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# A FIELD WITHIN

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**T.C. SOLOMON**



Housolo LLC

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For my father, the living embodiment of second chances

“Out beyond ideas of wrongdoing and rightdoing there is a field. I'll meet you there.”

-Rumi

# PROLOGUE

*New town, new job, new start, and I'm already falling behind,* Kevin thought as he coaxed Mr. Johnson's dislocated arm back into place.

"Argh!"

Kevin felt the satisfying clunk.

For both the patient and the doctor, the relief was immediate.

Mr. Johnson heaved. "Thank you."

"Glad we could spare you the sedation." Kevin smiled. "X-ray tech is on his way then we'll get you a sling and you'll be good to go. Please remember to follow-up with your primary doctor this week. It was nice to meet you."

A young nurse intercepted Kevin on his way to the doc box. "Nice one, Dr. Bishop. I haven't seen that technique before."

"Thanks ..."

"Becca." She pointed at her badge.

"Right, sorry." He flushed. "I promise to get it right the third time."

She laughed. "It's your first day here and there are six of us. All good, I get it."

"Thanks for understanding." Kevin sighed. "I'll circle back to you with the discharge paperwork."

Back at his workstation, Kevin stared at the computer screen, scanning his list of patients. *Crap, did I put that order in for bed 7?* "Diltiazem ... now where do I find you?"

"Just like riding a bike, right?" A baritone voice boomed out.

"Huh? Oh yeah, hey Ron. Right. Just like a bicycle," Kevin said. *Except the bicycle had two loose wheels and had caught on fire.*

The lanky, bald, medical director reached over and pointed at the screen.

"There it is." Kevin clicked the order. *He has an impressively thick mustache from this angle.*

"Don't forget to ask for help. We're all here for you. It only gets easier from here."

Kevin nodded. "Thanks again for everything, Ron. It's been great catching up with you."

"You bet."

Kevin quickly returned to the screen, tapping the tabletop.

"We're meerkats here at Chicago Legacy Hospital."

Kevin's nervous tapping stopped. "Meerkats?"

"You know, the mongooses. They're community animals. They keep an eye out for one another."

"Oh." Kevin nodded slowly. "Gotcha. That's nice everyone feels supported."

Ron pulled up a chair next to him. "Do you have time for a quick story?"

He didn't. "Sure." Kevin leaned back. *Don't forget to call the surgeon for bed five.*

"Back in med school there was a student in my class that was getting teased a lot. He was overweight, and kept to himself, so he was an easy target. But what people didn't know is he had just endured a horrible family tragedy. He was dealt a shit hand, but he ground his way to the top of our class at graduation, never sinking to the level of the bullies along the way. Look at him now." Ron pointed to the familiar textbook above Kevin, *The Pillars of Emergency Medicine, by Gregory Bishop, M.D.* "After all of your father's success, the happiest I saw him was the night he met your mom."

Kevin's hands slid up to the armrests. For the first time on the shift, he felt comfortable.

"I bring up this story for two reasons," Ron said. "The people I respect most in this life are the resilient ones. Greg didn't get into specifics with me regarding what happened to you at your previous job, but frankly, I don't care about the specifics. It sounded rough, and I'm sorry you went through it. I know you'll step up and fit in here because I know where you come from and what you're made of. Second, don't lose sight of who or what makes you happiest in life. That's what makes any of this worthwhile." Ron extended his hand.

Kevin shook it. "Thank you, Ron. I have a good feeling about this place."

"We think it's a good fit." Ron exited.

"Dr. Bishop, the x-ray's done." A recognizable voice called out.

"I'll take a look. Thanks Becca," Kevin said.

His hip vibrated. An incoming call lit up his phone. *That number ... is from Dad's ER.*

Kevin went cold.

His father knew it was his first day on the job, and he would never call unless it was an emergency. *Oh fuck. Fuck. What's happening?*

"Hello?"

"Kevin, it's Dad ... are you sitting down?"

