



THE FIFTH SURGEON

Faith Prize



Chapter 1

The Five Ps

NADIA HEADED TO THE EMERGENCY department to see a new consult, but her thoughts stayed in the cardiac intensive care unit on the patient in bed eleven—a forty-five-year-old man with end-stage heart failure. He was Singh’s patient, but everyone in the cardiothoracic surgery department knew him. After a heart transplant five years ago, his body was rejecting the donated organ, and he was now back on the waitlist.

But it wasn’t his medical history that was on Nadia’s mind this morning. It was the look of despair on his wife’s face that seemed to have taken permanent root there. She knew as well as any physician that there was no guarantee another suitable donor heart would be available in time to save her husband’s life. With every passing day, his chances of a happy outcome exponentially declined.

“Nadezhda!”

Nadia froze in her tracks at the familiar cheerful voice calling to her from the conference room. Setting her jaw tight, she turned to face Ashley Rylan, one of the attending surgeons. Well, not just an attending surgeon but the chief of the cardiothoracic surgery department where Nadia was doing her fellowship training.

Rylan was nothing one might expect from a surgeon. She was bright and sweet and tried to be everyone’s friend, often at the expense of quality training.

Nadia bit back a sigh. Despite her lack of authority, Rylan was still her boss, so she stepped into the room.

Two dozen elementary school children silently stared at her, electrifying her nerves.

“What are you doing right now?” Rylan asked, her blue eyes big and desperate.

“I’m on my way to the emergency department for a consult,” Nadia replied, hoping that would end the discussion. She would have walked away at that point too, but she reminded herself again that Rylan was her chief. She waited out of respect for the title, not the person.

Rylan looked out into the hallway again. “Jack, come in here.”

Was Rylan planning to bring the entire healthcare team in the room?

“Nadezhda, you remember Jack, the med student who is rotating with us this month?”

She didn’t, so she remained motionless, holding her lips in a thin line.

“Why don’t you let Jack see your consult and then brief you on it?”

Nadia nodded tightly. Having the student do the consult would create more work for her.

“Great.” Rylan beamed, apparently ignoring Nadia’s utter lack of enthusiasm. “I have an emergency, but I’ll be back in ten minutes, tops. These students are here to learn about being a surgeon. It’s a career awareness trip.” She paused, then added more quietly, “Be nice,” before she hurried away.

Nadia turned to the medical student, anger simmering under her cool exterior. Jack was just another child Rylan had foisted upon her. “The patient is in the ED, room fifteen.”

Jack pulled out a notepad and waited with his pen poised in the air. Nadia crossed her arms, tapping her fingers against her skin. If remembering the room number was already too much for him, she dreaded finding out what sort of report he would give her.

Finally, Jack spoke. “How old is the patient, and what is the chief complaint?”

Nadia’s first instinct was to tell him, but teaching wasn’t about giving students the answers. “That’s for you to find out and tell me.”

The children giggled and Jack’s face grew pink.

“You have fifteen minutes,” Nadia said. “Do a focused H&P, and I want to know if you think he’s an operative candidate. Go.”

Jack had the good sense to leave immediately.

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Nadia turned to face the remaining children, her jaw setting harder. What could she possibly tell them? She couldn't tolerate most adults, and kids required even more patience. Her own school experience had been unnerving. She had never fit in as a student. People mistook her direct manner for rudeness, and she rarely corrected them.

"Are you a nurse?" one boy asked her, his chest puffed out like a bird.

She narrowed her eyes at him. "Why do you think so?"

"Because Dr. Rylan called you by your first name."

"Observant, but wrong."

The other children giggled and the boy looked down.

"To you, I'm Dr. Keating. And it appears I'm going to be the one talking today about careers in surgery. Now, how many of you—"

"If you're a doctor, why did Dr. Rylan tell you what to do?" another student tentatively asked, her big brown eyes peeking out from underneath her bangs.

"Because she's my boss."

"Aren't you both doctors?" She scrunched up her nose.

"Yes, but she's an attending and I'm a fellow." Nadia looked around at the children's blank expressions. They were here to learn about surgeons, and it would be Nadia's fault if they left this place as ignorant as when they had arrived. She walked to the whiteboard and picked up a marker. "There's a hierarchy in—"

She stopped. They might not understand complex words. "The surgical department in a hospital is like a pyramid. At the top is the head of surgery, the chair." She wrote the word at the top of the board. "He or she is a fully-trained surgeon who oversees all surgical subspecialties." She drew a few lines branching downward. "Below the chair are chiefs in charge of different divisions. Can anyone give me an example of a surgical specialty?"

