses?"

"Yeah, that," she says.

"A, tha's not a sport," he says, smirking as he holds up his index finger.

"Is, too!" she insists.

"And B," he continues, holding up his middle finger, too, "Show jumping?"

She shrugs. "My neighbors would take me with their daughter once a year. It was fun." And it was one of the only times she could pretend she had a dad who gave a crap. "There was homemade fudge. And it is, too, a sport."

"'s not.

"Is, too."

"'s not."

"Have you ever even ridden a horse?" she says.

To which she knows the answer is, "Well, no. Have you?"

She takes a bite of her steak. The taste of peppercorn spreads on her tongue, and she sighs. This is good steak. Juicy. And so rare, it's bleeding. Just like she likes it.

"I always wanted to," she says as she chews. Her mother wasn't a hands-on parent. Which meant no real support for extracurricular activities outside of extended day at school. No sports. No musical instruments. No nothing. Anything that required reliable routine transport or expensive supplemental
materials was a no go. "But, no, I haven't." She sighs. "I like horses."

"Why didn'cha?" he says.

"Why didn't I what?"

He shrugs. "'F'you like horses, and y'always wanted to, why didn'cha ever try riding?"

"Derek … my mom …." Meredith swallows. She takes a sip of wine. "She wasn't like your mom. She wasn't …. She didn't support 'capricious whims.'" At his frowning look, she rushes to add, "Not to say your hobbies are capricious whims." Well, the jury's still out on fishing, but now is not the time. "I mean. Errr." Crap. "That's just what my mom called anything that wasn't skill building."

To his credit, he doesn't ask, "How do you know my mom?" in that paranoid, accusing tone he used during his Meredith-is-my-stalker phase. He hasn't been doing that at all tonight. All he does is get that deer-in-headlights expression that tells her, okay, she pushed him toward a ledge, but don't try pushing him off, yet, or it'll be bad.

For a long moment, he's silent, and he fixates on his plate again. He pushes some mushrooms around with his fork. She stays quiet, letting him collect himself. He clears his throat. Takes another swig of wine.

"Horseback riding isn' a skill?" he says.

Meredith shrugs. "Not one you can live off of. Not unless you're like the Michael Jordan of horseback riding."

"Well, how'd your mother know yer not the Michael Jordan of horseback riding nless sh'let ya try it?"

Meredith looks at her plate. She shrugs. She hates how her mother always makes her feel small. Always. Even dead. Or, well, not dead. In this timeline. Now. But … whatever.

The only nice thing Ellis Grey ever said to Meredith was during a near death whatever. And who the hell knows if that was real? Probably, it was just an overdose of asphyxia-related neurotransmitters, giving Meredith what she always wanted in her last few minutes. Right?

Though, she's time traveled. Her guardian angel is a dead ex-manwhore. Is it logical to assume a near death whatever is fake at this juncture?

Hmm.

"Why not do it as'n adult, then?" he says.

She shakes her head to stop the random tumble of thoughts. "What?" she says, a little too abruptly. She grins, sheepish. "Sorry. Many thoughts."

He rests his chin on his hands. "I have that problem, sometimes."

"How do you fix it?" she says.

"Wait fer it t'pass."

Of course. She sighs. "I might be ninety before I'm lucid again, if I try that."

He snorts with amusement. "S'why not ride as'n adult?"
She shrugs. "I spent college too drunk to care about horses. Then I went to Europe, and I was too stoned to care about horses. And then I enrolled in medical school, and I've been too busy and broke to care about horses since then."

"Oh," he says. "Tha's right. You mentioned Europe before."

She nods. "And the getting high part."

"Yeah," he says. He gives her a concerned look. "Y'did stop that, right?" he says, but not in a tone that says he's being condescending. Only that he cares.

She nods. "Yes."

His gaze softens. "'kay. Good."

A comfortable silence stretches. They both take a bite of steak and a sip of wine. She's not paying much attention to him when the hairs on the back of her neck prickle, and she looks up from her plate to find him staring at her with this … expression. Like he's found a wrapped present, and the more layers he unwraps, the more excited he gets about what might be in the package inside. It's ….

"You'll hafta take me, sometime," he says out of the blue.

She frowns. "Take you?"

He nods, and he gives her a devastating smile, complete with wink. "To a show. T'convince me show jumping's a sport. I'm willing t'be convinced."

"Oh, really," she says.

He nods again, still grinning. "Really."

Her jaw drops a little. "Derek Shepherd," she says, "Are you seriously asking me to ask you on a date in the nearish future?"

He takes a sip of wine. That smile of his makes her heart stop. "Mer-dith Grey," he says. "Yes, I might be."

She takes another bite of her steak and a quick sip of wine. He follows suit.

"You know," she replies, tone playful, "you're not exactly known for your willingness to be convinced."

"Are you callin me stubborn?" he says.

She bites her lip. "I might be."

"You should gimme a chanz. I might surprise ya."

"What if I don't like surprises?" she says.

"Do ya?"

"Sometimes," she admits.

"Then I guess I've gotta 50/50 shot at showing ya-a good time."
"You're very confident, aren't you?"

He raises his eyebrows. "50/50 implies confidenz?"

"Well," she replies, "I never said I only don't like surprises 50% of the time."

He regards her for a long moment, eyes twinkling. "Seerisly," he says. "Y'should take me. I make a good date."

"Seriously?"

He nods. "Wha, you don' think I'd makea good date?"

They share a grin. She takes another sip of wine. She's not sure what to make of his behavior, at this point. Does he believe her? Does he not? But … she likes this. Whatever this is. It's … nice.

She's missed flirting with her husband.

A lot.

He makes it fun.

He's a fun person.

Somehow, over the last however long, with all the anger and the overflowing resentment, she'd forgotten that.

"Are ya-a cat person, or a dog person?" he asks.

The second bottle of wine is almost gone. The steaks are long devoured, and a slice of cheesecake garnished with cherries sits on a small, shared plate between them. The cheesecake itself looks like it's been attacked by hungry sharks. Only a bit of guts and garnish remains.

"I like dogs," Meredith says. "But cats are okay. You?"

He nods. "I like both." He rubs his chin as he thinks. "I hadda dog. She died a few years ago. I named er Ssharlit."

"Right, Charlotte," she says. "The … um … the … the border collie?" She scrapes her memory for the story. "The one you found in the box in an alley? Named her after a pirate or something, because of the eye patch?"

"Yeah," he says in a flat tone.

The deer-in-headlights look is back on his face, so she eases off the throttle a bit. Stops talking. Takes a bite of cheesecake. Lets him collect himself.

She feels a bit like she's playing with fire. Constantly dropping reminders like this, but …. What else is there to do? She has to get him to believe her, and he still hasn't said whether he does or he doesn't.

"Favrit subject in school?" he wants to know.

"Bio," she says with a grin. "What else?"

"Well, neuroscience, f'course," he replies with an easy laugh.
She snorts. "I do like neuro," she says. "But … I think, sometimes, my intense love of neuro has more to do with being hot for teacher than anything else."

Which is the truth. She loves neuro. She'll always love neuro. She'd thought it a "punishment" at first, to switch to general, which was why she suggested it. But once she dragged herself out of Derek's orbit, once she was away from all that oxytocin drowning her in the OR, it had been a lot easier to see how much she enjoyed other specialties. One good byproduct of all the horrible crap they went through to get Zola. And she's happy. She's happy with how things turned out.

"Hot fer teacher?" he says, a sly look on his face. "Like how hot're we talkin, here?"

"Hmm," she says with a nod. She takes a sip of wine and gives him a flirty grin. "Molten." She leans forward, closing some of the distance between them. "And, just so we're clear," she adds, "teacher is you."

"Oh, is he?"

She nods. "He is."

He picks at the cheesecake with his fork and takes a bite. He empties his wine glass, next. "What specialty didja pick?" he says, and she freezes.

In this timeline, she's an intern. She hasn't picked a specialty, yet. It's his first tacit acknowledgement that she's older than she looks. That he believes her. That … She swallows, trying not to hope too hard.

"General," she says. "I went general."

"Ellis Grey's a general surgeon," he says.

"Yes."

He regards her for a long moment with an unreadable look.

"What are you thinking?" she says, desperate to keep the part of the conversation where he believes her going. Going forever.

"M'thinkin yer interesting," he says.

She grins. "Oh, I am, am I?"

"Yeah," he says. "I can' quite figerr y'out."

She takes a bite of cheesecake, and she laughs. "Okay, full disclosure."

"Yeah?" he says.

"I think you're still trying."

"T'figerr y'out?"

"Yeah."

He frowns. "When didja say yer from, again?"

She snorts. "2012."
He shrugs. "Well, clearly, s'fun, then, or I wouldn' a stuck around that long."

"What's fun?"

He smiles. "Figring y'out."

She nudges the dessert plate toward him. "Want the last piece of cheesecake?"

They wait outside of the restaurant, protected by the awning from the rain while they wait for the cab, because neither of them can feasibly drive at the moment. It's cold and dark, but birds are singing, heralding the advancing morning well before sunlight can pierce the clouds. They spent three hours in the restaurant. It's after 3 a.m. She has work in ….

God, she doesn't even want to think about when she has work.

Derek wraps his arm over her shoulder to keep her warm. She can't resist pushing closer. Cuddling. Because he's letting her, and he smells good, and she's missed him, and it's nice.

"Derek, what is this?" she asks in the ensuing silence, because she still doesn't know, and it's driving her crazy.

A lonely car swishes by in the empty road. "Wha's wha?" he says.

"Well, we've wined and dined, and it's been fun and flirty, and really nice …." She scrunches up his coat between her fingers. "Really nice."

"Yeah," he says in a soft voice.

Like he thinks she's fun and flirty, too. Like he's happy she's letting him, and he thinks she smells good, and he's missed her, and it's nice.

She's so reluctant to break the mood. "… But we haven't talked."

In the darker lighting outside the restaurant, he's harder to read. But she thinks she sees a frown when he looks down at her. "We talked fer hours," he says.

"Yes, we did," she says with a nod. "About nothing." She gazes up at him. "But there's a lot of somethings going on right now, and-"

"I don' wanna talk bout somethin."

"But … we have to."

He stiffens. "No, we don'," he says. "I juss … can' right now."

"Maybe, a little?" she prods.

He swallows. Backs away from her. Shifts from foot to foot like he might explode with … something bad, and she feels terrible for screwing this up. But … but … but she has to know, damn it.

"Please, I just need to know if you believe me," she pleads. "That's all I want to know. Then, I'll shut up."

It'll be so nice for someone to freaking believe her. For him to believe her. She misses having him
believe in her.

He looks forlornly at the empty street. His fists clench and unclench and clench and unclench. He swallows again. Again. Like he's fighting back a tsunami.

"Mer-dith," he begins, his voice dark and wavering, "I can' hide n'an OR where s'quiet, cause I got suspended. I can' bury myself'n paperwork, cause my cheating wife's at work, n'outside of a sterile field, there's leg … legitmit … legitimity no way fer me t'avoid her f she wants to hunt me down. I can' go home, cause m'home's empty, n'I juss …. I can' handle empty right now. I can' think too hard, cause then time travel's really real, n'I juss … can'. I can' **anything** right now. Please. I can'. I really loved tonight. But …." He trails off into silence, looking crushed.

"You sounded like … like you might be okay," she hazards, words hesitant. "Believing me. You were starting to … to say things. That made me think you might be okay."

"I'm **trying**," he admits. "I'm **trying** t'be kay with this, Mer-dith. But …." He closes his eyes and takes a deep breath. "It comes'n goes'n waves, n'I can'."

"Can't what?"

"I can' deal with another wave, right now. I can'. I'm tired, n'my head's spinnin, n'I can'. Please, I can', Mer-dith. S'too much."

"Oh," is all she can think to say to that.

Her heart squeezes. He wants to believe her, is trying to believe her, but he can't quite do it, yet. He's in a terrible place. She's not sure whether to cheer for joy that he's **trying**, hug him because he's miserable, or ….

"Come home with me," she blurts.

He blinks. Looks at her. "What?"

"Well, where were you planning on going?" she says, trying to inject him with some reason. "The ferries don't run this late."

"I …." He frowns. "M'office? I guess?"

"Your office is empty, too, and you said you don't want to be at work," she says. "My house isn't empty. I'm there. George and Izzie are there. You'll have people. My people. They already know about you and me, so there's nothing to hide. And it isn't work. Come home with me."

"Mer-dith … m'not …."

"I don't expect anything," she rushes to say. "Really, I don't. I'm just offering company. Like at your trailer. Before. Maybe, it will help?"

He regards her for a long moment. The taxi they called rolls to a stop at the curb, wheels squeaking as the driver brakes. The exhaust is burning a little oil, and it blows out of the tail pipe to form a puffy cloud, dampened a bit by the rain.

"Come home with me," she repeats into the quiet.

She holds out her hand. He peers down at it like it might bite him.
The rain pours with relentless determination. Like thunder, all around.

"Come home with me," she says one last time.

And, finally, he says, "'kay."

He takes her hand. They wobble into the cab together. The car cabin is chilly and smells like a cigar. The leather squeaks as they settle. She curls up next to him for the ride home. Seat belts click.

"Where to?" says the cabbie. He's an old black man with a silver beard. Distinguished, like Richard.

"I live in Queen Anne Hill," Meredith says. "At 613 Harper Lane."

The cabbie nods at the rearview mirror. "You got it."

The engine hums as the cabbie hits the accelerator. The streets are empty and quiet and wet. Derek squeezes her shoulder. His hand is warm, and the heat seeps into her skin.

"Yer very bossy, y'know," he murmurs against her ear.

She snorts. Looks up at him. "Shut up," she says. "You like it."

He sighs and pulls her closer.

"I do," he says in a wistful, why can't I have this? tone. "I really, really do."

A lump forms in her throat.

What she needs, now, is to convince him that he can have this.

All he has to do is leap.
Chapter Notes

This is another one of my favorite chapters. I'm super excited to see what you guys think :D Enjoy!

"Da's a an in'o ed," Izzie says, voice muffled around a gob of toothpaste as she wanders into the kitchen in nothing but her Hello Kitty underwear and a gray tank top. Her hand saws back and forth as she brushes.

Meredith tries to blink away cobwebs, but when one only receives two hours of sleep, cobwebs are more like cob-rocks, and are far more resilient to attempted obliteration via blinking. She pulls her dull, tired gaze away from her coffee cup. She squints at Izzie. Stupid cob-rocks. They impair translation of toothpaste-talk to English.

"Huh?" Meredith says.

"Da's a an," Izzie repeats. "In'o ed."

Meredith stares at Izzie with incomprehension. What in the hell?

Izzie rolls her eyes and spits her mouthful of gook into the kitchen sink. She turns on the faucet. Then she cranes her neck so she can stare at Meredith while she rinses her toothbrush. "There's a man. In your bed."

Oh. That.

"Yes, there is definitely a man there," Meredith says.

"In your bed," Izzie repeats.

"Yes," Meredith says. "And I'm going to be nice and not ask how you know that." Because Meredith left the door firmly shut, and there's no way Derek would have said, "Sure, come on in," if Izzie had knocked. Which meant Izzie had barged in.

"Well, what happened to the thing with Dr. Shepherd?" Izzie says, frowning.

Meredith shrugs. "I don't know, yet."

"What do you mean, you don't know, yet? How can-"

"I mean, I have no idea what happened to the thing," Meredith says. She tips back her coffee cup and takes a long swig. "But he slept in my bed, so whatever the thing is, it's still happening."

"Wait," Izzie says. She collapses into the chair across from Meredith with a surprised look on her face, dropping her toothbrush on the placemat in the process. "The man in your bed is Dr. Shepherd?"

Meredith rolls her eyes. "Yes, Izzie."
Izzie's jaw drops, but then she picks it back up. "Oh, my god. All I saw was hair and back. I mean … I suppose I should have recognized him. The man has some great hair." She frowns, and a contemplative look crosses her face. "And, admittedly, a pretty nice back, too." She shakes her head. "But. Oh, my god. Oh, my-"

"We didn't have sex," Meredith says. "We just slept." For two hours. If that. She sighs.

Izzie looks at Meredith like Meredith's declared today the National Day of Pink. "You have Dr. Shepherd in your bed, but you didn't have sex with him."

"Nope."

"How does that work?" Izzie says.

At which point, George tromps into the kitchen, still sleepy-eyed. His hair isn't combed, and he looks about as awake as Meredith feels. "There's a man in your bed," he says in a low, throaty, not-awake-yet tone.

Meredith glares at Izzie. "Jeez, did you leave the door open or something?"

Izzie cringes. "Maybe?" she says. And then she looks at George. "The man is Dr. Shepherd."

George pours himself a cup of coffee from the pot. He squints at Meredith. "Dr. Shepherd is in your bed?"

"Yes, we went over this already, George," Izzie says in an exasperated tone. "Get with the program."

"I wasn't here for the program," George says with a shrug as he sits down at the table next to Izzie. He blows across the top of his mug, making the coffee inside froth and waver. "I just walked in."

"Whatever," Izzie says. And then she hunkers in her seat and stares at Meredith. "Explain."

"He's having a really hard time right now, so I offered him some company," Meredith says. She kicks back more coffee. She doesn't think there's enough coffee in the universe, though. Has she mentioned, lately, how much she hates repeating her internship year? Just in case … she hates it. She hates repeating her intern year. "Speaking of which, act normal when you see him, okay?"

George gives Meredith a blank look. "Act normal."

"Yes, act normal," Meredith says with a nod. "He's already freaked out that you guys know about us. And I don't want him to bolt."

Izzie frowns. "Why's he freaked out that we know?"

Meredith sighs. "He has a protective streak. He doesn't want other interns seeing that I hang out with him. Or that he hangs out with me. In the interests of 'saving me from myself,' thus preserving my positive career trajectory, or whatever."

"Oh, that's so sweet," Izzie says.

"Yeah, sweet," Meredith says with a glower. Frankly, if he could be a little less male chauvinist about when his white-knight-ism would kick in, she'd appreciate it. It would make things easier. She shakes her head. Takes a sip of her coffee. Anyway. "So, please, please, please, act normal when you see him."
"Act normal," George says with a nod. "Check."

Izzie peers at her watch. "I have to go in a few minutes," she says. "I might not see him at all."

"You might see him later," Meredith says.

"Well, how long is he staying?" Izzie says.

Meredith shrugs. "I don't know."

"What do you mean, you don't know?"

"I mean, I don't know, Izzie," Meredith snaps. And then she sighs. She's not nice without meeting her coffee quota or her sleep quota. She chugs until her mug is empty. She scoots her chair back and heads to the coffee pot, but … it's empty.

George looks down at his mug with a guilty expression. "Sorry," he says.

Meredith sighs, and she heads back to the table, bereft. "Like I said, he's having a hard time," she says as she takes her seat again. "And it was an open-ended invitation."

"So, he's not just here for a day," Izzie says, frowning. "He might be kind of living here. Kind of."

"Maybe."

George frowns, too. "But you don't know for sure."

"He wasn't big on the being wordy thing when I brought him home last night, so, no," Meredith replies. "For all I know, he'll wake up, decide I got him drunk and took advantage - that, after all, seems to be our thing - and run out like his toes are on fire."

"Well … what's he having a hard time with?" Izzie wants to know.

"I'm sure you'll find out when you go to work today."

"That's mysterious," Izzie says. She leans forward on her elbows. "Come on. Prep me."

Meredith licks her lips. The first time this happened, she spilled the beans to all her friends - first, that he was married, and then, his story about Mark - because she was pissed, and she needed sounding boards, but … she's not pissed, this time. She doesn't need to confide in anyone right now. Not about Derek's crap, anyway. And Derek's in an awful place. He might not handle having his personal life dumped into the Seattle Grace gossip blender very well. He's already said he's morbidly embarrassed about what happened. She doesn't want to add to it. Still, the broad strokes will already be all over the hospital, given that Addison herself is all over said hospital, so ….

"He … um," Meredith says. Here goes nothing. "He's married."

Izzie blinks. "What."

"He's married," Meredith repeats.

"You said that."

"Well, you said what!"

Izzie rolls her eyes. "I meant it as a synonym for 'Please, Meredith. Do elaborate.'"
"Look, he's married, but said marriage blew up in his face." That's vague enough. Meredith hopes.
"So, he came out here. To Seattle. They're separated." Or, they were.

"And he's having a hard time," George echoes.

Meredith nods. "He's having a hard time."

"Wow," is all Izzie has to say.

"Yeah."


Silence stretches. George slurps his coffee. Izzie fiddles with the fringe at the edge of her placemat, speechless. Meredith rubs her temples. She needs to get going soon. But she has no energy to move.

"I should make him some muffins," Izzie blurs. "What kind of muffins does he like?"

Meredith glances at her. "Kale."

Izzie frowns. "Muffins come in kale?"

"I didn't think so before I met him, either."

"That's like … a crime against muffins," Izzie says.

"I wonder what they taste like," George says.

"Awful," Meredith says. "Just awful. And I know it's sad and tragic, but …." She shrugs. "That's what he likes."

"Okay," Izzie says. "I guess I'll find a recipe for kale muffins."

"Thanks, Izzie," Meredith rasps as she slogs to her tired, tired feet. "That's really sweet of you. You're a good friend."

Izzie grins. "Payback for the tip yesterday."

"The tip?"

"Yeah," Izzie says with a nod. "About the times Bailey wouldn't be available? We finished. We're vindicated, too. Guy had hemochromatosis."


"Finished what?" says George.

"Just a thing with our paracentesis patient," Izzie is quick to reply. She glances at Meredith as Meredith sets her coffee cup in the sink basin. "Going to check on our houseguest?"

Meredith nods as she yawns. "Remember, please-

"Act normal," Izzie replies. "We got it."

When Meredith returns to her bedroom to put on her shoes and swipe a comb through her hair,
Derek's still not awake. He's sprawled on his stomach, one arm dangling off the side of the bed, and he's shifted so his head is buried under a pile of pillows. The comforter has inched up and twisted, revealing a foot and a lower calf in addition to his back. He's still in a deep, alcohol-and-depression-induced sleep, and his breaths are soft and even and thick.

She likes, at least, that he felt safe enough to pass out like that once she got him home.

She bites her lip. She wants to wake him up. She wants to ask.

What the hell is this? Is he going to work today? Will he be there when she gets home? Is he going to stay more than just the day? Does he believe her? Does she need to perform massive Meredith's-not-a-stalker damage control for last night and the wine and the everything?

But ….

She settles for jotting a note on a piece of notebook paper.

*Stay as long as you want. You're welcome to anything in the kitchen. Towels are in the linen closet in the hallway. There's an unopened toothbrush in the medicine cabinet in the hallway bathroom. There's a spare key in the kitchen by the back door in the top drawer under the takeout menus. Please, lock up if you leave. My shift's over at 7. I'll be back around then. -M*

She reads the note several times to make sure it sounds okay. She underlines the "as long as you want" several times for emphasis. And then she adds a,

*P.S. I'll get the key back from you later if you go.*

So he doesn't think she's keying him for good. Keying him for good might freak him out. Too much too soon. Right? Maybe. Whatever. She reads the note one last time. She adds a,

*P.P.S. The address here is 613 Harper Lane.*

She folds up the paper and props it next to the clock on his nightstand so he'll be sure to see it when he wakes up. She pulls the comforter down a little so his feet won't get cold. And then she moves toward the door.