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# 1. ROOTS

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Kevin pounded up the hill, headphones blaring. He hoped the screaming in his ears, and the racing of his heart, would drown out the sludge in his head, but his beloved Rage Against the Machine seemed too loud. His pulse was way too fast. *This is forty.*

Collapsing by the old tree, he searched for the carving in the bark. *There it is.* He touched his mother's initials gently. It had been twenty years since their last Sunday walk there; twenty years since her ashes dusted the roots of the lofty, solitary oak. *I wish you were here with me. I'm so lost. I'm numb. Please help me wake up.*

Kevin's gaze followed the trunk out to the leaves, just as they began to rustle. The gentle summer breeze reached his arm, curled around his shoulder and across the nape of his neck, filling him with a calming warmth. All five senses came into alignment. His mind quieted.

Kevin had forgotten what serenity felt like.

He took a step back with a knowing smile before descending the hill. Jogging in silence, his breathing settled into the cadence of his strides.

*No more running.*

Kevin closed the door behind him. The early morning light crept across the living room carpet. It was all familiar: recliner, corduroy couch, clunky TV, but home felt foreign.

He wandered to the dining room, or, more accurately, the study: one end of the dining table had been his desk when he was a teenager. His seat faced a large window, which meant it was also the portal to his daydreams. He tried to conjure a reverie now, but his newfound inner stillness was leaving him, and he was overtaken by something much darker.

Three shadows were sitting at the table. They each spoke in turn.

*"Kevin, you made a series of clinical errors and you put a patient's life at risk. We cannot allow that to happen again."*

*"We have to do what's in the best interest of our community and the future of our group."*

*"This is your last day here."*

Kevin had never responded.

The medical directors' silhouettes faded away. Then, there was another presence in the room, at the liquor cabinet to his right.

*Mom.*

"Don't tell your father," she whispered playfully, pouring a glass of whiskey.

Kevin glared at the throng of new bottles. *Dad, how can you still drink like this after what it did to Mom?*

He was startled by footsteps upstairs.

*Pull yourself together.* He slid from the doorway and crossed the foyer to the kitchen. He prepped a mug of Earl Grey: fifty-five seconds in the microwave. Start.

After placing a packet of Splenda on the counter, a framed photo beside the microwave caught his eye: his father giving him his first white coat in medical school. He reached into the cabinet for the animal crackers and slowly chewed a handful. *Are you still proud of me?*

"I didn't even hear you come in last night." His father's voice rumbled down the creaking stairwell. He emerged before him, a mountain of a man. More snow on the peak. *Damn it, how is he even bigger?*

"Hey, Dad."

Kevin hugged him and rested his head for a moment on Greg's shoulder.

"Thanks for the wet hug."

Kevin felt his dad fight his urge to recoil from the hug, so he pulled back. His father checked his own newly washed scrubs for imperfections. The microwave beeped. Kevin nodded at it and dropped onto a chair.

"How was your flight?" Greg asked. "Save any lives?"

"Uneventful, thankfully. Is Alex awake?"

"Yes, finally. He had a late night with friends." Greg pulled out the mug and added sweetener. "Perfect. Thanks," he said after taking a sip, then glanced at Kevin's book on the kitchen table. "What're you reading?"

*"The Subtle Art of Not Giving a Fuck.* Kind of like a self-help book. It's—"

"Other people's ideas of how you should live." Greg rolled his eyes and grabbed his white coat from its hook. He checked his pocket watch. "Action and experiences are

what you need for real growth. Like what you just went through."

*He just paraphrased a chapter.*

"Thanks, Dad, I'll try to remember that."

Greg rummaged through his briefcase, found his badge, and transferred it to his white coat.

Kevin's eyes lowered.

"How are you?" his father asked.

If only it was a year ago, when he was a steady flame encased in glass. *I'm leaving LA and moving back in with you. How do you think I'm doing?*

"Living the dream."

"Look." Greg threw his coat over a chair. "They never should have fired you, but I warned you about that group. They run their new doctors into the ground, and you knew that when you signed the contract. You ignored the red flag."

Kevin gave him a defeated glance. "I couldn't focus."