The children continued to stare at her blankly. They didn't seem to be following at all. Finally, the same boy who had asked if she was a nurse said, "Neurology."

Nadia smiled, pleasantly surprised. "Is your mother or father in medicine?"

"My aunt is."

Nadia nodded. "Good guess," she encouraged him, wanting to spare the boy another round of giggling from his classmates. While there

certainly was such a thing as stupid questions and answers, putting oneself out there shouldn't be discouraged. "But neurology is what's called a medical subspecialty. Its surgical counterpart is neurosurgery. Physicians treat patients with medications, physical therapy, and some nonsurgical procedures, but only surgeons can operate on them."

She wrote *chief* and *neurosurgery* on the whiteboard, then added a few more examples.

"Dr. Rylan is one of these chiefs. Did she tell you what kind of surgeon she is?"

The children furrowed their brows as if they were solving a complex mathematical equation.

"She's the chief of cardiothoracic surgery. That's a surgeon who operates on the heart and lungs."

Nadia drew a few more branching lines. "Under each chief are what we call attending physicians. They've completed their training and are responsible for treating their patients as well as supervising all treatments given by any doctors-in-training on their service. The chair and the chiefs are also attending doctors who take care of patients. They just have administrative duties in addition to their attending role."

The children were watching her intently. Some had their mouths open, and others looked as if they had forgotten how to blink. Most of them probably weren't following well, but everyone seemed engaged on some level. Nadia smiled. The task Rylan had foisted upon her wasn't as terrible as she'd thought it would be.

"And below the attendings are the fellows like me. We're doing advanced training in a subspecialty. Below fellows are the surgical residents, who are usually still practicing general surgery." She wrote *fellow* and *resident* on the board.

"You're a fellow?"

"Correct. I operate on patients, but there is always an attending in the room with me." She added *intern* to the board. "And you may have heard of interns. They're fresh out of medical school. They're at the bottom of the pyramid, and everyone above them can tell them what to do."

"Including us?" one girl asked.

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Nadia chuckled. Even at this age, power was attractive. “No. Sorry.” She added *students* at the very bottom of her diagram. “When you’re a student, you need to listen to what you’re being told.”

At this remark, some of the children stuck out their lower lips. Nadia could relate. She had little tolerance for the hospital hierarchy. She was smarter than the chair, the chiefs, and all the attendings combined. She had a level of expertise from years of research that surpassed her training level, yet, she had to listen to everyone above her in the pyramid.

At that moment, Jack reappeared, studying his notes. He had to present a concise narrative of the patient’s complaint. Nadia had to judge his presentation, examine the patient herself, and verify the facts presented, simultaneously treating the patient and enhancing Jack’s medical knowledge.

It was a lot of responsibility, but it had its benefits. Nadia looked at the class and said, “He’s just a medical student. You can be in charge of him.”

The class cheered loudly. Jack looked up from his notes, startled.

Before Nadia could ask him to summarize the case in front of her audience, Rylan returned, flushed and out of breath. She looked at the laughing children with arched eyebrows and parted lips.

“Um, thanks.” Rylan recovered her composure and smiled.

Nadia’s inner child itched to reply, *See? I could be nice if I wanted to.* Instead, she kept her poker face. “I’m going to see my patient now.” She glanced at Jack. “Follow me.”

The class giggled again.

As she walked away, Nadia heard a girl proudly declare that she wanted to be in charge of surgery when she grew up. She smiled. Despite Ashley Rylan’s inconsiderate disruption of her work, if Nadia had inspired at least one child in that room, her time had not been entirely wasted.

* * *

Ashley’s head pounded, her feet felt like lead, and every muscle in her back ached when she finally made it home at the end of another long day at the hospital. It was after ten o’clock.

There was a time when physical exhaustion didn’t hurt her spirit, but lately, she was in a rut. The days, weeks, and months blended together in the same repetitive cycle: work, sleep, work, and sleep again. Ashley looked around her empty apartment. The silence was deafening.

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She dropped her keys in the small wooden bowl on the cabinet by the entrance, her gaze lingering on the gift from her ex-girlfriend. Maya had thought Ashley would be less likely to lose her keys if she had a designated place for them. She had been right. Ashley couldn't remember the last time she'd had to search for them in the morning.