At the threshold, she takes one last look.

He's on his side of the bed. His side.

Her husband is sleeping on his side of the bed, and … even with all the what-the-hell uncertainty going on right now, things feel a little more right in the world.

She hopes the feeling lasts.

The sun is barely peeking over the horizon as Meredith screeches into an empty parking space with five minutes to spare. At least, she didn't have to deal with the bicker squad filling up her car with prattle. Izzie and George left earlier than she did, so they could grab a real breakfast at the waffle place down the street from the hospital.

Meredith sprints to the locker room.

Four minutes.

"You didn't mention she's here," Izzie hisses as Meredith wrestles into her scrubs. Locker doors
slam. Chatter fills the room as all the interns prep for rounds.

"Who's here?" Meredith says.

Izzie rolls her eyes. "The wife."

"What wife?" Alex says.

"Dr. Shepherd's wife," Izzie says.

"Wait," Cristina says with a snort. "McDreamy is McMarried?"

"Yes, but they're separated," Meredith says. She yanks her baby blue scrub shirt over her maroon base layer. She glances at Izzie as soon as she can see again. "And I did say she was here. I said you'd find out at work today what Derek was having a hard time with."

Izzie rolls her eyes. "That's like the vaguest way possible to say that."

Meredith sighs. "I take it you saw her?"

"Kinda hard to miss, what with the salmon-colored scrubs." Izzie snorts. "What self-respecting surgeon wears salmon-colored scrubs voluntarily?"

"Maybe, she just likes pink," George says.

"We're surgeons, George," Cristina says. "Pink is for the gynie squad."

"Well," Meredith says. "She's … kind of a specialist surgeon."

"A gynie surgeon?" Cristina says. Her eyes gleam. She snorts. "McDreamy's McWife is gynie squad?"

"Yes."

Nobody has a chance to reply to that, though, before Dr. Bailey is dragging them on rounds. They start five strong, with Alex, Cristina, George, Izzie, and Meredith all trailing in a sleep-deprived line. Meredith wraps her stethoscope around her neck as they slog to patient number one. Alex is the first to peel off to run labs, not that he seems happy about it.

"Another late night, Grey?" Miranda says after everyone else is assigned to tasks, and there's nobody left for Meredith to hide behind.

Meredith yawns for like the fifty-seventh time in five minutes. She can't even bring herself to deny Bailey's assumption. She had a late night. A super duper late night. A night so late that it wasn't even night anymore when it ended.

She nods through jaw-cracking yawn number fifty-eight.

"Girl, you have got to stop partying, or you're going to drop dead of exhaustion."

"I wasn't partying," Meredith says.

Miranda gives Meredith a dubious look.

"I wasn't," Meredith says. "I was helping a friend."
"Dr. Shepherd?"

Meredith blinks. "Pardon?"

"You were helping Dr. Shepherd?"

That's right. Bailey was at the surgery. For the chief. And she saw Meredith coax Derek out of the OR. And ….

"Yes," Meredith says. There's no point in denying it. Not without insulting Miranda's intelligence. "How'd the surgery last night go?"

"Dr. Webber is fine; Dr. Nelson was able to handle everything," Miranda says, and she leaves it at that. She glances at her clipboard. "Oh. Dr. Shepherd requested an intern. I want you on that."

Meredith blinks. "Err … Dr. Shepherd? But he's-"

"Not He-Shepherd," Bailey says, shaking her head. "She-Shepherd."

"Oh."

Oh, boy.

Meredith yawns. This is going to be a long damned day.

The interaction with Addison turns out to be … remarkably anticlimactic. None of Addison's intended digs land.

"Define TTTS," Addison says.


Addison raises her eyebrows. "Connected by?"

"Blood vessels in the placenta," Meredith says. Addison opens her mouth to ask a question, but before she can get a word in edgewise, Meredith rushes to explain, "One twin gets too much blood, and the other gets too little, endangering the lives of both."

Addison's jaw clacks shut. She has the humility to appear impressed, and, for a moment, she says nothing. After she collects herself, though, she manages to say, "That's correct, Grey."

"They told me there wasn't much chance anything could be done," says Julie, their pregnant patient.

Addison nods. "TTTS is usually impossible to correct." She beams at Julie. "Unless you happen to be one of a handful of surgeons in the world who knows how to separate fetal blood vessels. Which, luckily for you, I am. So, we're going to get you into surgery tomorrow. If you have any questions at all, please, ask Dr. Grey."

Julie nods, but has no questions, so Meredith and Addison leave the room in tandem.

"Hey," Addison whispers they step out into the hallway.

Meredith glances at her. "What?"

"I haven't seen Dr. Shepherd at work today." Addison shifts from foot to foot. "The other Dr.
Shepherd, I mean."

Meredith shrugs. "Neither have I," she says in the most nonchalant tone she can manage.

Addison frowns at that. She seems like she wants to ask a more in-depth question. Like, well, why is the other Dr. Shepherd not at work today? Where is the other Dr. Shepherd? But she doesn't ask her burning questions. She fiddles with her glasses for a moment, and she walks away.

It's different, Meredith supposes, when Meredith's, A, prepared for the wifely incursion, B, not the least bit intimidated, C, an attending living in an intern body, and D, armed with the fore-hindsight that, in the end, Meredith wins.

Unless Murphy makes another play.

"You've reached 555-0192. Please, leave your name and number at the beep, and I'll get back to you as soon as I can."

Meredith frowns, hearing her own voice, tinny and quiet over the phone line. That's something she's still not used to. Returning to a world full of answering machines. She keeps dialing into voicemail that doesn't freaking exist and only remembering it doesn't exist after she's already wasted her time. But today, the time warp will actually help, because it means, unlike with voicemail, that if Derek's anywhere near the machine, he'll hear-

*BEEP*

"Hi, um ...," she mumbles into the receiver. She hijacked a phone at a nurses' station. She watches Nurse Debbie prowl past. The woman has a play-it-cool look pasted on her face, and her nose buried in a patient chart, but it's hard to miss how she's tilting her right ear toward Meredith. Crap. So much for avoiding gossip. Nurse Debbie is the gossip posse kingpin. Meredith cups her hand over her mouth and the receiver, trying to thwart her eavesdropper. "It's me," she continues softly. "Meredith, I mean. Are you still there?"

She waits a few moments in silence. Nobody answers.

"Hello?" she repeats.

She bites her lip. Crap. Well, maybe, he doesn't feel like he should be answering her phone. Or .... She glances at her watch. According to a suspicious Patricia, he called in sick, so he's not still passed out. But ... maybe, he crawled back into bed after he called? It's not like he's his normal chipper self.

She hopes that's all it is, and that he's not power freaking god knows where.

She sees George standing in the hall outside of the pediatric wing, mumbling agitatedly under his breath, as she rounds the corner. The distant sound of crying babies filters through the big glass window. George stares at a baby boy lying in an isolette. The not-so-newborn has a blue cap and bright blue eyes. He's blowing spit bubbles and wriggling as only small babies can. George seems to be taking comfort in his one-sided conversation with the little guy, and Meredith can't resist smiling.

"Talking to yourself, now?" Meredith says, looking over George's shoulder at the baby.

"Yes," George says as he glances at her, and then his gaze flicks away as his eyes widen. "No!" He sighs and resumes staring at the isolette like the mere sight of it recharges him. "Damn it, I'm a bad sponge," he grumbles. "A leaky sponge. I'm gonna leak all the wrong secrets. I'm a bad liar. I can't
even lie about talking to myself." He looks back at her after a moment's commune with the isolette's bubbly occupant. His gaze softens. "You look nice today."

She snorts. "You're a better liar than you think," she says. "I look like a pasty freak who only got two hours of sleep."

"Yes, but a nice-looking pasty freak," George counters in a kind tone.

Her chest squeezes, and her stomach feels like it's dropping into her shoes. George is … George. Such a loyal, wonderful friend. And, though she's had him back for months, now, every once in a while, she's reminded that she belongs to a future where he isn't.

"Though … now," George says, frowning, "you seem like a nice-looking pasty freak who just saw a ghost." He gives the babies a troubled glance. "Did you want to move the conversation to geriatrics again?"

She clears her throat awkwardly as she pushes the tidal wave of grief away. "No, I'm fine. Thanks." She hates how a reminder of a loss can come out of nowhere and overwhelm her to the point of non-function. Lexie. Mark. George. She gets reminders of each of them every once in a while, but it's worse in the Murphy Timeline with George, because he's here. She swallows against the lump in her throat. "So, what's this about sponges?"

George's frown deepens, and his eyebrows knit a bit as he reacts to her pathetic excuse for subject change. "Well ...."

"Come on, George," she prods, inching closer. "Out with it."

"Okay," he says. "Can you think of any reason - any reason at all, really - why Cristina would be kissing Burke?" And then his eyes widen. "You don't think … he's …. You know …. The baby?"

And, finally, Meredith has a reason to know what she knows. That Cristina is pregnant because of Burke. For now, though, she pushes that away to focus on George. "No idea," she lies. "What does that have to do with sponges?"

He sighs. "The chief assigned me to be his spy." He gives Meredith a panicky look. "I hate being a spy. I'm not good at stealth. Or lying. Or anything dastardly. And, now, I have to decide whether I'm going to tell him about this."

"I think if you leave it alone, it'll come out eventually," Meredith says.

"But that's the thing," George says. "I can't leave it. He'll ask me, 'O'Malley, did you witness anything of a suspicious nature?' And I'll say, 'Yes!' Exactly like what I say when I'm asked if I'm talking to myself."

She frowns. "Well ...."

He gives her a desperate look. "Yes?"

She shrugs. "You could do what I do."

"What do you do?" he says.

"When presented with a question I don't want to answer, I have a habit of bolting," she admits with a sheepish grin. "Sucks for relationships, but for keeping your mouth shut when you really want to gab about things you'll regret saying, I think it's a valid strategy."
George sighs and glances at the baby. She steps closer, so close that their shoulders bump. She glances at her watch. She has a few minutes before she has to be anywhere.

And in this moment, she can't think of anywhere else she'd rather be.

"So, what's this little guy's name?" she says.

George grins. "Would you believe it's George?"

Meredith catches Cristina in the elevator about three hours later. The doors trundle open, and Cristina doesn't get off as Meredith gets on. Cristina's nose is buried in a chart. She doesn't look up. Doesn't politely ask what floor button to press for Meredith. Doesn't anything. Which, whatever. Meredith isn't going to a particular floor except "The One That Cristina Is On."

"Seriously," Meredith snarks as the elevator doors close, and Cristina looks up from the chart with a frown. "After all the grief you gave me, you're doing the same exact thing?"

"Same exact what?" Cristina says.

The elevator hums as it rises.

"You're wasting my time, Cristina. You're wasting everybody's time, and nobody even knows it," Meredith snaps. "Do you seriously think Burke's giving everybody an equal opportunity to do cardio surgeries when you're kissing him in closets, or whatever the hell it is that you're doing?"

Cristina's mouth opens. Closes. Opens. "It's … not the same."

"It's the exact same," Meredith counters. She glowers. "Maybe, worse, even, given that Derek and I had protected sex once-"Well, four times. During the one time. Whatever. "We had sex once so far, months ago, but you've had enough sex to be pregnant."

"That could have happened with one time," Cristina protests.

The elevator slows down and dings.

Meredith folds her arms. "But did it?"

Cristina has the decency to look at the floor like she's a bit ashamed. "Not really," she says.

The elevator doors trundle open to a clamoring crowd of nurses and orderlies and doctors, all waiting to stampede in. Cristina bolts out of the elevator car, pushing past the tight web of bodies blocking the door. Meredith follows at a speed walk.

"Have you even bothered to tell Burke that you're pregnant?" Meredith says, glaring. "Are you going to?"

Cristina comes to a halt when they turn the corner into an empty-ish hallway. The office wing. A few doctors mill in the hallways, having hushed, whispered discussions. Most doors are closed. Most doctors who escape to their offices are looking for peace and shelter from the bustling medical wing.

"Look, Meredith, can we not go there?"

"No, we can't not go there," Meredith says. "Because you're a hypocrite, and you treated me like dirt for no good reason other than to be spiteful."
Cristina rolls her eyes. "What, do you want me to say sorry, so we can cry it out and hug or something?" she says, tone dripping with sarcasm.

Meredith grinds her molars. "I just want you to cut it out and be my freaking friend."

That answer pulls Cristina up short. She blinks. "Oh," she says, eyes widening a little. "Really?"

Meredith huffs a frustrated sigh. "Yes."

"Oh," Cristina repeats.

"So, can we do that, now?" Meredith says. "Can we, please, be friends?"

Something vibrates so loudly it's audible in the quiet, and Cristina twitches. She pulls her beeper out of her pocket and frowns at it. Damn it, damn it, damn it. "I have to go," Cristina says.

Meredith gapes. "Seriously?"

"Meredith," Cristina snaps, "I have to go." And then she turns on her heels and flees without offering Meredith any freaking answers whatsoever.

Crap.

Izzie and George are still at work when Meredith gets home at 9. She's greeted by a quiet, dark house, and she tries not to let herself sink with the weight of her disappointment. She plods into the kitchen to pour herself a glass of wine. She fills it to the brim.

So, Derek's power freaking. Somewhere. Alone. And she needs a new plan.

She carries her merlot upstairs with her, sipping as she moves, only to freeze on the threshold of her bedroom. There's a lump in her bed. And it's breathing. The sound of respiration is deep and thick and even with sleep.

He stayed.

He stayed.

A giddy wave lifts her into the stratosphere. She resists the urge to jump. Or cheer. Or something equally stupid and juvenile and embarrassing.

She takes a sip from her glass and turns to go back downstairs. She was going to read a book in bed for a while, but he's the lightest sleeper she's ever met, and she doesn't want to wake him with the lamplight or the noise. Which means Plan B. Television.

Except he says, "Hey," in a thick, sleepy, confused tone, before she can get more than a step away from the doorway. The dark lump under the blankets moves. Covers rustle. Pillows shift. The mattress creaks. He doesn't sit up, but he rolls onto his back and scrubs at his face with his hands.

She takes this as an invitation. "Hey," she says in a soft voice as she heads to her side of the bed. She was so ready for him to not be here that she has no idea what to say when he is here. She settles on, "You're still here." She sets her wineglass on the night stand and sits on the lip of the mattress.

"Hmm." He twitches. "M'sorry," he says with a bit more agency. "I didn't mean to fall asleep." He sits up, squinting at the clock on the nightstand. "Fuck, what time is it?" Bright red numbers declare
that it's 9:19. He stares at it for a moment, thinking, breathing, discombobulated.

She aches. Derek's an irritating, effervescent, unrestrained morning person, and he's still in bed at 9 p.m.? Still **asleep** at 9 p.m., having only gotten up to call in sick? Or, maybe, she's blowing this out of proportion. Maybe, he at least spent most of the day in front of the television or ....

"I can ...," he continues, "um ...." Leave. Call a cab. Walk to a bus stop. Flee.

Whatever he wants to say, though, it gets lost in his just-woken mental fog, and before he can sort out his head fuzz, she rushes to say, "Don't be sorry. I want you here. You can stay as long as you want."

"Most people who say that don't mean it."

She shrugs. "I'm not most people."

"No," he agrees in an unreadable tone. "Definitely not."

"I do mean it," she insists.

He regards her for a long, long moment. But he says nothing.

She bites her lip. "I was worried you'd ...." Think she took advantage. She shakes her head, though, and she manages to keep her mouth shut. She'd rather not put that idea in his head. "Never mind. How are you?"

He takes a long, long time to answer. Too long. "I'm tired, Meredith," he says in the most world-weary tone she's ever heard from him.

"I know you are," she says. She picks up her feet and slides onto the mattress all the way. "I'm sorry."

He doesn't seem to know what to say to that. He looks away.

She's not sure what to say or do at this point, either.

Derek's always been a tactile person. Very touchy-feely. And she's read studies about how a good dose of oxytocin helps with depression. Oxytocin can be released in response to touch. She thinks … maybe … there's a little hard science involved with her "saving him from drowning."

She scoots closer, until their bodies are flush, and she wraps her arms around him. For a moment, he's stiff, and unyielding, and he says, "Um," in an awkward, tense tone, like he's been startled. She thinks, maybe, she overstepped. She's almost ready to declare this idea a mistake, but then he sighs, and he relaxes, tension draining out of him like his skin is a sieve.

She rubs his back. Her palm against his t-shirt makes a quiet, shh shh shh sound in the silence. She can count the number of times she's done this for him on one hand - usually, it's the other way around.

"I want you here," she repeats, if for no other reason than she thinks it might help him to hear that. That someone wants him. "I want you here a **lot**."

He doesn't speak.

He doesn't pull away, either.
For the second morning in a row, there's a man in Meredith's bed.

"He had breakfast this morning," Izzie reports.

Meredith's at the lab, picking up Julie's post-op lab results.

Derek stayed. He stayed the night. 100% sober, he stayed.

They hugged for a while. She tried to get him to talk, but that didn't work very well. The second she veered even halfway toward trying to help him deal with reality - that Addison is here, he's suspended from the OR, and, oh, by the way, his wannabe girlfriend arrived here from 2012 - he clammed up and said, *Not now.*

*Well, when would be a good time?* she'd asked, trying and failing to keep shrillness out of the discussion.

But all he'd done was shrug, say he's tired, flop back onto the bed, and burrow under the comforter.

Then they'd slept.

They didn't talk about how long he might be staying, or if he even liked her, or if she was just comfort and a much-needed warm bed being offered as a port in a horrible storm. They didn't discuss whether he wanted all or some of the things she wanted and was just … unable to deal with the wanting right now, or … if he didn't want any of the things she wanted. They just slept, and she's not sure what that means.

*What the hell does that mean?*

The lab tech hands Meredith a report containing Julie's lab results. Meredith scans the pages. All normal stats. Not good by any means, but given that the woman just had major surgery, it's a kind of not good that's to be expected, and not a not good that means something's really wrong. Addison will be happy. So, that's one less thing to-

"*Meredith,*" Izzie says.

Meredith looks up. "Huh?"

"Did you hear what I said?" Izzie says. "He had breakfast this morning."

Meredith frowns. "Is it not normal to eat breakfast?"

Izzie shakes her head and gives a fluttering, nervous laugh. "No, no, no. You don't understand. He had a bowl of oatmeal. At the table. While I was also having breakfast."

Meredith gapes. "He ate at the table with you?"

Izzie nods. "Which, let me tell you, I should get some major freaking friend points for that. Do you have any idea how unnerving it is to eat across from your boss's boss while he's all glower-y, grumpy, pre-coffee, and wearing nothing but a wrinkled undershirt and boxers?"

"Major freaking friend points," Meredith agrees with a nod, heart aching a little. Izzie is a great friend, too. Like George. A really great friend. Meredith had shoved that knowledge out of her head when Izzie left. But …. "Did he … talk?"
Izzie sighs. "No, he mostly just read the paper and tried to ignore me. I think I might have made him more uncomfortable than he made me." Izzie thinks for a moment, and then she brightens. "Oh, he did ask me if we had any muesli."

Meredith bites her lip. "I wonder if he's coming to work today."

Izzie shrugs. "Beats me. Hey, have you see Alex today?"

"Not yet," Meredith replies. "Why?"

Izzie rolls her eyes. "Nothing. He's just being his usual cretin self."

Meredith snorts. "He softens up a bit, once you get to know him."

"I don't want to know him," Izzie replies.

"Who knows?" Meredith says with a grin. "Someday, you might marry the guy."

"Yeah, freaking right," Izzie scoffs.

Meredith eats a greasy slice of hospital pizza, while the lunch crowd bustles around her. Izzie and George and Alex are all too busy with patients to show up for lunch. Derek called in sick again. He has to be completely out of sick leave, but Richard seems determined to keep Derek from leaving, so, maybe, he's giving Derek a bit of leeway. Or a lot. A lot of freaking leeway.

So, here she is. Alone. Eating terrible pizza.

She sighs.

That's just sad, she can hear Derek snarking in her head.

She's not sure how the hospital's pizza can be so bad. It's pizza. It's hard to mess up to this degree. But Seattle Grace manages it. It's more like grease with pepperoni than pepperoni with grease. Meredith likes grease. But not so much that three napkins have failed to sop all of it up.

She should have just gone to the pizza place across the street. It's not like she's busy. Addison still thinks she's here as a temp, so she's been reluctant to take up routine casework, and nothing emergent has cropped up, yet. All Meredith has to worry about is monitoring Julie post-op.

Meredith frowns. Maybe, in Murphy Timeline, Addison will stay just a temp. Derek seems to want so little to do with her that he won't even show up to work. It's probably hard to get false hopes of reconciliation when your husband won't even come near you in a hazmat suit. Right?

Or ....

Hmm.

Her insides squeeze with stress. She tries to push those thoughts out of her head. Trying to predict how in the hell this will go just makes her stomach upset.

A tray with another slice of dripping pepperoni pizza slaps onto the table beside her, and Cristina slumps into a chair beside Meredith.

"Your avoid mode has an off button?" Meredith says, glowering.
"The clinic has a policy," Cristina says without preamble. She takes a bite of pizza and grimaces. A river of grease drips from the tip of the slice, and an orange streak crawls down her chin. She wipes it away with a napkin. "They wouldn't let me confirm my appointment unless I designated an emergency contact person. Someone to be there, just in case, and to help me home." Cristina glances at Meredith and then looks back at her plate. "You know, after. Anyway, I put your name down. You're my 'person.' Okay? So, you can shut up about the friends thing, now." She takes another bite of pizza, nose crinkling as she chews.

Meredith blinks. "You … made me your person?"

"Yes." Another surreptitious glance. "Whatever."

A grin overtakes her before she can stop it. She knew she'd been making some progress. She had no idea she'd reached personhood. Hell, she'd done it on schedule. And in time to make a real difference in Cristina's life.

"Oh, for god's sake," Cristina snaps. "Please, don't turn this into a mushy happy hug fest."

Meredith's quick to shake her head. She wipes the smile off her face. With effort. "No, of course, not. I would never."

"Whatever," Cristina grumbles.

Now … how to convince Cristina to reschedule her appointment? Hmm.

"You look like you're constipated," Cristina observes.

Meredith rolls her eyes. "Look, can you do me a favor?"

Cristina sighs. "Another one?"

"See if the clinic will take you tomorrow," Meredith says.

Cristina frowns. "What, why?"

Meredith bites her lip. Because they'll do an ultrasound at the appointment, and they'll see that Cristina has an undiagnosed ectopic pregnancy. It's fully treatable if caught in time, often without surgery.

"I'm not sure when you had planned, but tomorrow's a really good time for me," Meredith fibs. Honestly, it's a terrible time, but, if she asks in the right way, she thinks she'll be able to convince Richard to let her have an hour off to help.

"I was planning to go in a few weeks," Cristina hedges.

Meredith shakes her head. "That's really bad for me. I'll make it work if I have to, but can you, please, check to see if they have availability tomorrow?"

"Okay …," Cristina says.

"Good," Meredith replies.

They both take grimacing bites of their pizza. Cristina's is still dripping everywhere. Meredith sopped enough of it up with napkins earlier that, at least, it's not spilling greasy guts every time she picks it up.
"So … McDreamy's been scarce," Cristina comments.