"Of course, you couldn't. You were in no shape to handle anything else after your divorce. Kev, you were stretched so thin, but now you have time to heal. You'll make it through this. I've always been your dad, and your coach. I used to give you a kick in the ass whenever you got into a slump in baseball. This is no different."

*Slump? I'm barely hanging on.*

Greg leaned in. "Get out of your head. Trust your gut."

"I didn't tell you what they did." Kevin's voice cracked. "I reached out to Dr. Sunder to help me intubate my patient and he ruptured her trachea and blamed it on me. No one believed me! I'm so fucked up I went to Mom's tree today. God, I miss her."

His father's eyes reached out to him, as his jaw went tight. "I wish there was something I could've done."

"You did." Kevin picked at the spine of his book before meeting his father's gaze. "You got me in at Chicago Legacy, Dad. Thank you."

Greg nodded. "That was all you."

"I can't believe I start in two weeks."

"You'll be ready."

More footsteps. Kevin straightened.

Alex turned the corner and stopped.

"Hi." Kevin stood, matching his son's six feet.

Alex finished buttoning his shirt, said, "Hi," and grabbed his tie from where it was flung across his shoulder.

"I can help you ..." Kevin reached out.

Instead, Alex handed the tie to Greg, and they assumed their positions in front of the mirror.

"Morning ritual," Greg said.

Kevin sat.

"How's summer here in Chicago? Learning a lot from Grandpa?"

"It's Long Grove"—Alex focused on Greg's technique—"and yeah."

"All set." Greg patted his shoulders. "Jeez, those muscles. You're going to burst out of that shirt."

Alex blushed and adjusted his collar. He had a Hollywood face above a triangle torso with muscle definition that could grace the cover of an anatomy textbook. "Hardly. I haven't been in the water in weeks."

Kevin, predominantly a land mammal, always marveled at how he had produced a state swimming champion. "There's a YMCA down the street," Kevin said. "Lap pool."

Alex nodded. "I'll check it out."

"I'm really happy to see you," Kevin blurted.

Alex paused by the door before picking up his backpack. He turned to Greg. "I'll see you at the hospital. I want time to review that appendicitis case from our last shift."

Kevin reminded himself to keep breathing. *Slow it down.* "Have a good day at work. Your grandfather is lucky to have you as a volunteer."

"Thanks, Dad," Alex said.

Alex opened the door to the garage, but Greg stopped him. "I'm missing some of my cigarettes."

"Your cancer sticks? Sorry to hear that."

"I'm trying to cut back," Greg said. "Please don't."

"It's been a few weeks with no change, so I thought I'd help the process. How many times a day do you tell your patients to quit smoking?" Alex smiled and walked away.

"That kid." Greg's nostrils flared.

*Déjà vu. You can't imagine how many times I've tried to get him to stop, Alex.*

Kevin's medical knowledge came with a heavy price. He knew his father's vices were speeding up his doomsday clock, and that at the stroke of midnight there would likely be a brutal, sudden death.

Kevin couldn't afford to be visited by another shadow. "I think he likes having you around and wants to keep it that way."

Greg listened out for the sound of the car door shutting. "Speaking of, when are you going to tell him?"

"I don't know," Kevin said. "He's already disappointed in me."

"Sooner, the better. I think he'd appreciate any communication at this point."

*You can't be serious, Kevin thought. The tumor robbed Mom of her voice. What was your excuse, Dad, for not talking to me then?*

*They had spent five months listening to the sound of bloody phlegm being suctioned from her tracheostomy, watching her marshal what little strength she had into her thumb to push a button that auto-fed her morphine into her fading veins. All the while his father had demanded round after round of radiation and chemotherapies, ignoring Kevin's protests.*

*Dad, I was trying to protect her living will and you shut me down. How could you not see that letting her go was the most loving thing you could have done?*

Sometimes a prolonged death was just as devastating.

Greg opened the side door. "I want to show you something. Let's go out back," he said.

Kevin hesitated, then followed.