Her chest ached with the memory. After two years together, Maya had decided that Ashley's work schedule didn't leave room for romance.

She swallowed the lump that formed in her throat. Maya had asked her to choose between her career and their relationship. Ashley regretted the question but not her choice.

Her phone chirped, interrupting her thoughts. She realized she had been staring at the damned bowl for several minutes. Maya had left eight months ago. There was no point in dwelling on the past, and it only added to Ashley's exhaustion.

The text message was from the hospital. Ashley scoffed and typed her reply, confirming the patient's medication orders. She tossed her phone on the coffee table next to the sofa and dragged herself to the bathroom to get ready for bed. Her chest tightened with every step. For the last few months, all she had done was wake up, go to work, get home too late and too tired to do anything, and go straight to bed. It was the same suffocating routine. Her heart ached for change. Even though the gratitude of a patient still gave her a thrill for a job well done, depending on cardiothoracic surgery to breathe meaning into her one-dimensional life was turning into a fragile lifeline.

She crawled under the covers and opened her laptop. As tired as she was, she didn't want to end her day in the usual fashion. She had an overwhelming need for a change.

Her friend Pari had told her it was high time Ashley found a new girlfriend. Recently, Pari had even taken it a step further and set her up on a dating website. While Ashley had no interest in disappointing another woman with how little of her time she had to offer, perhaps she could find someone to talk to who wasn't a colleague, someone who could help her break out of her routine.

She opened the website's page and typed in her login, but her finger hovered over the *enter* key. Her pulse quickened at the thought of putting

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herself out there. Still the alternative—closing her laptop and going to bed—made her stomach twist.

Ashley closed her eyes and breathed deeply. Finally, she snapped them open and with a decisive tap hit the *enter* key and navigated to her profile page.

Her burst of courage fizzled. She had forgotten how little information had been posted on her *About* page. Not even a picture. Not surprisingly, there were zero new messages.

It was disappointing, but Ashley reminded herself that sharing information would only draw attention when she wasn't really ready to reciprocate.

She scrolled through several new profiles. There was one like hers with no photo. Ashley's gaze lingered on it. If this person had no interest in completing the profile, perhaps she had similar reservations about committing to a relationship. She clicked on the link, her heart beating more loudly.

The page had less information on it than her own, *if* that was even possible. The description was of a thirty-two-year-old female who was fit and who had dark brown hair and eyes.

And she was online.

Curious. Why would anyone go through the trouble of creating a profile on a dating site and provide so little information?

Before she could change her mind, she typed,

Hi.

The woman replied immediately.

Do you have sex with men, women, or both?

Ashley pushed her laptop aside and jumped out of bed. She had misread the woman's motives entirely. Clearly, she wasn't looking for friendship.

Ashley stared at the blinking cursor on the bright screen, her mind racing. She had wanted something different, but maybe this was *too* different. The safe choice was to log out and go to sleep.

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She remained frozen in her place. Part of her wanted to know where this conversation might go. It was a controlled environment. What harm could it do to exchange a few more lines?

She took a deep breath and climbed back into bed, retrieving her laptop. She typed her reply and waited, a little amused. Lately her only adventures had been in the operating room, but that was about to change, even if it was only in an anonymous online conversation. She hit *Enter*.

acr_34: Women.

MargaretBulkley: In the past 2 months, how many partners have you had sex with?

Ashley snorted. That question was even more direct than her previous one. And why was the time period so specific? Two months seemed rather arbitrary. Whether she was driven purely by curiosity about this woman or by the prospect of speaking to someone outside of work for the first time in months, Ashley didn't know. She typed another one-word reply.

acr_34: None.

MargaretBulkley: In the past 12 months, how many partners have you had sex with?

This time, Ashley scoffed. The conversation was beginning to feel like an interrogation. She tapped her fingers on the mattress as she considered whether or not to reply.

acr_34: One. How about you?

MargaretBulkley: What do you do to protect yourself from sexually transmitted infections or HIV?

What the hell? Ashley got out of bed again. Being direct was one thing, but this felt more like an annual physical exam than talking to a potential partner.

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She went to the kitchen and poured herself a glass of cold water. She was getting flustered, and not in a good way.