Meredith's not quite sure, yet, how much she should share about that. "Yeah," she comments neutrally.

"Sorry he's scarce."

"Thanks. I'll deal."

Cristina swallows, and she looks at her plate with a miserable expression. "Burke dumped me."

"Oh, Cristina," Meredith says, frowning. She scoots her chair a little closer.

Cristina scoots away like she's been stung. "No hugs!"

"Shut up," Meredith says, grinning. "I'm your 'person.'"


Meredith closes the distance between them. She wraps her arms around Cristina. "I'm really sorry about Burke," Meredith says.

"Yeah," Cristina replies.

As much as Cristina says she doesn't like hugging, Meredith can't help but notice how Cristina sinks into it. Like … she really needed some support right now. Really needed a friend.

Really needed a person.

Meredith is happy, finally, to provide.

Meredith stops at Wal-Mart on the way home. Derek doesn't have anything to wear except what he wore on their "date" at 13 Coins, and she imagines those things are getting a bit ripe. She has the advantage of knowing what size he wears. Heading out to his trailer to grab him some stuff would be a ridiculous out-of-the-way trek, given that.

She buys him things she knows he'll like - calf socks to go with his boots, a black t-shirt, a white button-down shirt, a pack of three black boxer-briefs, and a pair of bootcut stonewashed button-fly jeans - just enough so he isn't wearing the same thing for days on end, and her wallet isn't too dented. On the way out of the store, she grabs some muesli, a couple bags of pre-washed kale, some other pre-cut salad-y things, his favorite kind of coffee, a pack of his favorite beer, and some wax earplugs.

When she pulls into the driveway, she pauses, staring at the house. Everyone else is still at work. The windows are all dark. She can't tell if her wayward houseguest is even still there.

The murmur of the television greets her as she opens the door. She stops on the doormat, nostrils fluttering as she inhales. The house is warm. She smells … something. A spice of some kind. She glances into the dark living room, only to realize it wasn't the television she heard when she stepped inside. It was the radio in the kitchen.

She drops her purse on the table by the door, hooks the neck of her toggle coat over the closet door knob, kicks off her shoes, and carries her shopping bags toward the good smells and the noise.

Derek's standing near the stove, stirring a steaming pot. There are two plates on the counter, both covered with a heap of … green … noodle … things, a cutting board with a bunch of leftover green
bits on it, and a pile of refuse next to that.

He's wearing nothing but his boxers and his undershirt. His hair is messy, but not in an unkempt, ignored way, like lately, but rather a found-a-comb-but-didn't-have-my-product way, which makes her wince. She didn't even think to buy him any of that.

He looks up when a floorboard creaks under her weight, and he gives her a brilliant smile, marred only by how tired the bags under his eyes make him look. "Hi," he says in that low, reverent tone he's always reserved for her, a tone she's sorely missed the past few months. The past year.

"Hey," she says.

"I … um." He clears his throat, all hint of suaveness gone in a flash fire. "I stayed."

She smiles. "I can see that. I'm glad."

"You're sure it's o-"

"I want you here," she says, before he can even finish his question, and his jaw clacks shut. "It's more than okay." She sets her shopping bags on the table. "I got you a few things to tide you over." Until you get your things. Until you buy new things. Until …. She opts not to add the until. She doesn't want to give him parameters.

He wanders over to peek into the bags. Their hands brush as she releases the handles just as he reaches for them. The plastic crinkles as he opens the first bag to look inside. His jaw drops a little. But he doesn't ask any of the how-did-you-know questions burning on his face. He doesn't panic or freak out at the reminder that she knows his sizes, and his favorite type of underwear, and the fact that he prefers button fly jeans to zippered, and that, despite indigo being his favorite color, he likes stonewashed jeans more than anything else. He doesn't have any visible reaction whatsoever, which is a far cry from his utter failure at a poker face thus far when the time travel crap has come up. So … that's improvement. Right? That's improvement?

"… Thank you," is all he says in an unreadable tone. "That was really nice of you."

"You're welcome," she says.

And then an awkward silence stretches.

She wants to ask the big questions. She's learned not to do that, though, if she wants him to stay present in the conversation and not shut down on her. So, she's left with knowing what not to say, and not a single clue what she can say.

"So, how was work?" he blurs at the same time she word-vomits, "What are you making?"

He reddens. So does she, if the heat creeping across her skin is anything to go by. She swallows. Another awkward pause expands like a nuclear mushroom cloud. The radio blares some tinny punk rock song she doesn't recognize.

"Work was fine," she replies at the same time he works up the nerve to say, "Zucchini pasta and tomato basil sauce."

They stare at each other, scarlet. Which is stupid. This is stupid. She's never been this awkward around him. Or any guy, really. She's not that kind of person. Crap. It's just … there's so much riding on this. Getting him to freaking like her enough that she can have an epiphany-giving relationship with him and go the hell home.
"I didn't even know I had zucchini," she says quietly. Stupid. Stupid, stupid. Who says crap like that? It's like Baby saying, "I carried a watermelon," to Johnny. **Crap.**

"You did," he says.

He shifts from foot to foot and pulls his fingers through his hair. As if he's just as flustered as she is. She's not used to him being so bashful around her, either. And this is weird. It's just … weird. He gives her a look like he knows this conversation is going down in flames, and he can't think of how to save it.

She swallows. "And tomatoes?" she says, peering at the steaming pot on the stove.

He nods. A nervous smile flashes across his face. "And tomatoes," he says. "No mandoline, though. I had to get creative with a cheese grater. And what do you mean, work was fine?"

"I mean it was fine," she retorts. She frowns. "A … mandoline?"

"Yes," he says with another nod. "You use it to slice produce." He winks - the first hint of returning humor. "Which I imagine you don't often do, Ms. Leftover Grilled Cheese For Breakfast. And fine is not an appropriate adjective for an entire day of work at a busy hospital."

She blinks. "You remember about the grilled cheese?" That discussion was … months ago, and the leftover grilled cheese aspect wasn't even a salient point. Plus, once Syph Nurse had knocked into him, he'd fled like he'd heard a fire alarm somewhere, and panic tends to be amnesia-inducing. "And I say fine. Fine is my word."

He steps closer to her. "I remember everything you say, Meredith," he says in that soft murmur that makes her heart beat faster.

"Oh," is all she can think of to reply.

"So … fine, huh?" he says.

She nods. "Yeah. That's what I say."

"Fine's not very descriptive of anything."

She shrugs. "Well, I'm not a descriptive person, or whatever."

"Hmm."

Silence stretches again. He stares at her for a long moment, gaze softening.

"You seem like you feel a lot better," she hazards, stepping closer still. They're about six inches apart at this point. Way too close to be considered platonic. Still, a little too far apart for her liking. It's hard to kiss at six inches without getting a crick in your neck.

His stare wanders from her head to her toes. She doesn't miss the appreciative glimmer in his eyes. "I do," he says. And then he gives her that gorgeous smile again. The one that makes her heart squeeze.

She swallows. "Good," she says.

"Yeah," he agrees. He searches her with his gaze. She looks up at him. His lips move, long before he speaks aloud. "Would you …?"

"Would I … what?"
He licks his lips and shifts on his feet again. Back and forth. Back and forth. Like he's gathering courage. But then the timer over the stove beeps. He mutters something under his breath. *Fuck.* A colorful curse she doesn't quite hear, but she knows both the cadence of his voice and his preferred obscenities well enough that she can fill in the blank. He steps back to the stove, stirs the sauce in the pot a little, and turns down the burner. He takes a test taste and grimaces.

"Would I what?" she prods, following him.

He looks up at the ceiling like *why does this shit happen to me?*

She frowns. "What is it?"

He gives her a sheepish grin. "I think I've succeeded in making the worst tomato sauce in the history of mankind." Like he was *trying* to fail, and fail big. So, **so** Derek to twist that into a success.

She snorts. "In the history of mankind? That's a tall order."

"That's me," he says with another wink. "I'm the best at what I do."

"Making bad tomato sauce?"

He shrugs. "Someone has to."

"I'm sure it's not that bad," she insists.

He holds up a tomato-covered wooden spoon to her lips. "You tell me."

She licks up the sauce. Whatever the spice she smelled is, it punches her on the tongue. Hard. It's like the spice took a wire to the sauce's throat and garroted it. She coughs, but she manages to say, "It's … fine."

"If by fine, you mean bad," he interjects. He sighs. His eyebrows knit for a moment, and then he rolls his eyes. "So, I guess you mean work was horrible, today."

"No, work was fi-" Crap. Crappity crap. "Good," she corrects herself.

He smirks a pleased told-you-so smirk, and he takes the pot of horrible murdered-by-mystery-spice sauce to the sink to pour it out. "How about popcorn, instead?" he says.

She frowns. "Popcorn?"

Derek … doesn't eat popcorn. Like … no. He doesn't touch starch if he can help it. No pasta. No bread. When they go out for steak, he always gets something green or fungus-y instead of potatoes as a side. She has to twist his freaking arm just to order pizza once every few weeks, and even then, he won't eat it with cheese.

"I was trying to ask you to a movie," he admits. He glances at the mess of pureed tomato he's dumped into her sink. He flips on the garbage disposal to speed the drainage. "Prior to this disaster, I was going to suggest a late show, but … now is fine, I suppose, if you're hungry. My treat."

"You want to go to a movie," she says slowly, "and eat popcorn?"

"Well," he admits, "I'll watch you eat it, at least."

"What are you gonna have?" she says.
He shrugs, and for the first time, the tiredness in his gaze seems to overwhelm him. "I'm … not all that hungry," he admits.

"Oh," she says. She bites her lip. She glances at the abandoned plates of zucchini noodles, and then the cutting board, and his pile of cooking junk. He's not even hungry, and he worked that hard. He …. "You mean you did all that just for me?"

"That was the thought, yeah," he says in a glum tone.

She stares at him, lips parting. He licks his lips like he's nervous and stares back at her. Her lower body tightens, and she can feel blush spreading down her neck to her chest. He looks … so … so kissable. He looks … "I heard Batman Begins was good," she blurs, before her thoughts go any farther south than his lips. Crap. She will not be convincing him she's not a stalker if she tries to ravish him on the kitchen counter.

He raises his eyebrows in surprise. "You like superhero movies?"

"I know you do," she replies. "And there are worse things for me to look at than Christian Bale."

"Oh," Derek says. But again, he doesn't shut down. Doesn't shy away from the fact that she knows him. All he does is stand there. Close like a lover, but not close enough for love.

She can feel the heat of his skin. She can smell her shampoo in his hair. She grins awkwardly, shifting a bit, wishing her groin would stop telling her what to do. "You and your comic books."

"I …." He frowns. "What's wrong with comic books?"

"Nothing. I actually …. I kinda missed them. Missed you. Whatever."

"That's how I broke my nose, you know."

She nods. "I do know."

"I guess you would," he says. An easy admission. No stress in his posture or on his face. His eyes narrow. He regards her. "How did I break my nose?"

"Mark punched you in the face."

"Why?" Derek says.

"Because he wanted your comic thingy." He stares at her intently. "What comic 'thingy' was it?"

"Batman," she replies. "You never got more specific than that, though, and I'm not a comic book person, so don't ask me for a detailed narrative or whatever."

"Hmm," is his only reply to that, and his expression is unreadable.

So, did I pass your test? she wants to ask. She doesn't. She juggles her desire for him, her desire to prove herself without spooking him, and her desire to make him feel better, like each desire is a ball to toss around. She's not …. She's not doing half bad. She thinks.

"You'll be pleased to know the world is going to get hooked on superheroes, soon," she tells him.

"Even more than now?"
"Oh, now's just the start of the wave," she says with a nod. "In addition to Batman and all its sequels, they reboot Superman-"

He frowns. "Again?"

"Um." Wait. What? "There's been more than one reboot?"

"There hasn't been any reboot, yet, Meredith, but there's one being made right now."

"Oh, then, yeah. More than one. Because they only just announced the one I'm thinking of."

"They only just announced this one," he replies.

She shakes her head. "No, I mean in 2012."

His eyes widen a little at that, and her juggling routine collapses. Crap. Too direct! Way too direct! "Oh," he says in a flat tone.

"Sorry," she says. Damn it.

But he shakes his head. "No, it's …." Okay, he can't seem to bring himself to say. But the fact that he's trying to tell her it's okay, even when it's clearly not okay … well … that's major improvement.

She gives him a sheepish grin. "Really freaking confusing?"

"Yeah," he says, still ruffled.

"They reboot Spiderman, too," she says, desperate to retrieve their comfortable rapport.

His eyebrows raise. "Again?"

"Yeah," she replies. "And they do this whole big thing with Marvel, where like twenty different movies tie into each other and share continuity. Iron Man. Captain America. Avengers. All that crap."

"Did we see them all together?" he says in a soft voice.

"A few." You went to way more of them with Mark, she doesn't say. She's not really sure how Derek would take the idea of a renewed friendship with Mark right now. Probably badly. She bites her lip. She still can't figure out Derek's expression. "What are you thinking?"

"I'm thinking it feels good."

Her eyebrows knit. "What does?"

He steps closer, popping the six-inch bubble, creating a four-inch one. Now, she can read him. Now, she can. And he's hungry. Just … not for food.

"You," he says in a low, throaty tone.

He's closed the gap. She dares to put her hands at his hips, and pull tiny tents of his shirt into her fists. He's warm, and he fits in her space, and it's nice to be so close again without him looking like he wants to bolt. He's in her space, and he wants to be there, and he's not arguing with himself about it, either. For the first time in months.

Her lower body tightens to a degree that's threatening to make her squirm. She loosens her fists,
dropping his shirt, and runs the flat of her palms up the sides of his body. Then, she angles in to his chest, and she rests there, hands on his sternum. She can feel his heart thumping under the bone there. It's … fast. Faster than it should be.

Desire? her over-excited groin seems to be saying. He desires you? You should kiss him to find out.

_No, I really shouldn't_, she tells herself.

You totally should.

Shut up.

He's not a beefy guy, not by any means, but he's toned, and solid, and hers in a way that no one else is or ever has been. His nipples have puckered under his shirt. His mouth is close, his eyes are deep and dark, and … she licks her lips, trying to stave off desire.

_Do not kiss him. Do not kiss him._

Kiss him. Kiss him!

And then she makes the mistake of looking south, and … hello. He's only wearing boxers. It's impossible not to see that he's into this discussion. Into her. Way, _way_ into. Which leads her to remembering how he looks when he's wearing nothing but skin. How feels when he's inside her. How well he fits with her. The intense, open-mouthed, coming-undone face he makes when he orgasms.

Her breaths tighten.

You could-

_Do not kiss him._

Well, what about …?

_For the love of god, don't fondle, either._

You really hate yourself, don't you?

_Didn't I say to shut up?_

"So, _Batman Begins_?" she says with a croak, before she does something she'll regret forever.

He regards her through his dark eyelashes. "Yeah," he says in a soft voice. "Yeah, that sounds fun."

She gazes up at him. "One condition."

"What's that?"

"We're stopping at Whole Foods or whatever on the way, and we're going to get you some kale chips or seaweed … crunchy stuff … or … something that's Derek-edible. We can smuggle it into the theater in my purse."

He smirks. "Derek-edible?"

She gives him a prim look. "That's my condition. Take it or leave it."
"Well, I have a condition, too," he replies in a low, throaty tone.

"Oh, do you?"

He nods. "Yes." He shifts, and he feels suddenly gargantuan in her space. All presence and haughty flash bang and confidence. This is the Derek she remembers.

How about just one little peck on the cheek?

_How about shutting. The hell. UP._

_Pfft._

"What's your condition?" she says, heart thundering in her ears.

"Hmm," he purrs. "This."

And then he steps so close his entire body is flush with hers, and his erection is poking her in the belly, a line of steel trapped between them. He wraps his arms around her, hands slipping low to cup her ass. He backs her into the counter. She has time to utter a surprised squeak.

And then he kisses her so hard she forgets the movie. She forgets the horrible tomato sauce. She forgets the tinny bleats of rock emanating from the radio. She forgets the room.

She forgets everything except Derek.

Standing in her space.

Kissing her.

When he pulls away, they're both panting, and Groin is screaming things like jump him, jump him, jump him! and Brain is telling Groin to _shut up, shut up, SHUT UP!_ with every last fiber of willpower that it has. She licks her lips, tasting the remnants of their joining on her skin. His pupils are dilated, and he's blushing - but not the embarrassed kind - and his hair is disheveled mess. She thinks she may have yanked on it. She's not sure. He just …. He looks. So. Fuckable.

So, do that, then?

_No. No, no, no, no, no._

Please?

"So," he rumbles when he's caught his breath. "Movie?"

"Yes," she blurts, nodding. Because, if they don't go, _now_, Groin is going to curb stomp Brain with reckless abandon. "Right now. Stat."

Derek snickers. "I'll go get dressed," he says, and he struts off like he knows he's king of the freaking world.

Holy.

Freaking.

Crap.
"I'll get my purse," she croaks to no one.

Holyfreakingcrap.

She's going to need her vibrator in the shower tonight.
Chapter Notes

M'kay, here we go. Home stretch from this chapter to the ending chapter :) I hope this will start bringing it all together for people, and, of course, I really hope you like this!

P.S. I'm completely amazed by the "late game" swell of new readers & commenters this story has gotten. I've never seen anything like it, and I've been writing fic for over a decade. Seriously, thank you, everybody. I really appreciate all the thoughtful feedback.

George and Meredith sit at the kitchen table, while Izzie attempts to clean up her cooking mess. Meredith stares dully into her coffee cup. George samples the goods contained in the twelve-count muffin tin, cooling between them on some potholders.

The whole house smells homey and warm and something-is-baking-y. Dirty dishes pile high next to the sink, like the Leaning Tower of Pisa. Izzie looks a bit like she's gone ten rounds with a bag of flour and lost. Horribly. She even has white dust in her ratty hair.

Izzie sighs. "Eight hours, sixteen ounces of chocolate, thirty-two muffins, and they still don't taste right." She raises her recipe printout up to the light and frowns at it.

"Didn't we just do this a few weeks ago?" George grumbles.

Izzie glowers. "Those were cupcakes. Not muffins."

George's nose crinkles. "Maybe, they're just supposed to taste like this," he says around his mouthful. He chews like he's trying to macerate molasses and having zero success. When he swallows, the gulp is audible, and the motion of his Adam's apple is laborious. "I don't think I like kale cupcakes."

"Muffins!" Izzie corrects. She shakes her head. "And, I can fix this. I just need to figure out what to add to make the …. To …. Well …." She stares up at the ceiling, thinking.

Meredith looks up from her coffee. "To make the kale go away?"

"Yes," Izzie says, snapping her fingers. "To make the kale go away."

Meredith sighs. "You really can't."

"I can," Izzie says, shaking her head. "I can. I won't admit defeat!"

Meredith rolls her eyes and takes a sip of glorious coffee. The I-didn't-get-enough-sleep grog is bleeding out through her pores over the minutes. She's starting to perk up a little, starting to feel like a day at work won't kill her. She sighs. She's too old for this crap. She just-

"Good morning," Derek says with an overabundance of cheer, grinning as he steps into the kitchen. He took some time earlier in the week while she was at work to grab some clothes and miscellaneous essentials from his trailer. He's wearing jeans, a maroon sweater, black boots, and a white button-down shirt.
He's shaved. His hair is coiffed. His eyes are bright. The circles are gone. Finally. And the grin looks spectacular on him.

He looks … good.

Really good.

Meredith gapes. She hasn't seen him awake, let alone fully dressed before she's gone to work, since he came home with her. Which means …? "Hey," she says as he bends to kiss her good morning. "Are you …." Holy crap. "Are you going to work today?"

He nods. "That's the plan."

"You want a cupcake?" George says.

"Muffins," Izzie insists, "and no, no, no, he can't have these. These aren't perfected, yet. They still taste like kale."

Derek looks at the mess on the counter with interest. "Kale?"

"I really don't understand how something with this much chocolate can be considered a muffin and not a cupcake," George replies, leaning forward to peer at the cooling batch. His hair is ruffled, and he has melted brown spots at the corners of his lips and a teensy splotch on the tip of his nose. He looks … kind of adorable, and Meredith can't help but grin at him.

"The difference is in how the batter is beaten," Izzie says. "Muffin crumbs are coarser, and you don't usually put frosting on muffins."

"The cupcakes you made a few weeks ago had frosting," George says.

Izzie nods. "See?"

"I'll …," Derek begins, frowning. "Those look … very …." He stares at the muffins. "Chocolatey," he concludes. And not very kale-y, he doesn't say.

Meredith resists the urge to snort with amusement.

"My thought was that with the chocolate, you wouldn't be able to taste the kale," Izzie says.

"But … the kale is the good part …," he says slowly.

"I was trying to find a good compromise," Izzie replies.

Derek raises his eyebrows. "A good compromise between what?"

Izzie regards him for a long moment, frowning. She shakes her head and makes a face like she's just seen a poor little squirrel get hit by a car or something.

"What?" Derek says.

Izzie leans forward and cups her hand over her mouth. "You know she avoids whole grains, green things, and most foods without cholesterol or high fructose corn syrup in them, right?" she whispers in a voice that carries as she points to Meredith.

A small chuckle rumbles from his chest. He looks at Meredith with a bright expression. "Yes, I'm aware," he says, never taking his eyes off her. He gives her shoulder a warm squeeze.
And then he beelines for the cabinet where they keep the cereal and pulls out the box of muesli she bought for him. He grabs a bowl and a spoon next, and then heads to the refrigerator for the jug of milk.

"You really kinda put the nut in health nut, don't you," George observes.

"Pardon?"

"You eat muesli every morning."

Derek frowns. "No, I don't."

"Okay, the muesli thing?" Izzie says, amusement sparkling in her eyes. "You do." She thinks for a moment. "The last seven days, at least."

"Oh, come on," Derek replies. "I haven't been here for a whole week." His frown deepens as he sits down. His spoon clinks, and his bowl thunks on impact with the placemat. "Have I?" he says in a softer, almost inaudible tone.

Meredith grins at him. "You kind of have. More than, actually."

"It's okay," Izzie rushes to chime in. "We like it."

"Yes," George says. "I'm not outnumbered this way."

"And you pick things up," Izzie says. "And do dishes. And laundry. And fold. He folds, Meredith. Isn't it great?"

Meredith nods. "It's pretty great."

"I've imposed," Derek says.

"In what the hell part of the world is doing all of someone's housework for them imposing?" Izzie wants to know.

"But-"

Meredith leans forward in her chair. "I like you here," she says in a soft voice.

It's been wonderful. They haven't done anything more than kiss, but they're doing that with more and more frequency. Though he's by no means all whole and healed, every day, he seems happier, and she's happier, too. Having him next to her at night, where she can hear him breathe and feel his presence, has been a soothing balm no sleeping pill could ever duplicate. She's been resting better than she has been in weeks. Months. Months, because she was sleeping like crap while Her Derek was in D.C., too. The only thing that's keeping her exhausted and wishing she could mainline caffeine, now, is the fact that she's working hundred-plus hour weeks.