The backyard was a semicircular enclave surrounded by trees holding hands. The trees towered over their fallen comrades who had been converted into a fence. Young Kevin had added insult to injury by carving his initials into the planks in plain view of a dilapidated deck facing it. The trees now looked in mourning at a fresh pile of timber with a sledgehammer on top of it.

"Your summer project," Greg said.

Kevin balked. "Aren't I a little old for this? I can hardly assemble Ikea furniture, and you want me to build a new deck?"

Greg sized him up. "Seems like you're in good shape. Tear it down, follow the blueprint."

"What about the guys outside Callahan's? They need work and could get it done in a day. A one-man job will take weeks." Kevin glanced quickly at his father's swollen belly. *And it needs to be sturdy.*

"That's not the point. And you won't be alone."

Kevin watched his father head back inside. *Some welcome home this is.* He sighed and looked to the clouds.

A crow was circling above him. Little did he know the bird had found him too, and a splatter of shit landed in his eye. *Perfect.*

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## 2. FILL IT UP

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*The Nightcap* was a dive bar, but it was Kevin and James's dive bar. It was a place of dichotomies. A warm layover that often became a destination. Nostalgic, yet filled with people trying to forget. A horseshoe bar crowded next to a haggard pool table that smelled like stale beer with a flickering light overhead. It always flickered.

"Barkeep! Two more shots of the good stuff!" James's voice shook the small room. "Are you ready for this?" He chuckled and slapped Kevin's back.

Kevin struggled to mentally prepare himself, gulped it and grimaced. "Ughh, you always do tequila!" He made eye contact with the bartender, Luis, and discreetly tugged his ear.

Luis nodded.

"You know why I do it? Back in high school, that bad tequila night at my place? How many times did you puke, about fifteen?"

"Didn't I throw up right in front of your mom?" Kevin asked.

"Oh yeah! I told her you were on antibiotics and that you had 'one beer and it didn't sit with you right.'"

Their throaty laughter reached an old man at the end of the bar. He grumbled before returning to his thoughts in the bottom of his mug.

More shots came. Kevin pretended to wince. The water was a needed break.

"I had a feeling it was you guys." A raspy voice emanated from the office behind the bar.

"Judy!" They leapt from their stools. They hugged the bar owner, their valued friend.

"Let me see you." Judy leaned back slightly to peer through her obstructing salt and pepper bangs. Her rosy, round face glowed. "Wow, you both look great!" She ruffled Kevin's hair.

"But I look better than him, right Judy?" James puffed his massive chest out.

"After I messed up his hair, sure. But before, it's a toss-up." She ribbed James.

"This messy hair beats that buzz cut any day," Kevin said. James snorted.

"Now, boys." She jokingly held them apart. "Best behavior, please. We still have the table in the back if you guys want it."

"Always," James said.

The best part of *The Nightcap* was the back room. Behind a dirty velvet curtain was a round table with four chairs, a dartboard, and a frayed 2002 *Women of the Beach* bikini calendar. A VIP room where they tried to make sense of their crazy worlds, and maybe laugh a little. There was an

exit door always left ajar. No one entered without Judy's permission.

"I can't believe you're both back in town. How are you?" she asked.

"Good," James said and found his old seat closest to the curtain. "Well, Mom misses me and she's having trouble with her memory."

"That's really hard," Judy said.

"I'm just glad to come home and spend time with her."

"I bet she's happy you're back."

The hanging bell on the front door jingled. Judy squinted through a gap in the curtain at her new patron. "Hmm," she said, then returned to the conversation. "So, are you going to finally bring home a lady friend to meet Mom one of these days?"

James blushed. "Not yet. Still single."

*Single.*

Kevin's thoughts drifted to his father, alone in his crumbling castle for the last twenty years. The overgrown weeds in his backyard. His overgrown midsection. No dinner parties, no girlfriends. Kevin shuddered. *That can't be my future.* But was this year of bachelorhood much better? Filling empty nights with empty partners from dating apps?

"Right? ... Sticks!" James shouted.

Kevin shook away the image. "Huh?" Kevin was number eleven on their high school baseball team, and the number eleven apparently looked like two sticks. So did his legs.