Why did everything have to be so complicated? Her career interfered with her relationships, but she loved her job too much to let it go. Her lack of personal life bothered her but maybe not enough to even chat anonymously with a woman she might never meet—a woman who stubbornly refused to conform to any predictable pattern of someone on a dating website.

Ashley returned to the bedroom to consider her options. One, she could put an end to this bizarre chat and go to bed. She had to get up by five in the morning for an eight-hour OR case. Going to bed would be the adult thing to do.

Or, option two, she could keep answering the woman's questions, despite how one-sided and plain weird the conversation already was.

She went over the questions again in her mind. They were weird, yes—but perhaps they weren't all that random.

Margaret had asked about her partners and protection from STDs. Ashley sat on the edge of the bed and picked up her laptop again. She opened a new browser page and typed in *questions about taking a sexual history*. As a cardiothoracic surgeon, she rarely needed to ask her patients about these sorts of things, but she had learned in medical school that there was a guide to important questions to cover. She clicked a link on a healthcare provider's website called *The Five Ps of Sexual Health*. It offered a way for physicians to organize relevant questions. The categories were partners, prevention of pregnancy, protection from STDs, practices, and past history of STDs.

Ashley read the questions in each of the categories. They were identical to what the woman had asked. *How curious.*

But that didn't mean *MargaretBulkley* was a doctor. Anybody could look up questions to assess STD risk. It was just that nonmedical people rarely did.

Ashley stroked her chin. Giving direct answers hadn't gotten her anywhere, so it was time to change tactics.

acr_34: Isn't it a bit early to have this talk?

MargaretBulkley: Given the intent of this conversation, no.

Ashley smiled. She had finally gotten Margaret to break out of the questionnaire.

acr_34: So you are capable of writing lines that didn't come out of a medical textbook.

MargaretBulkeley: Would you answer my question?

acr_34: Why should I?

This time, Margaret didn't answer immediately. Several minutes passed without a response and Ashley's smile faded. Maybe she had gone too far.

Then: *ping!*

MargaretBulkeley: What's your email?

Ashley huffed. She wasn't about to give her actual email address to a stranger. Fortunately, Pari had created an alternate email when she set up the account.

acr_34: acr_34@gmail.com

MargaretBulkeley: Not trusting me with your real email?

Ashley's smile returned. Margaret sure was direct. And perceptive.

acr_34: I thought you'd approve. You're all about safety, aren't you?

MargaretBulkeley: Check your email.

Ashley opened the attachment—and froze.

What did she expect?

A picture of the woman, perhaps?

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Certainly not the results of an eleven-panel STD test. Ashley frowned. She was used to interpreting all sorts of patient data in her professional life, but she didn't expect to review a medical test in her personal one.

The report indicated that the samples had been collected a week earlier, and the results were all negative. The personal information was redacted. *So probably not Margaret Bulkley, huh?*

As she studied the document, one thing became clear—Margaret, or whoever this person was, didn't want to answer personal questions, even though she kept asking them. Ashley smiled, amused. Her fingers flew across the keyboard as she pointed out the flaw in Margaret's plan.

acr_34: You can't seriously expect me to manufacture an STD report just because you have one.

MargaretBulkley: And that's why I am asking you questions, to assess whether you should get one before we have sex.

Ashley laughed out loud. She leaned back against the headboard.

acr_34: Sex? Isn't that a bit presumptuous?

MargaretBulkley: Isn't that why you messaged me?

Ashley laughed even more loudly. This woman, who had yet to say anything resembling a normal conversation, didn't lack any confidence in thinking where this was all heading.

But Ashley didn't work that way. She didn't know anything about Margaret except that she apparently had a clean bill of sexual health. What an odd first thing to know about someone who wasn't her patient.

acr_34: I don't have sex with women I don't know.

MargaretBulkley: Is emotional attachment important for you?

acr_34: Isn't it for you?

MargaretBulkley: No.

The instant response deflated Ashley's mood. She tapped her fingers against her laptop while she considered what to say next.

Was there any point in continuing the conversation? They seemed to have very different goals.

Yet, how many people interested in a one-night stand wrote in full sentences and looked up safe-sex questions?

Ashley had never slept with a woman she didn't know well before, but where had that gotten her? She had been alone for over eight months, and her personal life was nonexistent. Perhaps it was time to try something new. At least a noncommittal relationship meant a woman wouldn't be disappointed with how unavailable she was because of her job.