"We like you here," Izzie is sure to add. She raises her hands in the air behind him, where Derek can't see, and gives Meredith two big thumbs up. Friend points! she mouths, pointing to herself.

Derek's frown breaks a little. "You're sure?" he says, gaze never leaving Meredith.

Meredith nods. "Yes, I'm sure."

"I do like it here ...", he admits. "It's ..." Less lonely, he doesn't say. Warm. Cozy. But she can read him, anyway.
She leans forward to touch his hands with hers. His skin is warm. His fingers flex a little as he registers the touch. "Then stay," she says. "Really, I want you here."

He gives her a quirky little smile. "Okay," he says. And then he fills his bowl with muesli.

Derek decides to ride to work with her. It's such a pedestrian moment. Her husband giving her a peck on the check, and climbing into the passenger side of her Jeep and buckling his seatbelt without even asking if it's okay. She can't help but smile. Her husband is riding to work with her without even asking if it's okay. He's getting familiar with her.

"What kind of music is this?" Derek says as she pulls to a stop at the first light.

Water droplets fall from the wet tree leaves overhead, landing with a splat, splat, splat onto the windshield. She flicks on the wiper blades to clear her view. He reaches toward the radio dial and turns down the volume.

Meredith sighs. "It's trance."

"How do you listen to this?" he says. "It's so ...." He frowns, searching for a word. Even after he turned down the volume, the audible, low-pitched thump thump thump of the electric bass makes the car vibrate, and she can feel it in her chest. "Repetitive," he decides. He frowns, listening a little bit more. "I think the only lyric is something about fire."

"Well, how do you listen to the Clash?" she shoots back. "They can't even sing."

His jaw drops. And then he picks it up. "How can you not like Rock the Casbah?"

"Because what's-his-name sounds like a tone-deaf buffalo."

Derek blinks. "Joe Strummer. He does not."

"Whoever. Does, too."

"Does not!"

"Does, too!" she replies. "Besides, you need a beat to dance, and I like to dance."

"Rock the Casbah has a beat!"

"The point of trance being repetitive," she explains, "is that you can go into a trance, and just dance. It's a state of heightened consciousness or whatever. That's why it's called trance. I discovered it while I was in Europe."

"Are you sure the 'heightened consciousness' wasn't from the E?" he says, holding up his fingers to make air quotes.

She rolls her eyes. She stops her CD and switches to the local classic rock station, where Styx is somewhere in the vocal stratosphere of Renegade's refrain. "Oh mama, I'm in fear for my life, from the long arm of the law," sings Tommy Shaw.

She turns the volume back up. "Happy, now?" she says.

Derek's silent for a long time.

"What?" she says.
"… I take it we've had this argument before?"

She nods. "Yep. Why?"

He looks out the window. "Nothing."

Her eyebrows knit. "No, really, why?"

He glances at her. "I'm just …." He shrugs. "I'm trying to picture myself married to a woman who
listens to the musical equivalent of a hammer striking nails."

"You're trying to picture us married?" she says, biting her lip. The light turns green, and she moves
her foot from the brake to the accelerator. Verdant scenery blurs.

"I …." He blushes. "Well, you said we were …." He shakes his head. "Are." Another head shake.
"Will be. Er …."

Like he's admitting he freaking believes her. About the time travel. Point blank. Like …. Her breaths
tighten in her chest. But then he doesn't say anything else.

She dares to ask, "Is it … mostly a nice picture?"

He glances at her again. A ghost of a smile crosses his face. His eyes crinkle at the edges. But he still
doesn't speak.

She opts not to push him for more details. Hell, this was a huge victory all by itself. The fact that he
even acknowledged what she's said about them in the future. Still ….

"I don't listen to trance when you're home," she says softly. "And you don't listen to punk rock when
I'm home. Co-occupancy means classic rock."

"Huh?"

She echoes his ghost of a smile. "That's the picture." Sheswallows. "Of us married, I mean. That's
the picture of …. We compromise." She glances at him, searching for signs that, maybe, she was too
blunt again, but … he seems fine. Almost … serene.

"Compromise," he echoes in that soft lilt of his.

"Yeah," she says.

He doesn't respond to that, but the silence is a pleasant, lived-in one. It doesn't say awkward, just …
nothing to say and no pressing need to fill the aural space. It's one of the kind of silences she started
having with him after they pushed past the hesitant, casual-dating stage of their relationship. Past the
perfunctory getting-to-know-youstuff. It's comfortable.

It's … perfect.

When she pulls onto the highway, the silence is still resting there in the car, like a good friend leaning
forward from the middle of the back seat to fill the space between them.

She smiles. The car rumbles as she accelerates.

Derek's riding to work with her for the first time in months.

It's pedestrian, yes, but she still enjoys every second.
Izzie and Alex stand at the other side of the locker room, too close for anything platonic, as they sip their coffees and laugh at jokes only they can hear. Meredith sits on the bench, hanging over her knee, hands at her shoelaces, but all she can do is stare at Izzie and Alex. Wow. That happened fast. Just last week, Izzie seemed incredulous at the idea that Alex was, under his prickly exterior, actually a wonderful person. And, now, they're making goo-goo eyes over coffee.

Meredith frowns. She wonders if she put the idea in Izzie's head.

"What is she doing?" Cristina demands over Meredith's shoulder.

George peers dubiously at the giggling pair. "She's hanging out with Alex."

Cristina just seems … confused. "Why?" she says, in the same tone one might use in akin to, Ew. There's a bug on my shoe.

"I dunno," George says, eyes wide. "I think … I think they might be friends." More giggles carry across the aisle. His tone drops into a horrified whisper as he adds, "Make the lambs stop screaming."

Meredith rolls her eyes, but resists the urge to defend Alex. She looks back at Cristina. "Hey," she says.

Cristina's eyebrows knit. "Hi."

"How are you doing?" Meredith asks.

Cristina snorts. "I just watched Evilspawn flirt with Dr. Barbie. I feel the urge to vomit."

Meredith grins. So, Cristina's back to normal after her procedure, at least. Meredith was right. They caught the ectopic pregnancy in a matter of minutes, and they took care of it. Cristina missed a day of work. That was it.

"Hey," Meredith says, "at least, the nausea isn't baby-related."

Cristina rolls her eyes. "Thank. God."

Meredith and George plunder the vending machine while Alex and Izzie talk farther down the hall. Bailey pokes her head around the corner. "Hey, there's a new surgical case coming up from the pit," she says. "Likely diverticulitis." She waves them forward. "Let's go."

Meredith pulls out her bag of chips from the dispensing bin, and the four of them follow Bailey at a lagging trot. It's not until Meredith hears a familiar, strident, "Watch it! Hands off me! I could report you to the chief, and you'd be out on your ass!" that she remembers this moment.

She grinds to a halt, staring as her mother is wheeled off the elevator. Ellis Grey is wearing a disheveled hospital gown. Her hair is in wild disarray. She's sitting up on the gurney, struggling with the restraints that keep her hands secure by her hips.

"Where is the chief!?" Ellis snaps.

Cristina, trying to talk over the racket, stumbles with her words. "Patient's name is … ah … ."

"Where is the chief!?" Ellis repeats. "You're all amateurs." She yanks on the restraints with so much violence she's panting.
"Complaining of intermittent cramping, pain, and diarrhea," Cristina says. A doctor bumps into Meredith, and she snaps back as though she were burned. She clutches her wrist, staring at Ellis, unable to look away. Cristina continues, "Also suffers from … ah ….

"Amateurs!" Ellis shouts.

Cristina hunches over the chart. "Alzheimer's."

"Patient's name?" Bailey asks.

"Um ….

"Yang!" Bailey repeats. "Patient's name."

Which is when Ellis catches sight of Meredith, standing in the hallway, still as stone, mouth slightly agape. "What the hell are you doing here?" Ellis snaps, and Meredith feels her shoulders curling. She can't help it. Run, says her tiny voice. Run. Just run. Her feet start to move as Ellis's nasty words chase after her. "Haven't I told you? How many times have I told you not to bother me when I'm at work?"

Meredith doesn't stay. She can't stay. She could barely handle this the first time it happened. She doesn't want to do it again.

She runs.

She finds Derek rooting through patient files at the nurse's station outside the NICU. What he's doing there, she has no freaking clue. She doesn't care.

"I need a surgery," she tells him without preamble.

He turns around to peer at her, chart in his hands. "Dr. Grey," is all he says.

She swallows. "Please, Der…," she says. She shakes her head. Professional setting. They're in a professional setting, and this Derek is picky about propriety. "Dr. Shepherd. I need a surgery. I need something to do. I know I've asked for a lot, lately." Like operating blind on a spinal hematoma, believing in time travel, and all that crap. "I know, but ….

He frowns. "What's wrong?" he says.

She rubs her eyes. "You haven't heard?"

He shakes his head. A glower overtakes his expression. "I've been dodging Satan all morning." He peers down at the chart in his hands and sighs. "Which … seems to be a futile endeavor."

"My mom is here. In the hospital."

He raises his eyebrows. "As a patient?"

She nods and wipes her eyes. "Diverticulitis."

He tilts his head, and a look of concern overtakes his upset over playing hide-and-seek with Addison. "Oh, Meredith," he says. "I'm sorry. What's the prognosis?" But he doesn't step close to wrap his arms around her. Doesn't try to hug her or kiss her or anything too familiar, and it only
makes her want to cry more.

She shrugs. "I didn't stay to find out."

And she can't remember this crap, either. Not beyond the broad strokes of her mother screaming at her. She's always done her best to push it out of her mind.

"Oh," Derek says.

She steps closer to him. As close as she dares. Close enough to feel the heat emanating from his body. Close enough to, if she wanted, take one step, press herself up against him, and never let go. But … this Derek isn't Her Derek. She wishes he was, but he isn't, and …. 

"Please, I just want something to do," she croaks. "Anything."

"I'm banned from the OR, Mere," he says in a soft tone.

She looks at her feet. "Oh. Right."

He thinks for a moment. "Dr. Nelson has an ETS this afternoon. Why don't you scrub in for that? He won't say no. I'll talk to him."

"Okay," she says. She swallows, and she clears her throat. "Thanks."

"Sure," he says, offering her one of his devastating smiles.

And that's when he surprises her. He reaches out, grabs her hand, pulls. She lets herself be pulled. He guides her into the supply closet. The lock clicks. His case file makes a slapping noise as he drops it carelessly on one of the shelves. And then he closes the gap between them, and she's enveloped in his warm, strong arms.

"Shh," he soothes as he rubs her back, and it feels so nice. So freaking nice. She melts. In his arms. Until he's pretty much propping her up in addition to hugging her. She presses her ear against his chest and sighs.

"It'll be okay," he assures her over the top of her head, and she listens to the rumble of his voice through his breastbone. He rests his chin against her hair. "I'm sure it'll be okay."

He holds her for …. 

She doesn't even know how long.

She loses all track of time.

"Well, Dr. Grey," Dr. Nelson says, later, across the OR table from her. "This should be exciting for you." He's smiling behind his mask. She can tell by the way his eyes crease. The EKG monitor bleeps in the silence. Kelly Roche lies on her side the table, her spine exposed to open air.

"Yes," Meredith replies, "very." Though, this surgery isn't exciting. All it's doing is filling mental space, so she can't think about-

"Pickups, please," Dr. Nelson calls, and a scrub nurse hands him forceps. He nods to Alex, who's standing next to him. "Okay, Dr. Karev," he says. A fleshy sound resounds as he shifts the forceps. "If we're going to stop her blushing, we have to expose the sympathetic ganglion chain, which resides where?"
Alex doesn't have a chance to answer, though. George appears at the OR door, holding a surgical mask over his face. "What is it, O'Malley?" Dr. Nelson asks.

"I … uh …." George futzes with the clipboard in his hands. "I need Dr. Grey's signature on this … form."

Dr. Nelson pauses what he's doing to peer over his shoulder at George. His eyebrows knit. "Can't it wait?" He gestures at the body on the table. "We're a little busy, here."

"It's … um …." George shuffles on his feet.

Meredith sighs. "It's for my mother, isn't it? Something …?"

He nods. "We need to perform a biopsy. She has … um. A mass. On her liver."

Meredith frowns. She can't remember … any of this. When did her mother have a freaking tumor? Her gut churns. She can't …. Is this something she doesn't remember, or is this Murphy striking again?

She bites her lip and glances at Dr. Nelson. He nods. "Go ahead," he says. "You can scrub back in when you're done, if you'd like."

Meredith follows George out into the hallway, peeling off her gloves and throwing them into the biohazard bin as she goes. She never even had a chance to touch the patient, or anything but an IV pole, yet, so she skips scrubbing out. She knows she shouldn't, but … the sudden anxiety clutching her heart is painful.

The quiet of the operating room falls away like petals from a flower as she steps into the hallway. Nurses chatter at the main station. Keyboards clack. A low rumble fills her chest as an OR team wheels a gurney down the hall to the neighboring OR. It's surreal. To be hearing all that when she's being told her mother has cancer.

George proffers the clipboard to her. She reads. Swallows.

"You really think she has cancer," Meredith says. "You think …." The growth is on her liver, so …. "What's her total bili?"

"Only four," George replies. He puts his hand on Meredith's shoulder. Squeezes. "It's … not great, but … it's not terrible."

"I haven't noticed any jaundice when I've visited," she says.

He nods. "That's why." He clears his throat. "Really, Meredith, it could be anything. It could be benign."

She shakes her head. "George," she replies in a croaky voice, "you don't understand."

He frowns. "What don't I understand?"

"I don't get reprieves," Meredith says. "I don't get … nice things. And this is …." A horrible timeline where everything goes wrong. Everything. "I don't remember this, so, this must be …."

George stares at her with a concerned expression, and she realizes what she's said and who she's said it to. He doesn't know about her losses. And he sure as hell doesn't know about the time travel. He'd try to admit her to psych if she spilled the beans about that.
She shakes her head and shoves the signed form at him. He grunts as it impacts with his chest. "Never mind," she croaks.

And then she's off at a run.

Again.

All she seems to be doing today is running.

She needs her bubble back. The bubble Derek pulled her into when he hugged her in the supply closet and told her things would be fine. The bubble where she had no idea anything was wrong with her mother beyond diverticulitis. She needs to not think. She needs ….

He's not in the cafeteria, or in his office, or doing rounds. She finds him on the catwalk, leaning against the railing, staring into space. He has a sheaf of papers clutched in one hand, but he isn't looking at it.

He doesn't look at her as she sidles next to him against the catwalk railing. He doesn't even acknowledge she's there. But, somehow, he knows the warm body next to him is her, because the first thing he says is, "How is your mother?" in a numb, distant tone that says, in this moment, he really doesn't give a single crap about Meredith's mother, and is only asking because he's polite. Which is … far from the warm reception Meredith was hoping for.

She wipes her eyes with the back of her hands. She tries not to be hurt. She tries. He couldn't know about the maybe-cancer. All he knows about is the diverticulitis, which is 100% treatable.

"Why are you upset?" she asks, trying not to let exasperation bleed into her tone. All he ever freaking is is upset, lately. And-

"She said, 'Sometimes, people do desperate things to attract attention,'" he replies in a hateful tone. He gives Meredith a dark look. "That's how she characterized what she did. As an attention grab. Can you believe that?"

Meredith blinks. Whoa. "You talked to Addison? As in face-to-face? With actual words? Made with syllables?"

He doesn't laugh. "She paged me for a consult," he says.

That … doesn't quite sound like Addison. At all. She lies as easily as she can walk in her nine gazillion dollar Louboutins. But she doesn't scheme.

"Under false pretenses?" Meredith says, eyebrows raised.

Derek shakes his head. "No, the consult was real. Wishful fucking thinking, but real. She gets too attached, and she …." He rolls his eyes, like this is a fight he's had so many times he's sick of it, and then he sighs. "I was on my way there when you ran into me. It's just … she also gave me these when I got there."

Which is when Meredith realizes the sheaf of papers he's holding in his hand has nothing to do with healthcare work. Superior Court of Washington County, it says in big bold letters across the top. A whole slew of check boxes and fill-in-the-blanks about assets and children and blah, blah, blah follow. Identification of Petitioner: Addison Adrianne Montgomery-Shepherd. Identification of Respondent: Derek Christopher Shepherd.
"Oh," Meredith says. "Wow."

"Yeah," he says with a wry, upset laugh. "Apparently not showing up to work for a week upon her arrival explained my feelings loud and clear." He snorts. "Which is really funny, because I don't even know how I feel."

"What are you going to do?" Meredith says.

He shakes his head. His eyes are dark. "Looking at her makes me nauseous."

"I know," Meredith says softly. She steps closer, but she doesn't risk being affectionate. Not in public. Not when he's already upset, her presumption of familiarity might set him off, and she doesn't want to lose any of the progress with him that she's made. She holds out her hands, and he foists the divorce papers at her. She skims them. Wow. Wow. "So ... you're signing them?"

"Meredith ... she ..." He looks her in the eye. For the first time since she arrived. His expression is a tormented wasteland. "Addison is ..." He chokes to a halt. Clears his throat. Swallows like he's got a lump in his throat. "Was. Other than Mark, she was my best friend. She ..."

Another rough sound catches in his throat.

Meredith looks up at him. Crap. Double crap. He's falling apart. Why the hell is **everything** falling apart right now? She wants to talk about her mother. Deal with that. She wants him to take all of it away. Like Her Derek would.

Pragmatically speaking, though, her mother, sick or not, dying or not, will have very little effect on any pending epiphanies. Meredith thinks she's epiphanied herself out over the years, when it comes to her mother, thanks to Dr. Wyatt, and near death whatevers, and everything else.

The divorce papers crinkle as Meredith shifts on her feet. She risks reaching for his hand. His fingers close around hers, almost like a reflex.

"Come on," she says in a hushed tone, and then she stalks off the catwalk, pulling him along by the hand.

The chief's office is just a few short strides away. And it's empty, if the lack of light emanating from the big, unblocked windows is any indication. She doesn't think the chief will mind her commandeering his office for the purposes of dealing with Derek.

Patricia's sitting at her desk just outside Richard's office door, typing. She looks up, and her eyes widen as Meredith approaches the office with Derek trailing behind, mute. "Hey, I can't let you in there," she says as Meredith tries the doorknob on the office. It's not locked, but ....

Meredith looks over at Patricia. "Look, we just need a private place to talk real quick." And Derek's office is a zillion years away, but Derek's falling apart now. "Call the chief and ask him, if you want.Tell him I'm handling his neuro problem."

"Neuro problem?" Patricia says.

Meredith sighs. "He'll know what I mean."

Patricia blinks. "... Okay," she says, tone a little mystified, but at least she makes the call. She talks to the receiver in hushed tones, glaring at Meredith and Derek all the while like she thinks they're thieves, but ... in a matter of twenty seconds, the glare leaks away. After she hangs up the phone, she looks at them with a surprised expression and says, "He says go ahead."
"Thanks," Meredith says. And she pushes through the open door.

Derek follows behind like a wraith.

Richard's office is cool a quiet and dark, save for the light filtering in through the big windows facing the catwalk. She leaves the lights off for privacy, if nothing else. She drops the divorce papers down on the arm of the sofa, where they land on the leather with a slapping sound. And then she flops down on the couch with a hefty sigh.

Derek doesn't, though. All he does is stand there in the middle of the room by the edge of Richard's desk, looking for all the world like a lost puppy. She rubs the bridge of her nose. This wasn't where or when she ever imagined she'd be - stuck in 2005, trying to console her husband about his horrible adulterous other wife, in the hope - anti-hope? She still can't decide what outcome would best foster the epiphany(ies) Mark thinks she needs - that Derek will go back to Addison.

"I thought she was the love of my life," he says. He pulls his fingers through his hair and starts to pace. "She's … family. She's been my wife for eleven Thanksgivings, eleven birthdays, eleven Christmases …. I thought …." He sighs. "I thought she didn't want me, anymore. I thought … I failed. I mean … to me … that's what your spouse cheating on you means." He halts his back and forth. Snorts. "According to her, though, all it meant was, 'Hey, look at me!'"

"So … you're not signing them," Meredith replies in a flat tone, not sure what else to say.

He pinches the bridge of his nose and flops down beside her on the couch. "It was … just the one time, and I …." he says. He looks at Meredith with a pointed expression. "I …. With you … um." He blushes. "I mean … I …. I can see how it could happen, now." His gaze darkens. "That doesn't mean it's okay, but …."

Meanwhile, a burning blade of anger strikes from the inside out. "She told you it was just the one time?" Meredith says through clenched teeth.

She forgot about this part. The part where Addison lied through her freaking teeth about an affair that lasted months. When Derek had finally told Meredith about what happened, about how much he regretted not picking her, regretted wasting months on being Addison's sloppy seconds without even knowing that's what he was, it'd been … later. Years later. After Addison had already gone to Los Angeles. And Derek had only admitted it because he was drunk off his freaking gourd and distracted, or else Meredith never would have even known Addison had left such a devastating scar on his psyche.

"I should have picked you, he said.

"Just the one," Derek continues, oblivious. He sighs and looks at his lap. "Maybe, I'm … being too harsh. Or …. I mean, I vowed …." He shakes his head. Sighs again. "I don't know." And then he looks at her with his sad, conflicted eyes and says, "What do you think?"

Meredith swallows. Crap. What the hell is she supposed to say to that?

"I think ….," she hedges, mind racing.

She knows precisely what she thinks. That Addison - who, outside of her proclivity for infidelity, is a lovely person - is a lying bitch who stole Meredith's happiness for over half a year, and he should say hell no. But … what if telling him, Go back to your wife, is how Meredith gets her freaking epiphany? It would help if she knew what her epiphany is supposed to be about, other than vaguely, "Derek," or, "her relationship with Derek."
Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,
And sorry I could not travel both
And be one traveler, long I stood

She almost laughs like she's manic when the poem wanders into her morass of uncertainty. The irony of that poem is that everybody thinks it's a ballad for forging your own path and being a special snowflake, when, in reality, it's Robert Frost poking fun at an indecisive friend.

"So not helping," she mutters.

"What?" Derek says.

She shakes her head. "Nothing." Crap. Crappity crap. Hell, she needs a coin to flip. "I think …." She swallows. "I think … that …." Think **what!?** "Your vows seem really important to you."

Her jaw drops a little. The words just popped out. She has no idea where they came from. If anything might push him back to Addison, it's that. She supposes her mind is now made. But ….

*To love each other, even when we hate each other.*

*No running.*

*To take care of each other, even when we're old, senile, and smelly.*

*And it's forever.*

A lump forms in her throat. Why did her brain have to take her **there**? She glances at Derek. He's staring back at her with an unreadable expression.

"What?" she snaps when he doesn't say anything.

"What's the point of making vows, if they're not important?" he says, the words soft.

"I don't know," she says with a dejected shrug. "I've never been a big wedding person."

He raises his eyebrows. "Oh?"

"I think actions speak a lot more than words," she replies slowly. Which … talk about prevarication. If anything will keep him from going back to his wife, that will. She supposes her mind is now **not** made.

And sure enough, he glowers. "I'd say this action definitely spoke."

"That's probably putting it lightly," she says.

"That's probably putting it lightly," she says.