"You still with us?" James laughed. "I don't see him for months and now he can't handle his liquor."

"Aww, go easy on him, James. He's gotta keep his mind sharp, saving all those lives." She smiled at Kevin and turned to leave. "Let's catch up more later. I'll have Luis bring you a pitcher. So glad to see you two." The drapes closed behind her with a small plume of dust.

"Speaking of saving lives, sorry to hear you left your job. That's rough," James said to Kevin. "You okay?"

"Thanks man. I'm hanging in. They forced me to do too many shifts. I was spent. Had to walk away."

James studied Kevin's face for a moment. He nodded and grabbed the pitcher from the bartender. "You went straight into one high pressure job after another. It's crazy you never took time off."

"Finally getting it now, I guess," Kevin muttered.

"Good." James took a few long gulps. "Peel away the bullshit. Like that crap with Susan. Long time comin'."

Kevin tried to shake the thought of his ex from his mind, push back memories of things he wished long forgotten. He still felt himself bristle remembering her unwarranted suspicions. "Did I ever tell you she didn't want me to grab drinks with my coworkers if women were there? She'd say stuff like, 'Don't you see enough of them at work? Why do you want to go so badly?'"

"Wow. When you're in the trenches with a team you need to blow off steam together. It's important."

"She didn't get it, and she didn't get me ... One time, I told her about this perfect moment where I was body surfing with Alex in the ocean and I accidentally ended up in the barrel of a wave surrounded by walls of water. It had the coolest sound. Hypnotic. You know what her response

was? 'I don't think you've ever done that.' Belittling me in front of Alex became a sport."

"Death by a thousand cuts," James said. "Did I just see Dr. Kevin Bishop get a little angry? Holy fuck, I never thought I'd live to see it!"

Kevin looked down at his drink.

"That right there." James pointed at him. "Stop that shit. You keep bottling it up, and one day you'll explode."

*My anger isn't always under control. I just don't want you to see it.*

"You were Susan's doormat. You kept her shoes clean. Not anymore."

"But I also worked on myself," Kevin said. "I went to therapy, and I told her we should go as a couple, but she wouldn't. Part of me thinks I quit too, and I could've kept fighting for us. Maybe I should have, for Alex's sake."

"Alex is a man now. He's in college. You left, and it was the right call. It's done." He reached out with his beer. "To new adventures."

Kevin met him with a solid cheers. "How's Coronado these days?"

"Really great." James's broad shoulders were tense.

Kevin shot him a puzzled look. "But ...?" He leaned in.

James slumped against his seat. "One of the new students is dragging the whole class down. He was lined up with his team, everyone working to carry a tree trunk over their heads, and his hands were barely on it. Poor kid in front of him tore his rotator cuff because of it."

"Seriously?"

"When I called the slug out, he blew me off. I mentioned it to the superiors, and they said I overreacted."

"What's up with this guy?"

"He's an entitled sack, nephew of the new commanding officer."

"I guess beating him into submission is off the table?" Kevin smiled.

"You need to stop watching those cartoons," James said.

"*Looney Tunes*? Never," Kevin said.

James shook his head and laughed. "But you may be onto something." He smirked and polished off his mug. His eyes softened. "Did I ever tell you about Brody?"

Kevin tried to steady his foggy head. "Was he the one in Afghanistan—"

"Yeah," James said. "I keep in touch with his family. His sister Grace was Navy too. She lives here and she's a nurse now. You two should—"

Shouts erupted behind the curtain. Shattered glass.

"Stop it!" Judy yelled. "James!"

James was through the curtain before Kevin could stand.

Kevin entered to see the old man no longer at the end of the bar but sprawled on the floor. He was unconscious and bleeding. Kevin dropped to a knee, took out his phone light, and inspected a deep cut on his scalp. "Judy! Towels! Still have that glue?"

She nodded and disappeared into her office.

James kept Kevin and the old man behind him. He faced the attacker.

"Here come the Boy Scouts," the man growled, holding a broken beer bottle.

James slowly took off his jacket and laid it on the pool table.