With a surrendering sigh, Ashley decided to give Margaret what she was asking for.

acr_34: I've never had an STD. My last relationship lasted two years and ended eight months ago. I've only ever been in long-term monogamous relationships. That's all I'm willing to share for now. You'll at least have to buy me a drink before I tell you any of my "practices."

Ashley held her breath as she waited for a reply. She kept rereading the message she'd just sent, wishing she had skipped the last part. It had been intended playfully, but in retrospect, it sounded as if she was asking her out for a drink.

MargaretBulkley: There doesn't seem to be any point in continuing this conversation. I'm not interested in being your girlfriend.

Ashley rolled her eyes. This woman had a talent for making good things sound bad. *I must be insane to still be interested.*

acr_34: Who said anything about a girlfriend?

MargaretBulkley: So you think you can handle having sex with someone you don't know and will never meet again?

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Despite not even knowing what this woman looked like, Ashley pictured clearly the mocking smile on her face. But she wasn't some goody-two-shoes. She could do casual. And it was thrilling to think of proving Margaret wrong.

acr_34: Of course I can. So what's next? Do we exchange photos?

MargaretBulkley: Anyone can take a good photo. It doesn't mean they look good in person.

Ashley chuckled. Margaret seemed to have an opinion about everything.

MargaretBulkley: Let's meet in person. This Friday at 8:00 p.m. at a public place. A bar, perhaps. This won't be a date. There will be no food. One drink and we talk. I'm not interested in your real name or what you do for a living. If there's a mutual physical attraction after the drink, we have sex.

Ashley rolled her eyes again. Margaret needed to loosen up. A lot.

acr_34: Deal.

They exchanged cellphone numbers and details about where to meet. Then Margaret went offline.

Ashley's fingers froze in mid-sentence. She scoffed for the millionth time tonight. She snapped her laptop shut and set it on the bedside table.

Why had she agreed to meet this insane woman? It was totally out of character for her. The entire exchange felt so impersonal.

Was she really about to meet up with a stranger just to have sex? Just because the stranger had challenged her to do it?

She rubbed her temples. Second-guessing herself made the stifling loneliness she'd been feeling for months creep back in her heart.

But maybe somehow, meeting up with a woman who demanded a no-name one-night sexual transaction was a step in the right direction. Or any direction. At least it would break her routine and remind her to try harder in her romantic life. Heck, if she put in one-tenth of the effort into her

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personal life that she put into her work, maybe she wouldn't feel so lonely every night.

As she fell into sleep, she made a mental note to ensure that her Friday night was work-free.

Chapter 2

Eligibility Criteria

NADIA MADE HER WAY TO Pari Singh's office, her stomach flipping with every step. The closer she got to Friday evening, the more uneasy she became. But she was determined to go through with it, and to hell with her fears and nerves. She raised her hand to knock on the door, then paused.

"I can't be on call this weekend. It's the only time I get to see my kids."

She recognized the hostile voice as belonging to Peter Williams, one of the senior attendings. His loud protests signaled that she should wait.

"This is the schedule we all agreed on, Peter. Each attending is on call one full week of the month. All seven days. You don't get to decide at the last minute you won't do weekends and use your family as an excuse. We all have lives outside this hospital. Why should you be special?"

A smile flickered on Nadia's lips as Singh held her own against Williams. Her voice was calm but firm, carrying considerably more authority than the one of her noisy colleague. She was the director of the cardiothoracic fellowship program, and as such, Nadia's direct supervisor.

"I never agreed to be away from my family so often. Every time I'm on call, there's one emergency after another. It's outrageous. If you truly cared about your own children, you'd understand where I'm coming from."

Nadia rolled her eyes. She sometimes wondered if Williams had had children for the sole purpose of using them as an excuse in moments like these.

It wasn't unusual for senior attendings like Williams to feel entitled. Surgeons rarely bothered to be nice, especially with each other. They were

forward, abrupt, and sometimes downright immature. Nadia understood why—after working for twenty hours without any rest, people tended to forego pleasantries and jump straight to the point.

“Don’t go there.” Singh’s voice was like ice. “Don’t bring my kids into this.”

“The chief has no children,” Williams continued as if he hadn’t heard. “Why don’t you make her do it? It’s not like she would object. She’s a pushover.”