He doesn't reply to that, and silence stretches. She's not sure what she's thinking when she drops her head onto his shoulder and sighs. She's **really** not sure what she's thinking when she curls up against him. She's concluded she's an indecisive freak by the time she's holding his arm like it's a teddy bear. He doesn't seem to mind, though. He extracts his arm from her grasp, but only to wrap said arm over her shoulder and pull her closer.

She sighs.

He's warm, and she's needed this.

"So … you don't dream of a big white wedding?" he says, thumb stroking her bicep. "I thought all
women did."

"No. I'm ... a bit more practical," she confesses. She makes a face. "Plus, I hate lace. And glitter. And pink. And fluffy dresses."

"Practical, how?"

"I don't think a piece of paper I signed, or some crap I said before a justice of the peace, should mean more than a kidney in a jar, or a candle house, or ... coming home every night to someone who loves and understands me no matter how much I screw up, or how freaky I get. Someone who, on the rare occasions I still run away, at this point, just rolls his eyes and chases after me. Or ...." Her voice trails away.

*Like he used to*, a tiny voice tells her. *He used to do all those things.*

And then the fighting started.

The lump in her throat expands to the size of a basketball.

"A kidney ... in a jar?" Derek says slowly, like she's just told him *Soylent Green* is people.

She shakes her head. "Just ... never mind."

Conversation ceases again.

Now, she's thinking about the horrible place she left her marriage in 2012, and in a futile moment of self-pity, she wonders why the hell she's fighting so hard to get back to that mess. She has no idea how the Meredith and Derek who happily formalized their marriage on a freaking Post-it became those awful, sniping, nasty people at the end.

*Well, you could ask him*, the tiny voice says. *Ask him how a marriage breaks down.*

She freezes. Ask him? Seriously?

*Why not? He's here. He might even be honest, since he'll think he's talking about Addison, and not you. Plus, you and he don't have the kind of shared baggage, yet, that makes Addison verboten. What have you got to lose?*

What the hell does she have to gain is what she wants to know.

*Maybe, everything.*

She feels a little like she has Pandora's box sitting in her lap again, begging her to open it. The last time she opened the box was on the ferry, when Derek was drunk, and she regretted it for weeks. Hell, she still regrets it for the delays it caused. Delays that, in Meredith's mind, still make Addison a legitimate wrench-in-the-works to consider when determining how to proceed with the whole Team MerDer thing.

Her fingers scrunch, gathering up pieces of his wool sweater. Maybe, she doesn't want to know. Shouldn't know.

*Or, maybe, that's the whole reason Mark sent you back here. To find out the answer to th is question.*

*Maybe this is your epiphany.*
"What was it like?" she says. She imagines yelling and breaking dishes and someone saying, *Get the hell out!* 

He looks down at her. Rests his cheek against her hair, like he's enjoying this closeness as much as she is. He squeezes her shoulder. "What was what like?"

"Your … marriage," she replies. "Before Addison … did …." Mark. "Um." **Crap.**

Derek's silent for a long, long time.

"Just tell me to shut up, if you want," she rushes to say, filling the awkward, stretching quiet. "I mean, I know it's not my business. I'm sorry I assum-"

"I thought we were okay," he says, cutting her off.

So … maybe, he's willing to talk in this context, after all. Wow.

She swallows. "You've said that - that you thought things were okay - but …." She stares into space. "What exactly do you mean by okay? What's 'okay' to you?"

"… We were good," he says with a shrug. "We didn't fight."

"At all?"

He shrugs again. "Not really."

"About anything?"

He stares into space. His tone is distant when he says, "No, not recently."

"How are you defining recent?" Days? Weeks? Hours?

"Hmm," he says. "A couple years, I guess."

She gapes. A couple years. A couple **years**? She and Her Derek can't go without fighting for a couple **minutes.**

"But … you used to fight?" she prods.

Derek glances at her. "Who doesn't?"

Hmm. "You said you were absent," she says. And he made her **promise** never to let him be absent. On a night of doubt. A few days before the Post-it.

"… When did I say that?" he says in a wary tone.

"You haven't, yet." Crap. "I meant you will."

"Oh," he says. He futzes with a crease in the denim of his jeans. "I really say that?"

"Yes," she says. "What did you mean by absent?"

"Well, I don't know, Meredith," he retorts in a wounded tone. "I haven't even said it, yet."
Crap. Crap. *Step lightly,* she tells herself. This Derek is raw, and hurting, and feeling worthless, and if she wants her answers … she needs diplomacy. "Look, I don't mean to attack you," she replies calmly. "I'm not saying this whole mess is your fault. Not at all. But … just … think. I want to know."

He frowns. "Why is it important?"

"It just is." She swallows. "Please, tell me?"

More silence. A long, uncomfortable silence. But then his hackles lower like a tide sweeping out of a bay. His gaze searches the space in front of him like he's futilely searching for … something. Answers. Who knows?

"I guess," he says with a sigh. "I guess, I meant …."

He thinks.

"No judgment," she assures him in a soft voice, trying to bolster him. "I promise."

"I focused a lot on work," he admits. "My practice was really busy."

She frowns. "So, you worked long days?"

"Well, yes, that's a given," he says, a strange look on his face. Like what she's thinking isn't at all what he meant. He frowns at her. "We didn't exactly pick a 9 to 5 job, Meredith."

"So … what do you mean, focused on work, then?"

"I guess it's more that I …." He thinks. And thinks. And then his expression sinks. His cheeks redden. Like her request for a little self-analysis is making him consider some things he hadn't, before. "I didn't make an effort to be home."

"Meaning …?"

"I mean I'd …." He shakes his head. "I'd wait for her to ask me to be there before I'd bother trying to be there at all. Which, I suppose … put the onus of maintaining the relationship on her instead of on me. And … I guess she got tired of maintaining it." He sighs. "She had a job, too. She was successful, too."

"And then Mark happened."

He nods. "And then Mark happened." He gives her an upset look. "I guess … we weren't really okay."

"So … she didn't ever get mad at you and … tell you to go?" Meredith hazards, eyes watering.

"She didn't have to, Meredith," he replies. "I was never there in the first place. Not …." He sighs and pulls his fingers through his hair. "Not for the past year or two."

*One of these things is not like the other,* the voice says.

She can barely speak around the lump in her throat. "And you really didn't fight," she says, because that's something she's having trouble believing.

"There wasn't much to fight about," he says with a nonchalant shrug. "We just … drifted."
Her Derek didn't do any of that. He didn't drift away. She pushed him. Granted, she pushed him because he was acting like an asshole at the time, but ….

_I … don’t think I made him feel wanted_ she remembers admitting to this Derek, months ago.

And his response, without realizing he was talking about himself, was, _You can’t blame yourself for his idiocy, Meredith. He could have told you he didn’t feel validated instead of ‘accidentally’ falling on the first pair of lips that showed interest._

Except he _did_ tell her he didn't feel validated. And instead of listening to his _words_, she listened to his _tone_. And after that, it was all over.

Was he acting like an asshole? _Yes_. A complete utter asshole.

But … really?

They both were.

They were _both_ acting like assholes.

And she can see it, now. Like a bad car accident happening before her eyes. All shrieking metal and broken glass like confetti, and all she can do is stare in horror as the impact happens.

He wants his dream job.
She won't go. Her job is important, too.
He capitulates, but he's upset about missing out on the job.
She's so prepared for his resentment that she dons her armor preemptively.
He stands in the middle, expecting her to meet him there.
She doesn't. Her armor's in the way.
His umbrage, burning lightly, becomes wildfire.
He's an asshole because he resents her.
She resents him because he's an asshole.
They fight, and fight, and fight, until there's no air left to breathe, because it's all being sucked out of the room by their yelling.
He hits his breaking point and demands a little support.
She's disgusted that he's making demands, and she tells him to leave.
He doesn't see any other way around going.
So, he goes.

It's one wrong turn and misunderstanding after another, snowballing into an insurmountable avalanche of awful glares and hateful words.

Her marriage to Derek isn't like the cold, distant thing he just described to her. Her marriage to Derek is _inferno_.

"Meredith, are you _crying_?" His arms tighten around her. "What's wrong?"

She should never have told him to go. She's not sure what the alternatives were. Couples counseling? Something. Whatever. She just knows telling him to leave wasn't the right thing.

She swallows around the horrible lump in her throat. "I think I made a really big mistake."

They _both_ had.
"It'll be okay," he tells her in a soft, soothing whisper.

The assurance she's been waiting to hear from him since she found him on the catwalk.

At this point, though … she's not sure if she can believe him.

How can any of this mess ever be okay?
Hmm. I'm not sure how I gave some people the impression this was the last chapter. It's not. There's still one more full chapter after this, and also an epilogue. Anyway, I needed a distraction for myself, and I figured you guys would enjoy having this early. I found out today that a friend of mine, who I've known since college, died unexpectedly on Monday. Any of you who have read AATW have her to thank for the idea for that story. She helped me lend as much authenticity as possible to Derek's struggles with substance abuse, because she went through them herself for the majority of her adult life. Since I don't have the epilogue for AATW done yet, I'd just like to dedicate this chapter to her. Love you, Amy. You left the world far too soon.

"So, what would you do?" Meredith says, leaning back against the wall by the lab window with a sigh. Hospital staff bustles back and forth, and she's just … standing still. Waiting.

"I'm confused," George says.

"Yeah," Izzie replies. "Can you run that by me again?"

Meredith glowers. "I'm writing a story."

"I got that part," George says.

Izzie nods. "Mmm-hmm. Me, too."

Meredith rolls her eyes. "Look. It starts with the girl and the guy already together, but they're having marriage problems."

"Is this going to be a drama or a rom com?" Izzie wants to know.

"I …." Meredith frowns. "I'm feeling an absence of comedy."

"But how are you going to lift the mood without comedy?" George asks.

Meredith sighs. This is not quite the advice she wanted. "That's not what I want help with. The girl's guardian angel.""

"Do you really want to go the Christian route?" Izzie says, interrupting. "I mean, what about everybody else?"

Meredith resists the urge to growl. "Look, I have no idea if it's Christian or not. I'm calling him a guardian angel, because what the hell else should I call a teleporting dead guy who wants to help the living?"

"So, there's no god in this story," George says.

Meredith glowers. "Not one that's said anything."
"Okay," says Izzie. "Continue."

"So, guardian angel guy kicks the girl back in time to have an undetermined number of epiphanies that might save the girl and the guy's relationship, but said angel doesn't specify what will trigger an epiphany. So, now, the girl's not sure whether the epiphany is supposed to be about stuff that did happen, or about stuff that could have happened, and she's pretty much at the point of no return where she needs to make a freaking decision."

"So, you're trying to choose which route for her to take?" George says. "Maintain the status quo, or change things up?"

Meredith nods. "Exactly."

"I had no idea you were an aspiring novelist," Izzie says. She gets a bright look on her face. "But this is good. It's a good distraction. I support you."

Meredith rolls her eyes. "I had this whole thing in college with pink hair and feelings and delinquency. The goth English poetry crowd was totally my thing."

George brightens. "Maybe … you should write a poem!"

Meredith sighs. "I don't want to write a morbid goth poem. I want to know what the girl should pick!"

"Don't time travel stories usually try to show that the way things originally happened is the best way?" Izzie says.

"So, she shouldn't try to change things," Meredith says. And she shouldn't worry about keeping Derek from picking Addison, because that's how it's supposed to go, or … did go, at least.

"But … maybe the girl only figures out she prefers the way things originally unfolded by seeing a new option unfold," Izzie adds.

"So … she should try to change things," Meredith says. And she should start her pick me; choose me; love me campaign, stat. Preferably without the humiliating speech.

"I think-" George begins, only to be cut off when the lab tech leans out the window with a sheet of paper.

"Here you go," the lab tech says in a deep voice. "Ellis Grey."

Meredith takes the paper in her hands. Clutches it. The paper crinkles. She takes a deep, steeling breath, and she reads. Benign. The tumor is benign. It's benign, it's benign, it's benign. Her stomach feels like it's dropping through her shoes. She swallows.

"Meredith," Izzie says from far away. "Are you okay?"

Meredith walks away, staring at nothing. "No," she says. "I'm not okay."

Izzie and George seem to know not to follow.
in her throat.

She hasn't come back here all day.

"Mom," she says softly.

Ellis doesn't stir.

Meredith steps into the room, and she sits on the lip of the bed, facing away. The lump is growing. "Mommy," she repeats in a small voice.

A quick, harsh exhalation fills the air behind Meredith as Ellis wakes. "What are you doing here?" her mother snaps. "I thought I told you not to bother me while I'm at work."

"I thought …."

"When will you get your head out of the **clouds**?" her mother scolds. "You have no direction. No focus. No drive-"

"I know," Meredith replies, numb. God, this was stupid. Coming here. Thinking she'd get … what? Answers? Closure? A second chance to say … whatever? The paper crinkles as she clutches it, her grip so tight that her fist hurts. "The … the mass on your liver is-"

"What?" Ellis says, tone strident. "What is it? What's wrong with me?"

"It's benign, Mom," Meredith says.

"Oh," her mother says. Silence stretches for a moment. The covers rustle. And then she takes a deep, harsh breath. "What are you doing here?" she snaps. "I thought I told you not to bother me while I'm at work."

Meredith looks at her lap. "Sorry. I'll go."

She barely makes it outside the room before her eyes fill with tears. She can't hold them back. Her heart squeezes. Her stomach churns. She races into the stairwell to grieve in quiet.

It's a horrible realization, she thinks.

Horrible to know she kind of wishes the test said the growth was malignant.

Kind of.

At least, then, the end would be quicker.

Maybe, a little less painful.

And she wouldn't have to live through the whole awful thing twice.

Meredith's barely even re-collected herself when she somehow manages to get stuck in a freaking elevator with Addison, of all people. Addison peers over the rims of her glasses at Meredith. Meredith tries not to glare back. But, as she's established in this stupid timeline over and over again, Meredith blows goats at subterfuge, and enough glaring to produce lasers ensues.

"I guess he talked to you," Addison says as the elevator hums.
Meredith shrugs. There's no point in lying, she supposes, since she sucks at it. "Yes."

Addison bites her lip. "There are two sides to every story, you know."

Meredith snorts. Addison is nice. They were sort of friends by the end. But that doesn't take away the fact that this woman perpetrated misery and wasted over six months of Meredith's life on a freaking selfish lie. "What, that people do desperate things to get someone's attention?" Meredith says.

Addison nods. "Yes."

Meredith rolls her eyes. She's tired, and angry, and hurting. She still can't figure out if she should be letting Derek drift toward this woman or yanking him away with all her might, and something inside her just … snaps. "You know, Addison, I'll give you that. Once. Twice. Hell, maybe even three times. Everybody does stupid things. Lord knows I do. I've done so much stupid stuff in my life that I could tell you about a bunch of it and still make a mountain with the leftovers. But you had an affair with Mark for months, you didn't decide to try and get Derek back until after you concluded the whatever-it-is with Mark wouldn't work, like you're betting on horses and changed it up when one broke down, or something, and you have absolutely no intention of telling Derek about it until god knows when. So, pardon me, if I can't have much sympathy for you and the bed you made."

"How do you know that?" Addison demands, stiffening.

Meredith shrugs. "I know a lot of things."

"Does Derek know?"

Meredith shakes her head. "No, he doesn't."

"Are you going to tell him?" Addison says.

Meredith turns her laser glare back on. "What I want to know is why should I even have to?"

Addison has no reply to that. The floor beneath them feels like it's pushing into Meredith's feet as the elevator car comes to a stop. The bell dings. The doors trundle open.

Meredith can't escape fast enough.

This is a horrible day. It's a horrible day. It's a horrible, horrible, horrible day. Her eyes hurt. The lump in her throat won't go away. She's exhausted.

She finds her favorite supply closet in the basement of the hospital. The one that nobody seems to remember exists and therefore nobody uses. The second she closes the door behind herself, plunging the room into darkness, she leans against the cold wood, and she stares through the blackness at the ceiling.

"Please, Mark, tell me what to do," she says. "I want to go home. Please, I want to go home."

At first, nothing happens, and she's left, staring at the ceiling, eyes leaking. She misses her children, and the Derek who's already hers, and her life, and she's had enough of the worrying and the stress and the sleep deprivation, and she wants to go home. But she's not a quitter, either. She's here for a reason. She wants to see it to the end.

Mark lights up the room when he appears. In this case, that's not a metaphor. He glows enough in
pitch black to light up the freaking room.

"Hey," he has a chance to say, before Meredith steps into his space, looks up at him and begs with every available fiber of her being.

"Please," she says. "Please, Mark. Please, tell me what to pick. Do I change things, or do I try to make them stay the same? I need to know what to pick, so I can go home. I want to go home. I really want to go home."

Mark regards her for a long, silent moment. "I can't do that," he replies in a soft, apologetic tone.

"Why not?"

He doesn't answer right away. He looks at the closet around him, full of buckets, and cleaning supplies and surplus sterile materials. The air is musty and old, despite the hint of Lysol that tickles her nostrils.

"This is pretty gloomy in here," he says. "Let's change venues."

She has a chance to say, "What?"

They're on the roof. The freaking. Roof. She blinks. And blinks again. Her brain takes a while to catch up with her eyeballs. This high up, the wind is intense, and slaps at her face with cold hands. Needles of drizzle prick her skin. This isn't gloomy? How is this not-

Mark, who popped in about ten feet away, steps closer, and it's like … his presence is a spherical umbrella. The rain stops hitting her, and the wind dies down, and the air fills up with warmth. And then Meredith Grey is standing in the wind and the rain, getting hit by neither, and it's … surreal. Her eyeballs see no barrier. She shouldn't be comfortable in this weather. And yet … she is.

"I can take you home right now, if that's what you want," Mark says. He looks at her, eyebrows raised like he's asking a question, even though his tone didn't ask one. She shakes her head. He continues, "I can't tell you what to do, though."

She sighs. "But what if I pick wrong?"

Mark frowns. "I … think, maybe, you're misunderstanding the point of all this."

"I thought the point was to save my freaking marriage."

"That's an end goal, yes," he confirms with a nod. "But that's not the point."

God, damn it, he is really freaking cryptic. She's not used to Mark being hard to read. Or to understand. She steps to the edge of the roof and rests her elbows on the guard wall. Traffic noise floats up from the street, but it's distant. Ambient.

"Well, what is the point?" she snaps, staring out over the gray city.

Mark sidles next to her. "Have you considered that, maybe, there isn't a wrong answer?" he says as he settles his elbows a few inches from hers. He's big, and he dwarfs her, but … she doesn't feel dwarfed.

She snorts. "What, this is one of those stupid peewee soccer games where all the kids get a trophy if they try?"
Silence stretches.

"I think … I may have misled you," he says. "By accident."

Seriously? She straightens, turns to him, and folds her arms. "Misled me," she says with narrowed eyes.

"Epiphany is …." He considers for a moment as he stares at the skyline. "I think it's the wrong word."

"The wrong word," she replies in a flat tone.

He frowns at her. "You're doing that thing where you repeat everything I say."

"Because if I don't do that, I'm going to strangle you."

"Look," Mark says. "You and Derek have always been this …." He waves his hands like he can't think of a word or words.

"Vortex of suck?" Meredith suggests.

Mark gives her a wry grin. "I was going to say jumble of recurring issues."

She shrugs. "You say tomato, or whatever."

"The point is …," Mark continues, "some of those things are hard to clarify without a little help, and this experience is supposed to be your help. You're not looking for a string of eureka moments. You're just … looking for understanding."

"What do I need to understand?"

"You tell me," he says. "What have you figured out so far?"

"I …." She swallows. Looks down at her shoes. And then back at the world beyond. A flock of birds pierces the drizzly gloom as they fly along the water in the distance. She admits, "Some of it is my fault."

"Some of what?" Mark prods.

"The … recent crap," Meredith says. The lump in her throat burgeons, and the scenery blurs. She rubs her eyes. "Some of it is … my fault. I've been blaming him and blaming him, but … some of it was me." She sniffs, and she looks over at her angelic companion. "Mark, I shouldn't have told him to go. He wasn't very nice to me. But … I … really wasn't very nice to him, either. I made him feel … unwanted."

Mark nods. "That's true."

"Derek puts … an astronomical value on feeling wanted."

"Yes," Mark says.

There's an and? tacked to the end of Mark's response. One he didn't say, but …. "Derek's … hot," Meredith says, looking down at her hands. Mark sniggers - she can feel it more than see it - and she rushes to add, "I mean Derek runs hot. He … falls into emotions headfirst at the speed of thought, and then he pushes them back into the space around him like a dragon breathing fire." Which sucks when he's angry, but … it's wonderful when he's in a good mood.
"And you?" Mark says.

"I'm the opposite. I … have this box. In my head. A box. And when I put things there … I don't have to think about them. Or talk about them. Or ….." It keeps the bad things from overwhelming her when things are going to crap, and it keeps the good things from being too good. So that when they inevitably get taken away, it doesn't hurt as much. It's ….

Her stomach drops like a stone.

"Did something just occur to you?" Mark prods. "You have a weird look on your face."

Crap. Crap, crap, crap.

She always thought they were the same, and that he was a raging hypocrite. They both run. They both run all the freaking time. It's just … he never admitted it, and she's the one who got labeled as broken, but somehow, he didn't, and that always miffed her. Except …. While they're both definitely broken, they're not the same. They're not the same at all.

"He tends to run from the things he doesn't want, and he fights when he's scared," Meredith says. "I tend to run from the things I do want." And if she's scared, she shuts down.

Mark smiles. "Bingo. Anything else?"

Meredith bites her lip. "Derek's also … slow."

Mark's smile becomes a snicker.

She rolls her eyes. "I mean not stupid slow. He's very smart. He's just slow to make decisions he thinks could potentially hurt him. He … doesn't make emotional leaps. Not without checking the water level about seventy-six zillion times, first."

"And how has all this stuff affected your relationship?"

"There's been a lot of … lost in translation moments." So, so, so many. They're all flooding her mind's eye like a tidal wave.

"What got lost, exactly?" Mark says.

"Well," Meredith says, thinking, "sometimes I interpret things he wants more than air as things he doesn't want at all, because he's so belligerent, or because he takes so freaking long to act. And ….

"And …?"

A distant ch-ch-ch-ch-ch floats over the air from … somewhere. She gazes down seven stories to the sidewalk. Two doctors chat over a clipboard about … something. A car rumbles past in the parking lot. She doesn't see where the ch-ch-ch-ch-ch sound came from.

"And I … know why he didn't tell me," she says. "About Addison. I know, now."

"Okay," Mark says with a nod. "And that helps you with what?"

"I don't know."

The ch-ch-ch-ch-ch is getting closer. Louder. The wind is picking up.

"So, I guess that's your goal, then," he says.
"Oh, sure," she replies, rolling her eyes. "Just figure out what I don't know. So easy. I'll get right on that."

Mark gives her a warm smile. "You'll get it, Grey. For what it's worth, you're really close."

A crash team pushing a gurney spills out onto the roof, frantic and shouting things, and the ch-ch-ch-ch-ch-ch is a loud, deafening thunder, now. Meredith turns to see a helicopter setting down on the launch pad, blades spinning so fast the wind generated by them explodes across the roof. Her ponytail snaps like a whip. The rain pricks like needles again. CH-CH-CH-CH-CH-CH. The crash team transfers the medevac patient to the gurney with the help of two of the helicopter crew.