The man's bloodshot eyes widened. "You military?"

James nodded.

"Army?" He gripped the bottle tighter.

"Navy."

A crooked smile appeared in his dirt-caked beard. "Just like me. Except I was doing tours when you were in diapers."

"Not like you." James rolled up the sleeves of his tight Henley.

Judy handed Kevin the supplies and retreated behind the bar. "He's a SEAL, you dumbass!" she shouted.

The man's face went white. The bottle shook.

James wagged a finger at Judy.

"But I bet we're similar in many ways. Tough childhood, right?" James turned his forearm under the light revealing a constellation of cigarette burns. "I've lived your anger. Anger at what was done to me."

The man's eyes darted around the room. He took a step back.

"And I know that pride. That push ... to show you're the alpha. Let it go."

Kevin's new patient moaned.

"He okay?" James asked, eyes fixed on his aggressor.

"He's good," Kevin said. "Closed a cut. That's it."

James raised both hands in front of him. "See? Everything's—"

The man bolted outside with the bottle.

Flood lights beamed through the windows. "Police! Drop the weapon!"

*He fell for the stall tactic. Oldest trick in the book. There's literally a police station down the street. James picked up his jacket and put it back on.*

The battered man wobbled onto a knee. "Bar," he mustered, as they hoisted him onto his stool. He held up his bloodied hands, confused. "What're we drinking?"

"This round's on me, boys." Judy snapped on a glove and grabbed the soiled towels. She cringed. "I don't know how you handle this nasty stuff Kevin but thank you."

"You're welcome," James interjected. "Anytime."

She squinted at him through her bangs. "And thank you for keeping it to one set of rags."

Test Subject 1  
Interaction 2  
Ford Hospital  
010900SMAY19

## **Informed Consent for Pneuma Transplant**

Today we will be assessing whether you:

Understand the transplant process including the procedural details, risks, benefits, and alternatives

Express a choice on whether to proceed consistent with your preferences and values

Appreciate the consequences of participating or refusing

Show appropriate reasoning when comparing these consequences

[X]: Denotes the objective has been completed

[]: Denotes the objective is still pending

This interaction is being video recorded.

---

My interviewer Mr. Montoya enters, and gentle air fills the room, drawing me away from the paper taped to the table. *Is it Montoya? Montenegro? Something like that.* He strides over to the table and takes a seat across from me. Oh, he carries himself confidently.

I see my reflection in the large mirror behind him ... I look tired. *I should've touched up my roots. My memory these days.*

"Hello again, Ms. Trudy," Mr. what's-his-name says.

"Hello dear. Please call me Katherine."

"How have the accommodations been so far? How was your sleep?" he asks.

"Lovely." I twirl the cord of my nasal cannula. "Ya'll have made everything so comfortable."

"Of course, and please let us know if you ever run low on your oxygen. We'd be happy to supply you with another tank." He smiles.

*That smile. That was Pete's smile! Oh, how I miss his face. The only man to ever show up in a suit to a first date. 'Clair de Lune' floats across my mind. I hope you're resting sweetheart.*

I remember I'm being interviewed and slide my hands off the table. I don't want him to see my dusky fingertips.

"This session will be longer than yesterday. We would like to get to know you more."

"Of course." I search my arm. "I unfortunately don't have my patch with me. I would hate to be rude and leave for a smoke."

He looks puzzled. "You still smoke? I'm surprised to hear that."

"Yes." I blush. "Some things I can't let go."

"That's very interesting. May I?" He nods towards his briefcase.

"Of course."

He scans a document at an impressive speed. He nods. "I must've overlooked that."

"I used to hate that I smoked. I was disgusted with myself. Now, I've accepted that I enjoy it. I've made peace with it."

He glances at my nasal cannula.

I laugh. "Even after the consequences I've felt. Don't worry, I turn off my oxygen when I do it."

"You seem happy. Why did you enroll in this transplant study?"

"Life ... This *gift* ... Is about quality, not quantity, and mine's been an amazing journey. I'm grateful for all of it, both before and after my trauma. It also affords me the opportunity to help someone and to be involved in something historic."