“Peter! I expect you to show more respect for your colleagues. Just because Ashley got the position you wanted doesn’t mean you can be a sore loser. Besides, we both know you use your family as an excuse. What is it you’d rather be doing this time? Playing golf with Bratton? Or another night out drinking with him? Or did you convince another nurse to sleep with you?”

“It’s none of your business what I do in my personal time,” Williams growled.

Nadia pictured the flushed expression on his face after being called out, pushing down her sudden feelings of twisting guilt. Her situation was nothing like his. She straightened up, focusing instead on how few had the guts to be so blunt with him about his indiscretions. Nadia admired Singh’s directness. It was one of the characteristics she shared with her mentor.

“But as you so astutely point out, Bob and I are old friends, so there’s nothing you can do.” Williams had regained his confidence. Robert Bratton, the chair of surgery, was in his back pocket after all. “I’m not working this weekend, and that’s final. You can either let the patients die or take the calls yourself if you want to protect your little protégé of a chief. I don’t care. I’m turning my phone off.”

Williams burst out of Singh’s office and smirked at Nadia as he passed. She stared after him until he disappeared.

Despite his behavior, Williams’s threats were just that—threats. After he was rested, he would probably stay on call next weekend. He was a jerk, but he pulled his weight.

“Keating, what’s up?” Singh’s expression relaxed when she saw Nadia. Her long raven-black hair had been let down from its usual tight ponytail and covered the shoulders of her beige blazer. “I hope you’re not here to tell me you won’t be working this weekend either.”

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“Of course not, Dr. Singh,” Nadia said. She kept her tone deliberately businesslike. “I emailed you that research paper you asked for, and I just rounded on our post-op patients. I took care of their med orders and spoke with the nurses. Do you need anything else before I head out for the night?”

“What? No late-night research? That’s new.”

Nadia’s nerves surfaced again. She hoped Singh wouldn’t notice the heat she felt on her cheeks. Regaining her composure with a tight smirk, she recited Singh’s own words. “We all have lives outside this hospital.”

“You weren’t supposed to hear that. Residents and fellows should dedicate one hundred percent of their time to their work.” Singh chuckled. “But I suppose I don’t need to tell you that. You put in more hours than your other three colleagues combined.”

Nadia shrugged. “I try to do my part.” She wasn’t sure if being called a workaholic counted as a compliment or not.

“Since when are you so humble?”

“Just because I’m the best fellow doesn’t mean I can’t be humble.” Singh rolled her eyes as Nadia’s smile challenged her to disagree.

Nadia was the best cardiothoracic fellow in this hospital, and she didn’t see a point in hiding that she knew it. She was probably going to be the best surgeon on the West Coast or even in the entire US very soon. But only a crazy person would say so to their program director. Nadia knew the game too well to go that far. Blind respect for your superior was a critical factor for a successful career.

Nadia hesitated, then added, “I have to admit I’m glad I won’t be working with Dr. Williams this weekend.” Respect was one thing, but bonding with a beloved mentor over a shared dislike was permissible. There were so few people that Nadia could tolerate at work, she allowed herself the occasional familiarity with Singh. Within reason, of course.

“Hm. What makes you think I won’t ask the chief to be on call? I know how much you’d like that.”

The sarcasm was not lost on Nadia. It was a toss-up whether working with Williams was worse than working with Rylan. One was an incurable chauvinist, and the other was simply weak. Nadia couldn’t stand either trait.

“Actually, I think you should make Dr. Rylan do it. She needs to take some responsibility around here. But for selfish reasons, I would rather you worked yourself.”

“Flattery will get you everywhere.” Singh smiled. “You’re in luck this time. Ashley is going to a private matter tonight that I don’t want to interfere with. But I may still ask her to help out over the weekend, so play nice. I don’t want to hear any complaints from the nurses.”

“I have never not *played nice*, Dr. Singh. It’s just that she’s so...positive and energetic all the time. It’s exhausting.”

“You are aware she’s my friend.”

Nadia kept a straight face. “This was the nicest possible way to say it.”

“You are so full of it.” Singh laughed. “You’d better get out of here before you say something we both regret.”

“Call me if you need me.”

Nadia pivoted and exited the office with an eerie feeling of anticipation rising in her chest. This would be the first time that she had left the hospital before seven p.m. since she had started working there seven months earlier. Her heart’s wild beats echoed in her ears. Her hands trembled, and her breath caught in her throat at the thought that she was about to do something she had never done in her life. She was going to have sex with a woman.