Meredith glances to her right. Mark's gone. Poofed away or whatever.

The rules about visitations, she supposes. He's only allowed to be here in the flesh for her. She swallows.

You'll get it, Grey, he said.

Crap, she hopes so.

Whatever the hell Addison tells Derek, Meredith doesn't think it's about the fact that Addison cheated on him over and over and over for three freaking months. If she had, he wouldn't be sucking her face right now. Meredith freezes outside the NICU, not quite believing what she's seeing.

Derek's sitting in a rocking chair. Addison is hovering over him, bent over at the waist. Their lips are locked. And he's … not pushing her away.

Nausea coils in Meredith's stomach.

This is what's supposed to happen, she tells herself. This is how it happened the first time. He's supposed to go back to her. Meredith's made him all whole and healed - or, well, in this timeline, at least healing - and now he can … do this. Kiss his cheating wife. Try to honor his vows like he thinks he should.

Because that's the kind of guy Derek is.

He doesn't forget vows.

No running.

Love each other, even when we hate each other.

But as "right" as the lip lock may be, watching him kiss Addison doesn't feel right. It feels horrible. And then Meredith sees Renee, like a ghost, laughing and laughing, juxtaposed on top of the already awful picture, and it feels worse.

Meredith's fingers clench.

Something inside snaps. It snaps. It snaps like breaking bone.

She's tired of being an intern again, and she's tired of everything going wrong. She's tired of slogging through her mother's illness all over again. She's tired of Derek being so much work. She's tired of having cryptic, helpful-but-not conversations with Mark. She's tired of everything that's happening in this stupid freaking timeline, and her chest hurts, and she can't breathe, watching Derek kiss that …
woman.

Nothing was ever the same after Addison showed up.

*Please, you have to believe I would have told you. I was going to tell you that night.* Please, Meredith.

*I want to trust you. I want to, but I can’t.*

You can’t trust anybody. And no matter what I do … you’re always going to look for reasons not to trust me.

The memories crash against her like waves. Like she's been sucked into an undertow, and she's drowning as it pulls her under. Moments from a near decade. Compressed into heartbeats.

*I should have picked you.*

*When I had a choice to make, I chose wrong.*

*I want to trust you. I want to, but I can’t.*

*Have you considered that, maybe, there isn’t a wrong answer?*

She doesn't have to watch this. Derek drinking Addison's spit. Meredith doesn't have to.

*The only thing that would be irreparable is if you die, Meredith.*

*Pick me. Choose me. Love me.*

*I should have picked you.*

*I want to trust you. I want to, but I can’t.*

This can be the thing she changes. This can be how she finds out once and for all. All she has to do is catch him before Addison sinks in her claws.

*I just didn’t discourage it. And that was wrong, and I'm sorry. I stopped her right after, and I came straight home.*

*I want to trust you. I want to, but I can’t.*

It can't possibly be too late. Can it? He kissed Meredith just that morning. He rode to work with her today. Without asking, first. They fought about the radio station. And he was avoiding "Satan" like the plague as late as a few hours ago. He can't go from avoiding Satan like the plague to wanting to try again with her in a matter of hours.

*The only thing that would be irreparable is if you die, Meredith.*

*Just figure out what I don't know. So easy. I'll get right on that.*

*For what it's worth, you're really close.*

Mark says this wasn't supposed to be a eureka moment, but it is. It so freaking is. She knows what she has to do, now. And she's not sure why it took so long to figure it out.

*I should have picked you.*
Crap, why did it take so long to figure out?

She yanks open the door and steps inside, panting, chest burning like her heart's turned molten. Addison and Derek pull apart. Addison's eyes widen.

"Meredith," Derek murmurs, eyes glassy, like he's still got stars circling his head from that sucking-face kiss. He's breathing hard. His hair is messy, and his lips are a bit too pink.

She folds her arms, trying to un-see what she just saw, but she can't. It's a hot brand on her retinas. "What am I, to you, exactly?" she snaps.

Derek blinks. "What?"

"You heard me," Meredith says.

"Hey," Addison snaps in a harsh, forced whisper. She makes a pointed glance toward one of the closest isolettes, where a tiny, wrinkled baby, smaller than a football, rests, swathed in so many bandages it's hard to see skin. "Not here."

Meredith rolls her eyes and steps back into the quiet hallway. It's late, at least, and they'll have some privacy for this knockdown drag-out of a discussion. Derek takes a moment to climb out of the rocking chair, but he manages with a soft groan that carries through the open doorway. He's blushing when he closes the door behind him. Blushing. Like he's turned on, or …. Anger tumbles through her.

"Meredith," he begins in that soft, reverent tone she usually loves so much, but she doesn't love it, now, and she doesn't give him a chance to say anything else.

"What am I?" she demands again. "To you, what I am? I'm tired of not knowing."

"I don't know," he replies.

She regards him for a long, long moment, silent, lump in her throat. Expanding. She has a sinking feeling she's about to dig the hole she'll be buried in, but she just can't do this.

"That's not enough, Derek," she says. "I need you to pick me." She pats her chest. The impact makes a hollow thumping sound. "Pick me. Believe me. Love me. Not her. And stop stringing me along."

She swallows. Wipes her face with the backs of her palms. "I need that. Just this once, pick me, instead."

He gives her a pained look. Like she just took his dog out back and shot it or something. The lump in her throat hurts. He's not going to do it. Pick her. He won't. She has no idea what she was thinking. And she can see herself, trawling in the smelly dirt with the shovel, digging and digging and digging her grave.

He leans against the wall beside the NICU. His fingers clench and unclench and clench again. He breaks eye contact with her to stare at some nondescript point down the hallway, where an orderly is mopping up a puddle of god-knows-what.

"I feel like I'm drowning, Meredith," he says in a broken tone.

"I know you do," she says, voice wavering.

He licks his lips. He cups his chin with his hand and drags his fingers over his face. He pushes off
the wall and paces. She watches, but all she sees is the hole getting deeper, and she feels like she's sinking into it. Why. Why, why, why does she always fall into the trap of believing this man, only to get burned?

*You and Derek have always been this ….*

*Vortex of suck?*

*I was going to say jumble of recurring issues.*

"Tell me about our kids," he says.

She bites her lip. "We have two," she says in a strained voice.

"Two," he says.

She nods. "An adopted daughter named Zola, and a biological son named Bailey. Well, Bailey is actually his middle name. His first name is Derek."

That makes him pause. His lip twitches as he regards her. "Like me."

"Like you," she says, eyes watering. Derek's not going to pick her again, and having to talk about their kids, who she misses so badly her heart aches with their absence, in the same breath of that realization, makes her eyes leak in earnest. "He has your eyes, too. And he has your smile. And he has your laugh."

"I've always wanted kids," Derek says softly.

Her lower lip won't stop trembling. "I know," she says. Her voice cracks when she adds, "You're a really great dad." And he is. He's wonderful. Even after he left - after you pushed him out the door, the voice says - he talked to them on the phone. Every freaking day. Without fail.

He loves his family.

Loves them.

He just … won't pick her.

"How old are they?" Derek says.

She sniffs. "The kids?"

He nods. "Yes."

"Zola is four. Bailey is two."

Derek stops. He doesn't look devastated by a kiss, anymore. Just … devastated. He pulls his fingers through his hair. "I like your version," he says. He looks at her, and he gives her a brittle smile. "Meredith, I like you."

But he doesn't like her enough. She's never been enough for him. That's the fundamental problem right there. That she's not enough. She never has been. She never will be.

"But …," she adds for him, glum.
"But … I just can't. I …." He growls. Deep and low in his throat. Like he's frustrated. "I can't …."

"You can't believe me."

"I … I …." He shakes his head. "No." His eyes are wet, now. "Meredith, this is **insane**. What you're asking me to believe is **insane**."

She looks at her feet. "I know it's a leap."

"It's a fucking pole vault to Jupiter," he snaps.

"I know," she says quietly.

Her chest hurts. Her throat hurts. God, she just can't handle this anymore today. She turns to leave. Addison's still in the NICU, trying to make herself look busy and failing. He'll have his wife to keep his head above water, now. He'll be okay.

"Where are you going?" he says before Meredith's made it two steps.

She shrugs. "Somewhere not here."

"What?" he says. "Why?" A warm hand touches her shoulder. She snaps away from him like his flesh scalds.

The flash of heat overwhelms her dejection. "Because I need to be at the bottom of a tequila bottle, like … yesterday, Derek," she snaps.

"But … we're talking," he says in a forlorn tone.

She huffs a sigh. "My mother has not-cancer-"

"Cancer?" he says in a horrified tone.

But Meredith steamrolls his attempt at interjection. "My husband is sucking off his other wife's lips, I'm pretty certain I'm going to come in second place **again**, I don't want to deal with this anymore right now, and I freaking need alcohol," she snaps. "Stat."

He has the good sense not to reply to that. She stalks down the hall. Away from him and his leggy and fabulous wife. Away from the freaking fairytale where he picks her first.

"Meredith, wait," he says.

She hears him behind her. Closing the gap.

"Please, wait," he says. "Please …."

She slams to a halt, wheels on her heels to face him. "**No,**" she blurs.

"Please, just let me **think**," he snaps.

"Derek, **no,**" she repeats. "I can't …. I just can't take this anymore. I can't be endlessly supportive with nothing in return while you get your head on straight, because I'm falling apart, doing that, and I can't. My life is completely screwed up right now, too, and I don't have anyone." Her friends, yes, but they'll never believe her if she tells them why she's upset. If Derek won't, no one ever will. No one sane, anyway. "I told you what I want. For you to pick me. Either do that, or go. The hell.
And then she continues her egress.

"But, Meredith," she hears him say behind her. "Meredith," he repeats. "Meredith."

She's good at running, though. She leaves him in the dust before he can say much else.

So much for freaking epiphanies.

The bell over the door at Joe's dings, and she can't help but crane her neck to see if it's Derek. It's not, of course. Just like the last five door dings haven't been, either. She's not even sure why she thinks there might be a chance. It's not like she told him where she was going.

God, damn it.

She kicks back her third shot of the night, not even bothering with salt or lime or anything. Fire explodes in her throat. She makes a choking noise, but she gets it all down, and she slams the empty glass onto the bar.

"I actually said, 'Pick me.' Right?" she says to Joe, who's reassumed his duties, despite the fact that he's wearing a funny hat to cover up the fact that he's bald, now. "I had a clean slate to not make a complete fool of myself and beg while he slobbers over some other woman, and I did it, anyway. The begging. Right? I did?"

Joe frowns as he refills her glass. "I think it's romantic," he says.

Meredith glares. She kicks back the next shot. Her face feels hot, and she's getting dizzy, and she's pissed. At herself. At Derek. At everything.

"Begging is not romantic, Joe," she says when she's recovered her wind. "It's horrifying. Horror movie horrifying. Carrie at the prom with the pig's blood horrifying."

"Okay, fine," Joe concedes. "It's horrifying."

"It is," Meredith says with a tight nod as the stupid freaking bell dings again. "I'm a sap. I'm a whiny, sniveling, begging, needs-a-man sap with no self-respect who says, 'Pick me,' even on a freaking do-over." She glares at her shot glass. "Why is this empty?"

Joe doesn't reply. She looks up. He's staring at the space behind her, grinning like an idiot.

"What!" Meredith snaps. "Are there peanuts in my hair or something?"

"No," says a soft, familiar voice behind her. "Just me."

She freezes. Gapes. Whirls around on her stool.

"For what it's worth," he says as she turns, "you didn't really beg so much as demand."

Sure enough, there he is. Derek. Standing there in his dark wool coat with his hands stuffed in his pockets. His face is flushed again, and he's breathing hard, but not like he kissed someone. Like he ran here. Actually ran.

"You're … here," she says, stunned.
"Yeah." He gives her a hesitant smile. "I respond well to bossy women."

She has no idea what to say. She glances at her watch. She's not sure how long she's been here, or how long he took to follow her. But … he followed. He … actually followed.

"You're … here," she repeats, still stupefied.

He nods. "Yeah."

"For crap's sake, why?" she blurts.

He licks his lips like he's nervous. "We weren't kissing," he says. "Addison and I. We weren't …"

Meredith frowns. Seriously? He's going to try to feed her that load of-

"I mean we were," he rushes to say. "But …." He pulls his fingers through his hair. Shifts from foot to foot. He swallows. "We were saying goodbye, Meredith. That's all."

"Goodbye," she says flatly.

He nods. "Yes."

"Like … 'Bye, wife, see you tomorrow.'"

"No, like … 'Goodbye forever, ex-wife.'"

She blinks. "Goodbye for- Wait. What?"

He shifts, and he pulls a sheaf of papers from his coat and drops them on the bar beside her. She spins on the stool and looks down at what he's placed there. The divorce papers he showed her before. Only this time, they're signed. Not blank. Signed. In long-dried blue ink.

She blinks, staring at the signatures. Derek Christopher Shepherd. Addison Adrianne Montgomery.

"See?" he says in a soft voice. "Goodbye forever."

Holy. Crap.

Holy crap.

Holycrap.

"When did you decide that?" Meredith says. "Did she talk to you?" Maybe, Addison fessed up, after all.

But he shakes his head. "No," he says. "You did."

She frowns. "I did what?"

"Talked to me."

She bites her lip. "Huh?"

"When you and I talked. Earlier today. You asked me what our marriage had been like." He shakes his head as he stares into space. "I realized there wasn't much to want to go back to."
He knew. Since hours ago. Before she even got the biopsy results back.

"But … why didn't you say anything?" Meredith sputters. "You let me work myself into a frenzy, and-

Derek sighs. "Meredith," he says. He swallows. "One minute, I'm kissing my wife goodbye, and feeling like my world ended, because I just gave up on eleven years and all my promises. Because … I failed. I failed and …." He shakes his head. Swallows again. "I was filled with all that, and then the next minute, you were screaming at me, and by the time I'd changed gears, you were already running away."

"But … but before that."

"You were crying in my arms," he says. "I didn't think it was a good time to say, 'Hey, thanks a million for the epiphany.'"

A sinking feeling overtakes her. "Oh," she says.

He takes a seat beside her on the next stool over. "Double scotch, please," he says to Joe as he throws a few bills on the table. "Single malt."

"Coming up," Joe says with a nod.

"How are you feeling?" Derek says.

Joe grins. "Much better, thank you."

Derek nods, smiling. Like he's genuinely touched that he could help. When Joe sets down a filled tumbler, Derek doesn't take a sip right away. He stares into it like it's a looking glass or something.

"I do pick you," he says. "I do, Meredith."

"But …", she adds for him warily.

He kicks back his scotch and downs the whole thing in a few swallows. "But I just blew up my marriage," he says. "I just …." He blinks, like he's stunned, like he can't quite conceptualize what he just did, yet. "I do pick you," he repeats firmly. He swallows. "But I need some perspective. I need … time. Time to ….

"Process?" she chimes in.

He nods. "To process. Yes," he sighs. "I'm … sorry if that's too slow for you. I'm sorry that you're … upset, and I'm sorry that I caused it. I'm just … not …." Ready, he doesn't say.

Her lower lip trembles. She peers at him. He's not ready. But he's here. He ran here. And he's showing her his throat and giving her a sword. And ….

"It's not too slow," she says in a soft voice. She swallows around the lump in her throat. "I just … needed you to pick me."

And he did.

He leapt.

Despite time travel being ridiculous. Despite vows telling him he shouldn't break them. Despite
everything, he leapt. For her. Derek Shepherd leapt, and all he's asking for in return is some time to pivot before he leaps again.

That's … almost …. No. No, it is. It is better than him believing her. Because it means he has enough faith in her for it to not even matter. That she believes it is enough for him.

She glances at the divorce papers.

The signed divorce papers.

Holy crap.

Screw pole-vaulting to Jupiter. He's already on freaking Pluto.

"This is … um," he says. He gives her a worried look, and then he adds in a soft murmur, "I don't know what to do, now."

She laughs. "Welcome to my life, Derek."

He laughs with her, and it's nice. It's so nice to be laughing with him again.

He picked her. A floaty feeling fills her insides. He freaking picked her. He picked her before she even asked him to. Her stupid speech didn't put him in the chair beside her. He did. Of his own volition.

I should have picked you, he said. Years ago.

The words take root in her head. They grow like a tree. Her eyes water.

"Derek," she says, barely a croak.

His eyes are traps, and she stares into them, overwhelmed.

"What?" he says.

She shakes her head. Clears her throat. "Nothing."

She leans over. Wraps her arms around him. He's warm, and solid, and hers. He's hers. He shifts. Wraps his arms around her, a mirror to her.

And then he kisses her.

The kiss is soft, and searching, and g-rated. It lasts for a matter of heartbeats, displaying none of the haughty flash-bang of a man trying to prove he's worth something to a woman, but rather the resolved certainty of a man promising that she's worth the world to him. I pick you, the kiss sings in her blood. Three little words, spoken in skin-to-skin, in case the words themselves, somehow, weren't enough.

It's a quiet promise she believes. She believes him.

When he pulls away, he doesn't go far. He presses his forehead to hers. Rests with his nose mashed against hers. Breathing in her space.

"Hi," she says in a quiet voice, staring into his eyes. She kisses him again. A quick, quiet promise, like the one he offered her. And then she pulls away. Holds out her hand for a shake. "I'm Meredith
He snorts. Looks at her with an amused, disbelieving expression. "What are you doing?" he says.

"We met here," she says. "Remember that? I said, 'I'm just a girl,' and you said, 'I'm just a guy.'"

"I remember," he confirms with a nod.

"I think we had a crappy start." She gives him a sheepish look. "I acted like a lunatic, and you were in a terrible place. I want a do-over for my do-over," she says. "From the beginning. We can go as slow as you need." She takes a deep breath. "So, hi." She holds out her hand again. "I'm Meredith Grey."

He stares at her outstretched hand for a moment, eyebrows knitting. And then he reaches out to meet her. His fingers wrap around hers.

"Derek Shepherd," he says, a soft rumble. He smiles one of those devastating smiles that makes her heart skip. "It's really nice to meet you, Meredith Grey."

She doesn't get a chance to reply.

The world flashes white like a flashbulb just went off inches from her face.

And everything fades away.
No Need for Dreaming

Chapter Notes

Thank you, everyone, for the kind words. I really appreciated them. Still an epilogue and a short sequel to go, of course, but let's see if I can tie up most of the loose ends :D I hope you enjoy this!

Meredith wakes to darkness, and to quiet, and to warmth.

She stiffens, not sure where she is, as a swell of disorientation and dizziness nearly bowls her over. Sorry for the turbulence. Time jumps can be hairy, she can hear him saying. Mark. But ….

Good luck, Big Grey. We're all rooting for you.

Wait. Who's we?

A lump forms in her throat.

Mark.

Mark is dead.

Mark's been dead.

But … it felt so real.

Seriously, how could it be, though? The peanuts and stale beer smell of Joe's is gone. The background crack of pool balls striking each other is gone. No chatter fills the space with a steady murmur. There's nothing.

Nothing.

And guardian angels belong in the movies with Donna Reed.

Not real life.

The cobwebs of Meredith's dream unravel, replaced by crickets. Wind moaning. Wood creaking. The distant tick of a clock. The faint scent of a familiar aftershave.

Her head aches. A hangover, maybe. Her eyes ache more. Like she's been crying too hard for too long. The space between her legs, though …. That aches the most. It's an insistent hey, I'm down here, and I'm unhappy throb that tells her something inside got a little torn up. Rough sex that became too rough, she supposes. She knows the feeling well enough to peg it, even though she doesn't remember ….

Doesn't remember what?

What was …?
Wine, crying, and too rough-

Oh, right.

Crap.

She winces.

Wine, sobbing, and awful sex.

A small movement to her right makes a rustling noise. Like cloth sliding against cloth. She listens.

And that's when she hears the familiar rush of his breath.

Derek's breath. In the dark. In and out. In and out.

She sits up. The blankets spill away from her body like water. She rubs her eyes with the backs of her knuckles and squints into the moonlit darkness. The silver pall of moonlight casts a glow against birch hardwood flooring and a pale area rug.

She's in her bedroom. In her bed.

Not her old bedroom in her mother's house.

Her new bedroom, in her house on the cliff. The house she and Derek planned and built. Well, that Derek planned and - disregarding a few ill-advised weekends where he decided he was a skilled carpenter, more powerful than a gifted electrician, able to leap tall plumbing disasters in a single bound - contractors built, and Meredith said yes a lot to both processes. But whatever.

Derek's asleep beside her. She takes a quick look at him and only sees a lump, because he's buried in pillows and twisted sheets. She frowns.

It's just …. This whole …. 

She's never had a dream like that before. Not one that makes her wonder about reality to the point that she's surprised to be waking up in her own freaking home in her own freaking bed. Not one that makes her feel older. Like she's been gone forever, and she's missed …. 

Everything. Everyone.

Her hand wanders to the lump that is Derek. She rests her palm against his body. Warmth floods through the blankets.

She's missed him. Her Derek.

Just remember, Grey.

Remember what?

Lexie has a job, too. It hasn't happened, yet. But it will. She'll be there. I promise. You won't be alone.

What?

Just remember that. Okay? It's important. Something bad is going to happen, but I promise. Lexie will come.
Okay .....

Her heart squeezes. She slides out of bed, pads out of the bedroom as fast as she dares to move in the dark, and heads down the hall to the kids' rooms.

Zola's asleep in her little bed. Bailey's conked out in his crib.

A lump forms in her throat as she stands in the doorway of Bailey's room. She wants to run in and hug them and never let go. Her kids. Both of them. She restrains herself to watching, though, oscillating back and forth across the hall every few minutes. She doesn't know how long she stays there, caught between two overwhelming sources of gravity. Bailey. Zola. Bailey. Zola.

She's home, she keeps telling herself.

She's home.

So long, Meredith. See you on the flip side.

She's not dreaming, anymore.

It was just a dream.

She forgets to unset her alarm, which rings at 5 a.m like an air raid siren. Derek groans beside her. She slaps at the noise. Once. Twice. A glass of water, a picture frame, a box of tissues, and the clock, all careen to the floor beside the bed.

Crap.

She slides her torso off the side of the bed, chasing after the noise.

"Meredith. Alarm," Derek grumbles, grogginess and irritation hugging his tone in equal measure.

She finds the button. Finally. Slams it off. "Sorry," she snaps back at him, bristling. She rights herself and sits up. Rubs her eyes.

Derek's up, too. Glowering at his knees. "Too late," he says. "I'm up."

Like he thinks she peed in his cereal or something.

She rolls her eyes. "Sorry to interrupt your precious beauty sleep."

He looks at her, then, stricken. "Meredith, I didn't mean-"

"Whatever, Derek," she says, parrying before he can attack any more.

Weariness sets in. A lump forms in her throat. He hasn't even been back from D.C. for forty-eight hours, and they're already brandishing verbal swords for a duel. How will they ever stop fighting?

You won't, says that irritating, pessimistic inner voice of hers. It's hopeless.

Unacceptable, she snaps back at it. She'll just ..... She'll push through this. They'll push through this. Somehow. It's not like things were going to be fixed with one bippity boppity boo! No dream is that good, and she's too much of a realist, anyway, even if it were.

Still, she does need to regroup.
She leaves the room before he can see her eyes watering.