He nods thoughtfully. "We cannot thank you enough."

I smile.

"I'll get you a patch. Can I get you anything else? A water?"

"Oh no dear, you don't have to do all that! Very kind of you," I say.

"My pleasure, just a moment."

"What a process this has been. Thank goodness you're so much more personable than that stiff psychiatrist." *And so handsome.*

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## 3. RECOGNITION

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“Time for me to go.” Grace smiled. “Thank you for dinner. I’m blocking your number, so if you want a second date, you’ll have to find me.”

Kevin slowly finished his drink and placed the empty glass on the table. His eyes focused on the dimly lit wall of ancient celebrities. “I’m not big into games.”

Grace tucked her hair behind her ear. “Me neither, but you have a lot on your plate right now. No rush.” She stood.

“Are ...” Kevin awkwardly slid out from the table. “Are you sure you’re interested?”

“See? All up in that head of yours. Oh, and you can’t use James to find me. No cheating.” She reached for her jacket.

Kevin intercepted and slid it over her shoulders. “Who are you?” he whispered.

Grace shrugged and walked away. She weaved through the tables, grinning back at him. Her eyes were stars under the lantern lights.

He slowed behind her.

She stopped at the door. “You okay?”

Kevin exhaled. “I don’t know.”

"Do you need to sit?"

He shook his head. "I'm good."

They reached the sidewalk. He took five more steps then winced, clutching the right side of his abdomen.

"Okay, what's going on? Seriously."

"I tried to write it off the last thirty minutes, but it's not going away."

"Do you still have your appendix?"

Kevin looked at her anxiously.

"I'm taking you to a hospital." Grace pointed through a park. "Chicago Legacy's around the corner."

"Please no, I start there next week."

She tapped her foot, focusing down the street. "Wait here." She grabbed her keys.

Ten minutes later they arrived at a different ER.

"Hi Ms. Lamoreaux." The hospital valet opened her door. "I thought you weren't working night shifts anymore."

Grace smiled nervously at the valet. "Hi Carl, not working. My friend's sick."

A tech arrived and helped Kevin into a wheelchair. He glanced at the young man's badge. *Saint Monica Hospital*. "Thanks Brian. I'm actually starting to feel better." Kevin slowed the wheels and smiled at Grace.

She squinted at him. "Better that fast, Dr. Bishop?"

"I feel like a new man."

Grace looked him over, probing. "Interesting." She came closer and reached for his abdomen to examine him.

He intercepted her hand softly and laced his fingers through hers.

"Or maybe"—her lips curled up at the corners—"you faked it all."

"I wouldn't say *all*. This, here"—Kevin held her hand warmly—"is something I can't fake, and I can't wait to see you again."

She blushed, unable to contain her full smile. Her hand returned to her side as she stood. "I'm glad you're feeling better."

"Time for me to go." Kevin pushed himself out of the chair and stepped back. "Thanks for a great night." He set off for the street.

She took a moment to regain her bearings, leaning on the armrest of the wheelchair. Her smile was still there.

Brian cleared his throat and gently jostled the chair. "Sorry I need to take this back."

"Oh, right ... of course," she said.

"So ... um, what kind of doctor is he?"

She looked up at the big blue letters of her hospital. "A sneaky one."

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Three days later, Grace entered the parking lot to find Kevin resting on her bumper.

"How about that second date?" he asked.

She reddened and rocked back on her heels. "I have work I really need to finish."

"You sound like me." He reached for her hand and pulled her in.

The sunset streaked her porcelain cheeks. Her wavy brown hair smelled like a cascading rose garden, but it was her pheromones that captivated him, softening, and warming the air between them.

“Quick date, you pick,” he said.

Grace arched back and gazed at the clouds. “You know what I’ve been craving?” She bit her lip.

The faux-frosted glass doors of Ice Dream opened, and Kevin was suddenly in a Disney movie. The aqua and white ensemble greeted their princess as two teenage girls gawked at Kevin, whispering to each other in their aprons.

“Who’s that, Grace?” One giggled. “Boyfriend?”