* * *

Nadia walked into the bar and was bombarded by loud music. *Good*. She wasn’t looking for conversation tonight.

She scanned the crowded room, resisting the urge to turn and run out. Her stomach had been in knots all day. Leaving now would untwist those knots, but it also meant that nothing would change.

Nadia stepped into the noisy room. She wanted to do this. Her heart hammering against her sternum tried to prove her wrong, but she simply tightened her fists and resolve and took another step.

She normally didn’t scare easily. The last time she had felt this nervous was seven years ago when she had delivered her first national talk to a room full of surgeons. Since then, a lot had changed, and Nadia was no longer that frightened girl with no title to her name. Now she was the confident surgeon who inspired fear in her junior colleagues. It was better that way. Keeping people at a distance meant she wouldn’t be disappointed.

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She closed her eyes, breathing slowly in and out. Her innate respiratory rhythm could be overridden by a voluntary pace. By controlling her breathing, she told herself that she was in control of her body, not the other way around. If she believed it, her heart rate should return to normal rhythm.

She had practiced this breathing technique many times in the past before correcting the mistake of a doctor, a medical student, or a research assistant. It had also helped her gain emotional neutrality before delivering bad news to a patient.

She thought she had outgrown the need to use a calming technique during social situations, but given her current emotional state, clearly, she was wrong. She frowned. Admitting she was wrong, even to herself, was nearly as bad as her heart stubbornly refusing to slow down.

Tightening her fists harder, Nadia found a table in the shadows of the far corner of the bar, where the music was at a tolerable level, and sat. She ordered two drinks, took out her cellphone, and typed,

I'm here.

Before she could change her mind, she hit *Send*.

* * *

Ashley froze when she caught herself twirling a lock of hair in the reflection of the taxi's window. She was tangling it, making it worse. She dropped her hands onto her lap and chewed on her lip instead. She fidgeted in her seat. Meeting a strange woman whom she knew nothing about—other than her STD panel—for a one-night stand was the craziest thing she had ever done.

Her phone chirped, bringing her back to reality. She looked at the screen and cursed herself for being late for her blind date. *If one could even call it a date.*

Despite pushing herself all day to finish on time and Pari helping her out, Ashley had still spent the last two and a half hours at a last-minute emergency meeting to discuss the politics of patient satisfaction surveys. She scoffed. Administrators had no idea what qualified as an emergency. Now, finally, she was on her way to the bar.

She had convinced herself that she wanted this blind date, but that didn't stop her from freaking out. What if they didn't like each other? Or worse—what if they *did* like each other? Would they go to Ashley's place or Margaret's place? Or to a hotel? And what would happen after? Should Ashley just...leave?

To still her racing thoughts, she resorted to what usually helped her through stressful situations: she forced herself to envision the best possible outcome. She would like this woman. They would have a great time together. Ashley would get out of her rut and her life would become more interesting. And perhaps she would find something more meaningful in the future.

Her phone chirped again. The message read,

I'm here.

Ashley's stomach clenched in a fresh wave of anxiety. She felt paralyzed with fear. *What if she leaves before we even meet?*

The thought scared her even more, and she finally forced herself to act. She checked the street signs, then typed,

Running late. I'm so sorry! I'll be there in 10.

* * *

The time that elapsed after Nadia sent the text were the longest two minutes of her life. Her heart pounding, she read the return message and scowled. The only thing worse than someone being late was someone who groveled about being late.

She set her phone down on the table. There was no point in replying to the text since she had nothing nice to say. Forcing herself to take a few deep breaths again, she decided to simply wait...patiently.

No one had said she had to like this woman.

Nadia tapped her finger on the table next to the untouched drinks. Normally she wouldn't waste her time with sexual frivolities, but she wanted to experience this once so she could put it to rest.

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It was how things worked. Curiosity compelled people to seek new experiences. The unknown activity created an adrenaline rush. Once the fantasy was fulfilled, the novelty was gone, along with the desire to repeat the experience.

The online conversation last night had piqued her interest. The woman had used full, coherent sentences; she was just a couple years older than Nadia, making her age appropriate; and she had an unremarkable sexual history. The deciding eligibility criterion was a mutual attraction. If there was a physical spark, tonight's encounter would be the final chapter of this story. Nadia was ready to get it over with.