She's sniffling at the coffee maker in the kitchen, when the hairs on the back of her neck stand on end. Moments later, she hears him pad into the kitchen. She glances at him out of the corner of her eye.

His hair is mussed. His skin is pale, like he got very little sleep. He's wearing the fuzzy blue bathrobe she gave him for Christmas.

He doesn't approach her. Doesn't kiss her good morning. He sits at the island instead, slumped.

She dares to look straight at him. He's peering back at her with the strangest expression. Like … he doesn't know what to say. And he hurts. And he knows she hurts, and that he caused it, and he wants to fix it, but he doesn't know how to fix it, and why can't he fix it. And he's … scared. When he catches her eyes - when he sees her crying - the fear burgeons in his gaze like a nuclear mushroom cloud. Like he thinks ….

What? What does he think?

He's unreadable beyond the fact that he's frightened.

He swallows. Pulls his fingers through the mess on top of his head. Looks at the countertop.

She's not sure what to say to that. Not sure how to react. Seriously, what should she say?

She decides, "You want coffee?" is a good start.

"Sure," he replies with a shrug, tone a little glum.

She nods, and she turns back to the coffee maker, intent on, if nothing else, at least making this horrible morning a little better with chemistry. She pulls out a fresh coffee filter, along with the tin full of her favorite Irish crème blend. She dumps the rinds onto the filter and hits the start button.

Her back tingles. Like … he's looking at her again. And her body somehow knows it.

"I had the weirdest dream last night," Derek says, sounding as uncomfortable as she feels.

It's as good a smalltalk topic as any, she supposes. He's … trying. To push through the morning-after awkwardness. The morning after horrible sex. Horrible sex where he hurt her. Not that that was his fault, but … she can't imagine how she'd feel if their places were reversed.

"You, too?" she says, not turning around.

"Yeah, I ...."

"You what?" she prods when his voice trails away.

"Never mind," he says. Like he's lost his nerve.

The silence stretches. Crap. Crap, this just …. Crap.

I do pick you. I do, Meredith

She grips the edge of the countertop, fingers tightening against the cold granite. One of them has to buck up and start this thing today. Whatever this thing is and will be. They have to get through this
part. They **have** to.

*It's really nice to meet you, Meredith Grey.*

*I do pick you.*

"Look, Derek …," she begins, turning to face him, at exactly the same time he hazards a soft, "Meredith …"

They both skid to a verbal halt at stare at each other.

She bites her lip. "You first."

"Do you … want pancakes before you go?" he offers.

Yes, but … wait. What? She frowns. "Go?"

He raises his eyebrows. "… To work?"

"Oh." Oh, crap. That's right. She doesn't set her alarm when she's not going to work. So, her alarm rang, and, now, he thinks she's leaving, despite the fact that, last night, he asked her to stay home today. That's what the problem is. That's why he's acting weird. He thinks she's going to tuck tail and bolt. Admittedly, last night, she **was** planning on going to work today. The last thing she wanted was to be trapped in a house all day with him and his hurting conscience and his guilty, pouting looks.

But … there's no way. No **way**. Telling him to leave wasn't the answer. Neither is her leaving, instead. She **knows** that, now. "Derek … I'm … not going to work today."

His mouth opens. Closes. A small sound catches in his throat. An aborted word. He settles on a flat, bamboozled, "… What?"

"I'm … not going to work?" she repeats, a little more shyly, this time, under his intense scrutiny.

He frowns. "I … thought you didn't want to stay home today."

A lump forms in her throat again. She was going to walk out this morning. Not on their marriage. But to get some air.

*You're about to make a horrible mistake,* Mark said in her dream.

Her conscience, rearing up, she supposes. Giving her a good conk on the head and yelling in her ear, *If you try to get some air, now, you'll come back to nothing but empty space.*

"I didn't," she confesses as the coffeemaker burbles behind her. "Last night, I didn't. But ….

"Oh," he says, face falling.

She gives him a hopeful look. "I thought … maybe, we could take the walk that you …." She hates this. She hates how awkward this is. She hates how awkward she feels. Like she's asking a boy to the prom or something. **She doesn't do proms.** "The one you suggested. If you still want to."

He perks up a little. "Around the lake?"

"Yeah." She nods. "That one."

"I still want to," he says, a soft murmur.
"Great!" she says in a desperate-to-be-happy tone that she's sure makes her sound like an idiot. "So, we'll go later, then. When … it's light out. And we can see. Seeing is important for walking. Walking in the dark would be kinda … not good." Awkward. Awkward, awkward, awkward. "You know, I should call in sick, now." She turns toward the phone and reaches.

"Thanks for … humoring me," Derek says as she's wrapping her hand around the receiver.

She frowns. Drops the phone back into its cradle. Turns to face him again. "Derek, I'm … not humoring you."

His eyebrows knit. "I … don't understand."

"I'm …" She gives him a shy smile. "I want to go, too. I'm not going just for you."

His mouth does the open-close thing again. This time, he doesn't recover. The shock sticks on his face like it's a fly trap he landed in face first. "You … do?" he says, bemused.

"I do. I …" She swallows. The lump in her throat expands. "I've really missed you," she admits. "So …" She shrugs. "I'm not humoring you."

A rough sound catches in his throat. The hope in his gaze burgeons from dead embers to a crackling blaze in a single blink. "I've … really missed you, too, Meredith," he says.

She smiles at him.

He smiles back at her, hesitant at first, then blooming in full.

The coffeemaker burbles, filling the silence along with the waking birds.

Derek slides off the stool and heads to the pantry to grab the pancake mix while she calls in sick. *I pick you, too,* she wants to tell him. She just … can't quite work up the nerve, yet.

"You woke up and didn't know who I was," Derek says when she asks about his dream to fill the awful, stretching silence that ensues. He cracks an egg on the edge of the mixing bowl. "You didn't even know my name. You didn't recognize our kids or the house or anything. You went ballistic and took the car - pealed out so fast you spit gravel all over the front walk."

Meredith stills. An ice-cold chill slips between her ribs like a knife made of glaciers.

*So … I woke up after a one-night stand … to a marriage and two kids?*

*That about sums it, yes.*

*You warned me, right?*

*No …*

Holy …. No. No, this is just a wacky, improbable coincidence. Nothing more. Nothing less. She …. No.

She sits at the island, in the seat he relinquished when he decided to make pancakes. He whisks the eggs while the griddle heats up, and his body jerks in time with his stirring. Next, he mixes in the rest of the ingredients - mix, milk, honey, oil.

"What … happened next?" she asks. Croaks, really. Her throat feels like it thinks it's strung up on a
laundry line in the Sahara.

He stops stirring long enough to shrug. "I had no idea what to do. Eventually, Alex called me."

"Alex?"

"Yeah," he says. "You fled back to your old house."

"Oh," she says.

He pours the first silver-dollar sized dollop of batter onto the griddle. The batter sizzles. He sets down the whisk and trades it for a spatula. Then he turns to face her for the first time since he started telling this awful story. His face is …. He looks like he's just been told she died or something, and his turmoil is infectious. She feels her own stomach sinking into her shoes.

"So, I went to pick you up," he says in a wobbling tone, interrupting her spiraling thoughts. "When I got there, you were clutching a picture of you and Alex and Cristina, which I guess you'd gotten off the mantle, and you looked up at me, and you said, 'Am I sick or something? Am I sick like my mother?'"

He stops his explanation there. She doesn't know what to say to fill the silence. He takes a deep breath. He rubs his eyes.

"So, um …," he continues, clearing his throat, and he turns away to flip the pancake. Or, at least, he turns away under the guise of flipping the pancake.

"I took you to the hospital, and we … um …," he says, clearing his throat again as he talks in a thick, low, upset-doesn't-begin-to-describe-it, hard-to-understand tone. Worse, he talks to the griddle, not to her, and she's left staring at his back and his slumped shoulders. "We ran some tests. Amelia did, I mean. I was …." Distraught. Distraught is the word he seems to be looking for, from the way he keeps swallowing like he's barely holding back a tsunami. "And … um."

He clears his throat, but says nothing after that. He can't finish. The quiet stretches like a hangman stretching out a long noose. A lump sticks in her throat. Why he would describe this dream as "weird" and not "unmitigated nightmare" … she's not sure.

What do you mean, my Derek's fine, now? You mean there was a point at which he wasn't fine?

Crisis of faith. That's all.

Faith in …?

You.

Me?

Well … not you, specifically. Happiness in general.

This just … this can't be real. It can't be. Her wacky time travel hijinks were poor alcohol metabolism combined with exhaustion combined with stress. Her guardian angel is not a dead ex-manwhore. She doesn't have a guardian angel. There are no such things as guardian angels. There is no such thing as time travel.

She has Pandora's box. Sitting in her lap again. Begging her to open it.
She swallows.

Was Mark there? In your dream. Was he ...?

All she has to do is flip the lid and ask the question.

"Was ...?" she begins, but her words trail away before she can make a meaningful sentence.

Was Mark there? In your dream. Was he ...?

Derek puts the first pancake on a plate and brings it to her with the syrup bottle and a fork. He doesn't smile when he puts the plate down in front of her. Doesn't prod her to continue. Just ... heads back to the griddle to make another pancake. He's upset. He's upset in a Mark-just-died kind of way. Why upset him more?

"Sorry," she decides to say. "We don't have to talk about this."

"Yeah," is Derek's rough reply.

There's a reason everyone wants to keep Pandora's box closed.

She opts to leave the box on the back shelf in her mind, where it can collect dust until it's forgotten. She thinks, maybe, there are some things the living aren't meant to know.

Seattle's idyllic six weeks of summer is still months away, but March seems to have stolen a day of it. The air is cool, hovering in the low 50s, but the sky is a cloudless azure. The lake shimmers and sparkles like it's made of cut diamonds. A flock of birds flies low over the water and lands near the reeds with a raucous series of splashes.

The kids huddle closer to the water. Derek's crouched with them in the mud, helping them throw frozen peas to a flock of chattering ducks. The splashing and giggling carries back to Meredith on the breeze. She smiles while she watches, perched on a nearby boulder, which is cold. The chill from it soaks through her jeans.

"Where da baby duckies, Daddy?" Zola wants to know.

Bailey, who only just turned two, has a bit less of a vocabulary. All he chants in addition is, "Duck, duck, duck, goose."

Derek tosses a pea. It lands about ten feet out in the water with a thunk. Three ducks race like feathered rockets toward it, honking, quacking, wings flapping, splashing. He grins like he's having the time of his life.

"These ducks don't live here, so they haven't made nests," Derek replies. "They're just passing through."

"Why?" says Zola.

"Well, you know how it gets cold in winter?"

Zola nods.

"Some places don't get cold in the winter, so the ducks move there. They only come back when it gets warm."
"And dey come back, now."

Derek nods. "Yes, they're going home, now. Our lake is a nice pitstop."

"What a pit-top?"

"A place to rest."

"Oh."

The bag of frozen peas crinkles as he shifts it in his hands. He pours a fresh, heaping handful for each of the kids. Then he stuffs the bag into his coat pocket, brushes off his knees, and stands with a soft groan that says he's not as young or as limber as he used to be. He steps back to Meredith while the kids throw more peas and laugh at the waterfowl wars that result.

He sits on the rock beside Meredith with a sigh. He closes his eyes, tips his head back, face toward the sun, and he takes a deep breath that fills up his whole torso. His nostrils flutter. A small smile encroaches on his face. Like … he's missed it here.

They sit shoulder to shoulder. Inches from touching, but … not. Not touching. The space he gives her is an undeniable bubble. A subtle, undermining layer of tension, despite the relaxed look on his face.

Things … are not fixed.

Not yet.

They haven't talked much on this walk. The kids have monopolized his time. Not that Meredith can blame them. They haven't seen Daddy in months, and kids are less able to understand absences like that than adults.

The kids are distracted now, though. With ducks and with peas.

Meredith looks at her lap. She needs to say it. *I pick you, too.* She's been hemming and hawing and she just needs to- "I want you to know … I believe you," she blurts, before she loses her nerve again.

He frowns. Looks at her. "About what?"

"You say you didn't encourage that kiss," Meredith says. "You say you didn't encourage it, and that you stopped her in seconds, and that you came right home after." She bites her lip and dares to meet his gaze. "I believe you. If you say that's all there was … then that's all there was."

Questions dance in his eyes, along with, perhaps, disbelief at his change of fortune. She doesn't want to lose her nerve. Her lower lip quivers, but she pushes the upswell of badness away. Schools herself.

"I'm … sorry," she says, before he can formulate a reply.

He tilts his head, frown deepening. "It's okay. I know it's hard to swallow. I …." He sighs roughly, like the inside of his chest is barbed. "I kind of expected."

*You can't trust anybody. And no matter what I do … you're always going to look for reasons not to trust me.*

She grabs his forearm and squeezes until his coat squashes enough that she can feel his radius and ulna underneath cloth, underneath skin. He halts mid-sentence. Instead of looking at her, though, he
looks at her hand. On his arm. Like … he knows Meredith. She's 2+2=4 to him in most circumstances, except, now, she's metamorphosed into a 2^7=128 situation, and … what the hell?

"That's not what I meant," she admits softly.

"… What?" Like she's gone full quadratic equation, now.

A lump in her throat burgeons at his befuddlement. Her eyes prick. It's … kind of a horrible self-realization. To be trying to apologize like this, and to have your partner be that confused. Her lower-lip quivers, and she can't make it stop. She blinks. The world blurs.

"I … um," she manages. She sniffs, and then she can't stop the deluge.

For a moment, he gapes. "Hey, it's okay." He wraps his arms around her. Pulls her close. "Please, don't cry, Meredith. Please. Whatever it is, it's ok-"

"I was mean to you," she snaps.

And again, she's stumped him. He blinks. "… What?"

"You were an asshole, Derek."

He slumps. This, he understands. This, he gets. He pulls away like she's scalded him. "I know," he says, looking at his knees. He pulls his fingers through his hair. "I know I was. I'm so sor-"

"Stop," she tells him, and he stops. "Listen to me."

He swallows. "I'm listening."

"You were an asshole, but so was I." She looks him in the eyes, which are stark, confused, hurting. "I was an asshole to you, too, and then I pushed you to leave. We … both did this. It … wasn't just you." She sighs. "I blamed you. But … it wasn't just you. You spent all last night and the night before apologizing to me, like you're the only one who owes a mea culpa or whatever, but it wasn't just you. I owe a mea culpa, too. So … I'm apologizing." She swallows. "I'm sorry."

Silence stretches. He looks … stunned. Like she's a door, and he ran face-first into it. Like he's still seeing the little cartoon birdies and stars circling his head. And this … hurts to see.

Her heart squeezes.

God, they really screwed this up together. They really screwed this up. And the mountain they've built between each other, in this moment, feels … almost impossible to climb.

"Meredith … I don't know what to say," he replies in a soft voice.

She wipes her eyes. Sniffs. "You don't have to say anything," she says. "You already said tons. I just wanted you to know that I …" She sighs. "I know I helped make our marriage the capsizing boat that it currently is. I know, and I'm sorry."

"Oh," he says.

He sighs, and he looks out at the water. At their children, playing.

Zola runs through the mud, holding out her tiny hands. "Daddy, can have more peas?"
"Sure," he says in a rough voice. He shifts. Reaches for the bag in his coat pocket. He pours her a new handful with a ghost of a smile, and he stuffs the bag back into his coat. "Share some with your brother, okay?"

"Kay," she says. She trots back to the edge of the water and gives Bailey about three peas from her heaping handful.

Derek sees the exchange - he rolls his eyes. But … it's like he feels too tired or sad or … emotionally bankrupt to bother fixing it. Bailey can always come get more of his own, if he wants them badly enough. There are still plenty of peas.

The silence stretches.

Meredith's not sure what to say at this point, so she lets it stretch. She does scoot closer on the rock, though. Close enough that her entire right side lines up with his left. She rests her head on his shoulder, wraps her right arm around his back, and stuffs her hand into his right coat pocket.

He mirrors her, wrapping his left arm around her. And then they're intertwined. The ducks honk and the kids chatter.

"Stay home with me the rest of the week," he says, staring out at the water.

She frowns. "What?"

"Just …." He shrugs. "Stay home with me. Forget about work for a little bit." She looks up at him. "Just a long weekend," he rushes to say. "I know work is really important to you right now. I know that. I don't want to keep you from that. I just want one long weekend. Today. Friday, Saturday, Sunday. That's all I'm asking. Please, Meredith."

"Okay."

He blinks like she's stunned him again. "… Okay?"

She nods. "I want to fix this, Derek. I want to fix this so badly it hurts. I don't want the boat to capsize. I don't want us to get a divorce."

"Me, either," he confesses in a low, weighty tone. "That's the last thing I want."

She nods again. "So, I'll stay home." She swallows. "Maybe, we should … think about counseling."

"Maybe, we should," he agrees without hesitation. "But ….

She raises her eyebrows. "But?"

"Can we just … be? Just for this weekend? Before we try to come up with a plan?"

She nods. "Sounds nice," She swallows around the lump in her throat. "Let's start, now."

"Okay," he says.

They sit and watch the kids, and the ducks, and the water, and the world.

They sit, and they just … are.

The kids have run a few dozen feet ahead to collect rocks and sticks and other treasures on the trail.
The sun hangs at its peak in the brilliant sky, but its presence is muted and dappled by the tall trees, swaying overhead in the breeze. It's lunchtime, and four hungry bellies have dictated a return to the house.

"Hey, Mere?" Derek says as they tromp across packed beds of wet pine needles.

They walk arm in arm, enjoying the sights. Enjoying the company. Just being. They haven't said much else to each other - not since their conversation on the rock by the lake.

"What?" she says, panting.

"Just so you know, I forgive you," he says. "I forgave you before I …." *Came home*, he doesn't say, but she thinks she can fill in the blanks well enough.

She stops. Looks up at him. Surprise makes her eyes widen. "Really?"

"Yes, really," he says with a nod. Early clemency on his part makes sense, when she thinks about it. She imagines forgiveness is part of what got him on the plane to come back in the first place. She stares up at him, biting her lip. "What?" he says.

She grins. She was so busy apologizing earlier, she forgot to say that part. The most important part. "I forgave you already, too."

He gives her an equally surprised look. "Really?"

"Yeah," she says. "Really."

"When?" he says.

She shrugs. "While I was sleeping."

He gives her a mystified look. But he seems satisfied enough with the fact that he's forgiven that he's willing let her lack of explanation slide. Frankly, she's glad. She's not sure how she'd even begin to explain the wine-induced cup of crazy that imbued her dream last night.

"Mommy, look!" Zola says, skipping back to them with something small and white in her hands. "I find see-trew rock."

"That's quartz," Derek explains.

"Cort, cort, cort," says Bailey, bouncing along behind his sister.

Meredith grins. "Quartz, huh?" she says, glancing briefly at Derek, before turning back to their daughter. "That's great, Zozo! Show me."

Meredith and Derek decide to run a hot bath after the kids are in bed. To try to reconnect. To "just be," skin to skin.

No sex.

She hurts, still, and he knows she hurts, just from seeing her pop ibuprofen all day. Even if she were in the mood for a little pain - which, she admits she is, sometimes - she's not sure she could convince him to try sex right now, anyway. Not in light of him knowing she already hurts.

Pain for pleasure is **not** one of his kinks.
He sits on the lip of the tub, testing the water with his fingertips while she searches in the cabinets for her favorite lavender-scented Epsom salts. The purple bag isn't in its usual place, and she's left pulling everything out as she roots for it. Stacks of unopened toothpaste tubes, toothbrush packets, tissue boxes, shampoo and conditioner bottles, cotton swabs, q-tips, safety razors, soap bars - all sorts of crap - form a fan around the open cabinet door.

"I think …," Derek says over the rush of the water. Meredith stops her search to peer at him expectantly. "I think I want to come back to work. At Grey Sloan. Is that …?" He steels himself, like he's preparing for some nasty blowback. "Would that be okay with you?"

Meredith frowns. Okay? Sure, it would be okay. "But Amelia-

"I know Amelia's Head of Neurosurgery," he rushes to say. "I don't care, anymore."

Her frown deepens. "You don't care," she says, tone flat, unable to keep the disbelief out of her tone.

"No." He shakes his head and shrugs. "If she wants that job, she can have it. I won't make any more trouble."

Meredith gives up her search for the salts, entirely, and shifts so she's facing him. She pulls her knees to her chest and peers over her kneecaps at him. "Derek, that's …." Way, way, way too good to be true, she doesn't say. She doesn't want to sound hostile, but … holy crap.

Is she in fantasyland? Did she not wake up?

He tests the water one last time, nods at nobody in particular, drops the stopper into the drain, and wipes his hand on a towel. He turns to face her fully, as she's done for him.

"I don't think I want to change the world anymore, Mere," he says in a soft voice, but … he doesn't sound like he's had the fight knocked out of him. Not like what happened when Jen died. He sounds …. "I mean, I do want to change the world, but not if that means I'm too busy to live in it. I don't want to spend my life slaving away in some laboratory, thousands of miles from home," he says. He smiles like someone finally gave him an answer to all the incessant why, why, why's he asks the universe every day. "I just want to save lives. That's all. That's enough."

Her eyebrows creep toward her hairline. "You seriously think a career with no research is going to be enough for you?"

He shrugs. "I don't know why it ever wasn't," he says, unblinking.

Serene. That's the word she was looking for before. Serene. He sounds serene. And Derek Shepherd is many things, but she can't recall him ever going full Zen like this. He goes to dark, awful places, and then he bounces back to bright ones. But he's never been Zen.

"Derek, you're ambitious," she replies slowly. "It's who you are. There's nothing wrong with that, inherently; you just have to know when to-" stop. Chill out. Throw in the towel.

"I just want to be with my family," he replies before she can finish. He gives her an earnest, bright-eyed look. "I want to be with you, Mere. What's the point of being ambitious if it means I missed my one chance to see my kids grow up? Or if I missed my one chance to be with you?"


"I've just been thinking," he says.
"About?"

He glances at the tub, like he's suddenly too nervous to look at her. The water level is sloshing and high, almost to the overflow line. He twists off the faucet, and the bathroom is plunged into silence.

"About what would happen if you woke up tomorrow with no idea who I was," he says.

"Derek, that was just a nightmare. I'm not sick."

"No, you're not," he says with a firm sureness that tells her he's not spinning tales out of a broken perception of reality. "But you could be, sometime. You have the gene markers."

She can't say she hasn't worried about that. She doesn't want to waste away like her mother. She doesn't want to have that indignity forced on her.

"I could be, sometime," she admits softly.

"I'm just saying, I spent so much time focused on the idea of eliminating the possibility of you getting sick, that I never stopped to think about how I would feel if I can't, and you do."

She blinks. The words are like a hammer coming down. Not that he said them that way, but ….

"Oh."

"Meredith, I don't want to waste the time I have with you," he tells her.

A lump forms in her throat. He's older than she is. By almost a decade. She knows he'll probably be the first to go if she doesn't get sick. "I don't want to waste the time I have with you, either."

He sighs. "I'm pissed I already wasted some of it."

"I'm pissed I helped you do it," she replies.

"Well, I won't let it happen again," he says. "Not ever."

She swallows. Looks at her lap. If there's one thing Derek's pretty routine about, it's being freaking stubborn. If he says he won't let something happen again, something he has the real power to prevent ….