“I’ll tell you later.” Grace winked.

Kevin picked a table on the sidewalk.

Grace took her first bite of Speculoos Fantasy smothered in marshmallow and graham cracker, then gave a contented wiggle. “I’m sure your job is pretty boring. No good stories or anything like that.”

He chuckled. “I pretty much just stare at a wall all day. As an ICU nurse, I’m sure you’ve had your fair share.”

She placed her spoon in her cup and leaned forward on the table. “Not like yours. My patients are mostly machines by the time they come to me.”

Kevin saw his mom on her hospital bed gazing at him. He blinked it away. “What would you like to hear? Pick a category, please.”

“How about crazy?”

“Crazy ... As in shocking, or crazy as in funny?”

“Both, but let’s start with funny.”

“Brace yourself.” Kevin grinned. “In medical school during my first rotation, I had to do an abdominal exam on an obese patient. I lifted layers of his fat and found a half-eaten Twinkie.”

“No!” Grace covered her mouth.

"Then the patient blushed and said, 'My wife and I play a game called *Find the Twinkie* and I think we might've lost that one.'"

Grace erupted with laughter. "Oh my God stop it. You're lying. No way did that happen!" She playfully slapped his arm.

"True story."

"That's priceless." She giggled through another scoop of melting ice cream.

He couldn't help but move closer.

"How about the shocking story? Do I even want to know?" she asked with feigned alarm.

Kevin took a moment. With strangers, he typically chose the French tourist who lost half his face after a bicycle crash at thirty mph. With James, it was the homeless man with a colony of squirming maggots that waved at him when he parted the patient's hair. For Grace, he chose something new. He wanted her to *see* him.

"It was my first pediatric death. She must've been seven years old." He fixated on the memory. "There was this horrible stillness while we waited for the ambulance. Doors opened, and the paramedics were performing these frantic chest compressions. She was in her swimsuit, wet on the gurney, and her arm brushed against me. She was so cold with this lifeless stare. Parents had left her with the babysitter and came home to find her face down in their pool. That image ... don't think I'll ever shake it."

She wrapped her arm around his and pulled him close. "I'm sorry you had to experience that."

He looked at her nestled against him. "Thank you. I don't normally tell anyone that story."

"What about your dad?" She sat up. "He's ER too, right?"

"Yeah, but he has his own set of tragedies. I try not to burden him." Kevin curled her hair behind her ear. "I'm glad you're here."

Their blue eyes met. "I think I'll finish my work another night. Let's get out of here," she said.

He followed her on Lake Shore Drive to her downtown apartment. It was Kevin's favorite road right alongside Lake Michigan. When he was at Northwestern for undergrad, he would play catch with James on the lakefill, and they would stop in amazement before turning home. It was their own private ocean.

"I don't think Jen's home." She gave him a flirtatious wink and opened her door.

"I do declare Grace, what're you implying?" he said in a passable southern drawl.

Grace dropped her keys on the table. "Want anything to drink?"

"Sure. Wine?" Kevin surveyed her large two-bedroom apartment. Clean, modern white fixings, flowers on the table, gorgeous view of the Chicago River. He saddled up to her breakfast bar and stopped on a framed photo. "King James at his coronation." He pointed. "Brody?"

"You've done your research." She handed him a glass. "Their graduation. We had James over for dinner that night and the rest is history. He had a standing invitation every month after. My Dad's a chef and never saw anyone who could eat like him."

"Bottomless pit."

"Brody admired him. So did I. James was the one who convinced me to do Navy ROTC in college."

"We should all hang out soon," Kevin said.

"Oh, indeed we should." Grace nodded as she slowly slipped onto his lap. "You and James are both only children. How did you not rip each other apart after all these years?"

"We've had our moments." Kevin leaned closer and kissed the top of her head, but then pulled himself back. "There's another only child. I have a—"

"Son?"

He froze.

"I've done my research too." She caressed his arm. "And I want a *man*. No more confused boys." She slowly kissed up the side of his neck and rocked forward, grazing his lips. "Know anyone?"