"I trust you," she tells him.

A simple confession. The heart of the matter.

Meredith Grey trusts Derek Shepherd.

She gives him a hopeful smile. For a moment, nothing happens. Like … she spoke Swahili or something. The wheels churn behind his eyes. By second number three, he smiles back. Hesitantly, at first. Shallow. Hardly an upward curve. But by second number five, he's found delight. And by second number ten, unadulterated joy has kidnapped his entire freaking face. The edges of his eyes crease. Years melt off his face. Hell, even his posture opens up, like he'd become some sort of twisted, gnarly tree before, and she never noticed.

She says she trusts him, and he believes her.

Derek Shepherd trusts Meredith Grey.

Unfettered trust is an element their relationship has lacked for … far too long. It's like a puzzle piece
they misplaced years ago, one that got buried deep underneath a couch cushion somewhere. Their puzzle hasn't made a picture ever since then, but so many years have passed since they had the original artwork, they forgot what the original looked like. And, now, it's like ... *let there be light* or something.

The fixed puzzle is a really pretty picture.

Something precious.

She wants to keep it forever.

She wants to put it in a frame, protect it with glass and metal, and never let go, now that they've found it again.

"Meredith," he says softly.

She looks at him. "What?"

He stands. He points to the countertop above her head. "Is that what you were looking for?" he says.

The purple bag of Epsom salts is, indeed, right there. Right. Freaking. There. Inches from her head. All she had to do was reach.

He holds out his hand, and she passes the bag to him. The plastic crinkles as he gets a good grip on it. He dumps the entire contents into the tub. Then he slides out of his pajama bottoms like they're liquid, and he stands there, naked, unabashed.

"Let's start over," he suggests.

She raises her eyebrows, snickering with amusement. "Be kind, rewind?"

"Yeah," he says. "Please, Mere. Let's just ... start over."

She opens her mouth to reply.

"Not fresh," he rushes to say, qualifying his suggestion. "Just ... again. Please. I don't want to waste any more time. Not another second. I'm sorry. You're sorry. So, let's be done with being sorry. Life's too short to fight forever. Okay?"

He's order. She's chaos.

He runs hot. She runs cold.

He's a chatterbox. She's quiet.

He's arrogant. She tends toward the demure.

They're both, she's learned, equally insecure, though - they just express it oppositely.

He's type A. She's ... type D.

He's Derek. She's Meredith.

Together, they just ... fit.

"Okay," she says.
"The rest …," Derek says. "It wasn't horrible, you know."

He drags a wet, hot washcloth down her back in slow, soothing strokes. They both sit, naked, in the tub. The air is damp and warm and smells like lavender. Candles burn. A thick film of condensation turns the windows an opaque, misty gray.

She sighs. He's helped her get so relaxed, she's half asleep - hell, almost snoring. She blinks and raises her head, which, in this moment, feels far too heavy for her neck. She looks back at him.

"Your nightmare thing?" she says.

"It wasn't a nightmare, Mere," he replies.

She frowns, more awake, now. "What you described sure sounded like a nightmare."

An easy smile spreads across his face. "That was just the first part, and it was pretty short."

She turns to face him. Water sloshes as she shifts her body. She dips down into the water, until only her neck and head are exposed, and she rests her too-heavy head on the cold, porcelain lip of the tub. She stares at him through her eyelashes. He sets the washcloth on the tile floor beside the tub and mirrors her position. His feet slide against her ankles, then her calves, then her thighs. He comes to rest with his toes brushing her hips. She reaches into the water and puts her hands on his ankles. Gives him a squeeze.

"Tell me," she says.


She frowns. "What do you mean?"

His gaze shifts to somewhere distant for a moment. He leans back. Looks up at the ceiling. And then he smiles. Like … he's remembering the first time he saw snow. Or … the first time he went camping in the middle of nowhere, and he discovered what real silence is. Or … the first time he kissed a girl.

Or … the first time he kissed Meredith Grey.

"I took you to Joe's, and we 'met' all over again," he says. He gives her a warm look. "You remembered that from before. You liked that part."

She snorts. "Keep telling yourself that."

He laughs. "I'll have you know you're the first woman who's ever complained about my pickup lines."

She folds her arms. Water sloshes. "And exactly how many women have you tried to pick up in a bar?"

She knows the answer is one, and her name rhymes with Speredith. But he rolls his eyes and ignores her. In this tiny, perfect slice of life, though, where nothing in the world is wrong, and all they are are two bright and shiny people relaxing in a bathtub, she's happy to let him get away with it.

"I re-proposed in the elevator," he continues. "We made a new Post-it. I showed you all of Bailey's
ultrasounds. I even did your house of candles thing."

"You made a house of candles? For me?" Meredith says.

He blushes. "Well, our house is in the way, now, so it wasn't on the cliff - it was a lake house. But, yeah. I did." He frowns. "Where the hell did you get all those candles, anyway? I had to order online in bulk."

She snorts. "I cleaned out two Wal-Marts, a CVS, and a Pier- What are you looking at?"

He peers back at her, unblinking, head tilted to the side with a beautiful smile on his face. In the candlelight, his eyes are obsidian, but still … warm. Open. And in this moment, she knows she's loved by someone. Deeply. In an I care about your happiness more than I care about my own way that steals her breath from her body. He doesn't even need to say the words.

"Just you," he replies in a soft, reverent tone.

She returns his look, hoping he sees the same well of affection in her eyes that she does in his.

They're both more fluent in sex than they've ever been with words, and on Sunday night, when she convinces him she's healed enough to lie with him, they have a long, fruitful conversation that erases any remaining doubts. Not that there were many to begin with, because he trusts her, and she trusts him, and … things are better, now. They're just … better.

"So … you'll go to work with me tomorrow?" she says against his skin. He tastes of salt. Of familiarity.

"I think so-" O, he says, wheezing with laughter when she catches his nipple between her teeth. The covers rustle as he kicks out with his left foot.

She runs her fingers against his ribs, and he spasms underneath her, but he chokes his laughter down into soft grunts that will be barely audible beyond the bubble of their marital bed. "Mmm," she purrs, smirking. "I love how ticklish you are." She gives him a breather.

"Are you trying to make me traumatize the kids?" he says, panting. Bailey and Zola are sleeping down the hall, less than two dozen feet away.

Meredith grins. "So, what if I am?" she taunts.

He gets an evil look on his face. "So, you're ticklish, too. And, if I'm not mistaken …." He slides a palm down her leg and finds the inside of her knee. She jerks in his grasp, trying to get away, but his grip is iron, and bone-rattling laughter falls from her lips when he refuses to give ground. She twists, and squirms, and laughs, and laughs, and laughs, but he won't let her go, and she falls against him, a boneless, out-of-breath heap when he ceases torturing her. "You do tend to shriek," he adds, a too-cheerful gleam in his eye. "Speaking of traumatizing the kids, I mean."

"Evil," she replies.

He rolls his eyes. "You started it. You're evil."

"That's Dr. Evil to you," she says. She puts her pinky to the corner of her lips, sniggering. "And for lenience, I demand …." She widens her eyes for dramatic effect. "One. MILLION. Dollars."

"If I pay you the million, will you give the kids the sex talk that explains the screaming?"
She snorts. "You don't think you'd be good at giving the sex talk?"

"I'd rather do the, 'Drugs are bad!' talk, personally."

"What about the, 'No, I'm not buying you a car,' talk? Or the, 'Your friend's a rebel, and he'll never be any good,' talk? Or the, 'Winning isn't everything,' talk. Or the, 'Don't wash whites with colors,' talk?"

He frowns. "You know, we should just write down all the various required talks on slips of paper, mix them up in a hat, and divvy them evenly."

She grins. So long as he's here to draw straws with. Forever. She gazes into his eyes. *I will be,* he seems to be replying. *I promise.*

Four days. It's only been four freaking days. And she's already having trouble conceptualizing why she ever made him leave in the first place. And from the heady look in his eyes, he's having trouble conceptualizing why he ever left.

She presses closer. She kisses him. A rumble of pleasure coils in the base of his throat. She slides a hand underneath the covers, wanders down his torso, following his happy trail, and cups him. He's semi-erect already. She rubs her thumb against him, up and down his length, gentle, just enough to get him interested. To make him hungry. He pushes against her hand, and his eyelids dip low as he sighs.

"That feels good," he says in a relaxed, drunk-y tone.

She shifts, pressing closer still, until she's a long line of warmth, pasted against his skin. She kisses his shoulder. Trails along his naked collar bone. Up his neck, until his pulse throbs against her lips. She kisses him there. Once, again, another time. And then she finds his mouth.

She's barely parted her lips before he takes the reins and plunges between her teeth, running his tastebuds along hers. She loses track of time, petting him, stroking him, while he plunders her. Until she's out of breath and dizzy, and her lower body is tight and sopping with the good kind of stress. Stress that makes her squirm when his steel erection bumps into her pubic bone. Stress that makes her feel empty and wish he could fill her up. Stress that makes her ache to assuage the tension, and she can't help but grind against him, trying to do just that.

"I've missed you so much," he confesses, breathless, ripping the words right out of her brain. He pulls his fingers through her hair. Kisses her again. Again.

She nods. "Me, too."

"I was so lonely," he says.

She nods, eyes watering. "Me, too." She bites his lip. And then she kisses him. She pets his groin. His length. His perineum. The inside of his thighs. Anything she can reach. Until his pupils are dilated, and his lips are swollen, and his nipples are pert, like hers, and blush creeps across all his visible skin like wildfire.

"You keep doing that, and I'm going to lose it before we even start," he murmurs.

"So, start, already," she commands.

He smirks. "You're the one on top, at the moment. I was waiting for you."
"Do you want me to be on top?" she asks.

Sometimes, he likes to drive. Sometimes, he likes to be driven. Same as her. She finds he's not in any particular mood at the moment, though. Just a mood. A hot, wet, tense, ready-to-burst mood that doesn't want to bargain over positions.

He shrugs. Smiles. "I don't care as long as there's a trip of some kind." Like he's read her mind.

"A short trip?" she says. "Like to Tacoma?" She adjusts, dropping her knees so she's straddling him. She kisses him. Again. Again. Again. "Or a long one. Like … New York?" He tips up to meet her lips as she comes down. "Because …" She gives him a suggestive look. "We can always trade for round two." She kisses him. "Or three." Another kiss. "Or four."

He smirks. Waggles his eyebrows suggestively. "How about you head south, and we'll see where we end up."

She laughs. "I'm hoping for a Cape Horn kind of trip."

"Hmm," he purrs. "Tierra del Fuego." He shifts his hips, grinding up against her. "Appropriate."

"Come on. Come on. Put your hands into the fire," she replies with a giggle.

She rocks forward and reaches down. He's hot, and thick, and solid. Easy to guide. When he presses against her lower body, hits all those nerve clusters begging for attention, she can't help but sigh. And then she slides down his length, until he's sheathed to the hilt. His groan unfurls down her spine like fingers, and she arches into it, almost shivering with her desire.

His lips part. His teeth gleam in the dim light. He looks up at her, though his gaze isn't focused.

"Feels good?" she says, grinning. She lies against him, holding him inside of her while she rests, soaking up the warmth of his body.

"Yes," he says, sighing. "This is so much better."

She raises her eyebrows. "Than?"

"Picturing you in the shower while my hand does the work."

She snickers. She kisses him. "Is that what you've been doing while you were away?"

"Hmm," he says. "Yes."

He shifts underneath her. Starts to bounce up and down at the hips. Not much. Millimeters. Like he can't quite handle the stillness. And, now that he's moving, she's not sure she can handle it, either.

Her lower body tightens. Demands that she give in to need.

She leans back, straightening. She rests her hands at his navel and begins to rock against him like she's riding a horse at a canter. She sighs, enjoying the feeling of him moving inside. He's a bit like a piston. And she's the cylinder.

"Ohhh," he says, a deep, long moan.

When he gets used to that, she switches to figure-eights, and he moans again, staring at her through his eyelashes. He reaches forward, wraps his palms over her thighs, and presses his thumbs against the vee between her legs, giving her something extra to grind into, pleasuring her while she pleasures
him.

Her pace quickens as the tension in her belly ratchets toward unbearable.

A drop of sweat curls down her chest, through her cleavage, and peters out somewhere near her navel.

She wants to be nearer to him. She wants to be …. She lies flat against him, still rutting against him. It's more awkward, but worth it, because now, he can press his lips to hers, and his eyes are only centimeters from hers. Their skin is a hot slip-and-slide.

Words are gone, replaced by a deep, desperate sound that rasps in his throat with each thrust, and a higher-pitched cry that curls in his vocal cords, over, and over, and over again. He tastes like salt. And like fire. And like home.

He pushes her toward an edge. Somewhere in space. A razor line she can't straddle for more than a few seconds before everything inside her body bursts at the seams. Unhinged, unfettered, a breathy exultation flies loose from her mouth. She arches backward, presenting her breasts to the ceiling. Her teeth clench, her eyes roll back into her head, the world goes spotty, and then all she is is falling, twitching, pulsing, despite never leaving the bed.

When she can think again, all her muscles turn to spaghetti, and she flops against his body with a pleased sigh. She pushes her fingers through his hair. He's coming undone, now, too. His eyes crease, his breaths cease, and he bares his teeth as an intense rictus of pain/pleasure/death/life captures his face. For a moment, he's still, and he's stuck in that moment, stuck beyond the point of no return, not seeing much of anything, and she watches him, bare inches from his face.

His lower body bucks against hers, and his breath returns to him in rasping, labored grunts. Sentience fills his gaze again. He pulses inside of her.

She squeezes around him, waiting while he peters out.

And then all the rest is silence. She kisses him. He kisses her.

Lassitude makes his eyelids droop. He tends to drop off for a few minutes after sex. Biology rules him with an iron fist. He might be good for a second round. A third. A fourth. Who knows? But not until he's dozed for a bit.

She slides off him, but only to curl up beside him with her head resting on his breastbone. She listens to him breathe while she toils with a wisp of hair on his chest. He kisses her once, twice, again.

"I really love you, Mere," he murmurs, soft and slurred and sleepy.

The covers rustle as she snuggles closer. "I love you, too," she says.

He tips his head sideways to gaze at her. He smiles. He kisses the top of her head. And then he sleeps.

She sleeps, too, warm, and safe, and loved, while their fire burns between them, enduring while they rest.

Enduring, she hopes, forever.

_To love each other, even when we hate each other._

_No running._
To take care of each other, even when we're old, senile, and smelly.
And it's forever.

Forever's a good length of time to be in love.
Well, here we are. The end of the line. The coaster is back in the station.

There seems to be some confusion about Lexie's job. As I have mentioned, TRNT is the first story in a series that is meant to provide a 100% fix for S11 MerDer (up to and including Derek's death). Obviously, I've done nothing, at this point, to fix Derek's death. That's what the next story, loosely titled "The Stillness the Dancing," is meant to deal with. That's what Lexie's job is. Fixing that mess. For those of you who would rather not read that, and would like to pretend TRNT is the happy sendoff for our pair, you can do that. I've intentionally offered as much closure as I can in this piece. But for those of you who need the added oomph of obliterating 11x21 from existence, TSTD will do that, and TRNT was the setup for that.

Thank you so much for taking this ride with me, and thank you especially to all the wonderful people who've taken time to leave me such thoughtful feedback. I think TRNT is one of the most narratively complicated pieces I've ever written, and I'm pretty happy with how it turned out. I sincerely hope that you've enjoyed it, too!

Before.

Meredith wakes in stages. First, she knows it's morning, just from the brightness laving the backs of her eyelids, turning the world a fleshy black. She hears the birds singing. A car putters somewhere outside. She smells something musty, and her throat tickles, like she's been breathing in dust. Her lower body doesn't ache anymore. The skin on her back feels like it's been plunged into a meat freezer, but her front is warm. And her head is pounding like her skull's the drum. She feels like she's been asleep for a year, living another life.

Her eyelids snap open.

The guy she took home last night - the guy she dreamt about - is lying naked on the floor to her immediate right, asleep underneath a knitted gray blanket edged in fringe. She snatches the blanket from him to cover herself. Then she grabs a pillow from the couch and drops it on top of him to cover his .... She swallows.

He grunts and sluggishly joins the world of consciousness. His hand sweeps around the front of his body. He grabs a black bra that's been discarded near his head, and he holds it up to her with a groan.

"This … is ...." Another groan.

Crap. Crap, crap, crap. She usually makes a point to be gone before this part. Before the guy wakes up. She snatches the bra from him, grinning, because her face is out of control, and she's embarrassed as crap. "Humiliating on so many levels," she says in a wry tone as she tiptoes away from him. "You have to go."
"Why don't you just come back down here, and we'll pick up where we left off?" the guy suggests in a flirty tone that makes the hairs on the back of her neck stand on end.

_I love you, Meredith Grey_, she can hear a man with his same voice say.

The man she dreamt about.

Phantom arms wrap around her body. She knows how safe he made her feel. How wonderful it was, having someone be there for her, no questions asked, even when the world is ending, and sane people bolt. She knows, now, how good it can be. Having someone.

She shakes her head, trying to push the imagery away. The very naked, **fantasy** imagery. The …. Yikes. _You dreamed that up, you freak_, she tells herself. _Stop oozing girly thoughts._

"No, seriously," she says. She throws his pants at him. His belt buckle clinks as his pants smack into his chest. "You have to go. I'm late. Which isn't what you want to be on your first day of work, so …." She trails away, hoping he'll get the hint.

He doesn't.

"So, ah …," he says, looking around as he stands up. There's a pile of pillows, a table covered with books, and a grill about a yard away from him. Crap, there's even a toilet brush on the mantle. **Humiliating doesn't even begin** to describe this situation. "You actually live here."

"No," she says.

He frowns. "Oh."

She shakes her head. "Yes. Kind of."


"I moved here two weeks ago from Boston," she explains. "It was my mother's house. I'm selling it."

"Oh," he says, frown deepening. "I'm sorry."

"For what?"

"You said was," he says as he zips up his pants.

"Oh!" she says. "My mother's not dead. She's …." Meredith sighs. Why can't this moment end? "You know what, we don't have to do the thing."

"Oh," he says. He leans forward to pick up his shirt. His muscles bunch, and she can't help but gulp. "We can do anything you want."

"No, the thing," she explains. "Exchange the details, pretend we care."

That makes him grin. He has a very nice grin. A- _stop it_, she tells herself. _Stop it, stop it, stop it._ "Look, I'm gonna go upstairs and take a shower, okay?" she says. "And when I get back down here, you won't be here, so, um …." Crap, crap, crap, what was his name? She wants to say Derek. That was what he called himself in her dream. But … he said his name last night at the bar. For sure. She knows he did. Derek? Donald? Dilbert? Darko? She doesn't want to guess wrong. She can't say
anything without risking further mortification. "Goodbye … um …"

His beautiful smile melts away, and he sighs. "Derek," he says.

"Derek!" she says. Her subconscious apparently has a better memory than she does. "Right." He reaches forward. They shake hands. "Meredith."

"Meredith," he says. Like he thinks it's pretty. Like he kind of wants to say it again.

"Yeah," she says.

He hops over the back of the couch and steps closer. "Nice meeting you."

She steps away. "Bye, Derek."

And then she flees, leaving him behind to fend for himself while she gets ready for work.

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Before. But later.

"Come have a coffee with me," Derek says with a pouty, obnoxious look, during what must be his sixty-seventh attempt at getting Meredith to go on a date with him. "This was a long day. I could use a coffee. Couldn't you? You look like you could use a coffee." He grins. "Do you like decaf in the afternoons, or are you an espresso addict all day long?"

Zona's consoled - Derek talked her off the ledge of lodging a formal complaint against Meredith for her unsolicited advice. Jorge will have his surgery tomorrow. The surgery that will make him forget his wife. There's nothing else to do today, and if Meredith doesn't get away from this freaking vortex of triggers, pronto, she might start screaming in the hallway.

Except Derek's blocking her way to the damned locker room.

Meredith folds her arms. She should be filing a harassment complaint is what she should be doing. She should be. If he were any other guy on the planet, she would have already. But something keeps stopping her from pulling the trigger. Something ….

I love you, Meredith Grey.

She can hear him in her head. Saying that.

She can see them in the future. Taking care of their kids. They have a boy and a girl. The boy likes trains and dinosaurs and blocks. The girl likes ponies and tea parties and dolls. The boy is sweet. Like his father. The girl has sass. Like her mother.

"Meredith?" Derek says, interrupting her musing.

"Shut up," she says, and he does, for a moment.

Meredith hardly even knows him, but she knows what it's like to be supported by him. To feel safe because of him. To be loved by him. To raise a family with him.

She's never had any of that before. Not love or safety or a family or anything. None of that. Not once.

She wishes it could be real.
You. Had. A dream, her tiny voice says. A dream, Meredith. It was fake. It wasn't him. It was your neglected inner child, making crap up for you. File the freaking harassment claim, and move on.

Still ….

"Please, Meredith," Derek says. "It's just coffee."

She bites her lip. "Just coffee," she says doubtfully.

He nods. "Just coffee to start."

"But you want more than that," she says. "More than just the coffee, I mean." Like sex. Lots and lots of sex.

"Yes," he replies without hesitation.

I love you, Meredith Grey.

A lump forms in her throat. She wants to say no. She wants to file the sexual harassment claim. Except …. "Where?" is what comes out of her mouth.

A beautiful grin spreads across Derek's face. "I was thinking that place across the street. What's it called? Sally's?"

Meredith shakes her head. "No. If we're doing this, it has to be farther away than that."

Derek looks like he'll burst. "So, we're doing this, then?" he says with a smirk, putting air quotes around "doing this." Like he's five, and he's alluding to sex. Of course, he's alluding to sex. He is five.

And all she can do is glare.

"So, where would you like to go, then?" he says in the ensuing silence. "I'm open to suggestions."

"Except for, 'go away,'" she grumbles, using air quotes of her own. "Which I've 'suggested' about forty zillion times."

He nods. Winks. "Yes. Except for that."

She sighs. "I do know a good restaurant near Pike Place." She grabs her Post-it pad from her pocket and scribbles an address and a name onto the paper for him. She gives him the slip of paper. "Meet you there in an hour?"

He reads what she's written. He's not smirking anymore. Not like ha ha ha, I win, but … smiling with genuine pleasure. In fact, his stupid grin is so bright, he could light Seattle with it. And it looks good. On him. The grin does, she means. The grin that isn't about winning or predation. It's just about a girl he really likes, saying yes to spending time with him. He likes her enough to beam. No man has ever beamed like that at her before. Not at the mere idea of her company.

What the hell are you doing? says her tiny voice.

Trying to be happy, she snaps in reply. So, shut it.

Derek folds the note and stuffs it in his pocket. "See you then," he says, and he leaves her there, standing in the hallway by the locker room.
She sighs. And then she heads into the room to change.

*You're seriously going to do this? Seriously? This could go so freaking wrong.*

She pauses by her locker and closes her eyes. She nods.

Yes.

Yes, she's seriously going to do this.

*Fine. Don't say I didn't warn you.*

She shakes her head. She won't say that. And, yes, it could go wrong. It could go *really freaking wrong*.

But wouldn't it be epic if it went right?

~finis~

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