At 8:14 p.m., precisely ten minutes after receiving the text, Nadia looked up, searching the entrance for a blonde wearing a long black coat. Instead, a familiar face entered the bar.

It was Ashley Rylan. *What is she doing here tonight?* Of all the places she could be, why would she come to the same bar as Nadia?

Nadia balled her hands into fists again. Rylan's appearance left no doubt in her mind that she had to leave. If Rylan saw her, she would undoubtedly smile cheerily and strike up a friendly conversation.

Then Nadia had an even worse thought. What if the woman she was meeting showed up before she could get rid of Rylan, who was her boss after all? The thought of anyone from work learning about her plans doused her curiosity like a cold shower. She had kept her professional and personal lives separate for years, and that wasn't about to change now. She deliberately compartmentalized her life for structure, security, and comfort.

Tonight was a mistake.

Nadia picked up her phone and quickly typed,

Something came up. I have to go.

She hit *Send* and waved at the server to settle the bill.

* * *

As soon as Ashley entered the bar, her phone chirped. She read the message and sighed. Given how anxious she was, it should have been a relief to cancel her plans but it wasn't. Her heart sank at the thought of going back to her empty apartment alone.

Was her date having second thoughts? Or was there another reason?

Ashley scanned the room and was surprised to find one of the CT surgery fellows at a table in the shadows. Nadezhda Keating was trying to get the attention of a server who was busy at a nearby table.

Ashley stared in disbelief. She had pictured Nadia's life outside the hospital as a dark void. She should probably walk away and leave Nadia in peace, but she couldn't take her eyes off her. It was like witnessing proof that the Loch Ness monster existed.

She took a step in her direction, then paused. Nadia was an extremely talented doctor with a promising future, but she was also the epitome of arrogance. Ashley couldn't remember ever seeing her exhibit a single positive emotion. So while saying hello would be polite, Nadia would almost certainly be unreceptive.

When it came to her junior fellow, Ashley was convinced of two things: Nadezhda Keating was destined to do great things, and being agreeable was never going to be one of them.

Still, Ashley wondered, *Why is Nadezhda here tonight?*

Coincidences were possible, but scientists rarely attributed results to chance. She considered the evidence as her heart began to race.

Nadia matched the description of the woman she was supposed to meet tonight. She had straight brown hair, and she was wearing a black V-neck sweater. She also had two drinks in front of her and no one sitting next to her. And she was about to leave, something her date had told her she would do.

Ashley gasped. She could be way off, but something inside her urged her to test her theory. Her feet started moving before she could reconsider. She pulled out her phone and typed a text message, but rather than hit *Send*, she pocketed it, her thumb poised over the button.

* * *

Nadia braced herself as she watched Rylan approach. She had just paid the bill, but it was too late to escape the encounter. Nadia had no desire to talk with Rylan at work, much less outside of it. With skill that comes from years of practice, she adjusted her features into its usual expressionless mask.

"Nadezhda, what a surprise," Rylan said, smiling woodenly.

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Nadia nodded. “Dr. Rylan.”

Her phone, still on the table, vibrated. The screen lit up:

You'd better find a way to make it up to me.

She looked up to find Rylan staring at her phone intently. *What for?* Refusing to entertain the question, Nadia stood up and pocketed her phone. “I was just leaving.”

As she started to walk past Rylan, the woman grabbed her arm and pulled her into earshot. “So how do you plan to make it up to me?”

Nadia's heart processed the information faster than her brain. It began to pound so loudly, she was convinced everyone in the bar could hear it. She stared at Rylan like a deer in the headlights, but there was no impending collision that would end this catastrophic moment.

Finally, her mind caught up. Ashley Rylan, the chief of her cardiothoracic surgery department, was the woman she had picked to have sex with.

Chapter 3

Testing a Hypothesis

“WE SHOULD TALK,” ASHLEY SAID after a long pause.

Nadia stood motionless, her expression unchanging. She reminded Ashley of a patient in a catatonic state.

“Sit down.” Ashley’s tone was surprisingly authoritative, but the realization that her date was a surgical fellow she was responsible for had caused her jaw to set and her vocal cords to tighten. The sooner she shut down this HR disaster of epic proportions, the better.

She tugged on Nadia’s arm, and Nadia sat back down. Wordlessly, she circled the table and sat across from her.

This wasn’t how things were supposed to go. Tonight was supposed to be a fun, carefree night. Instead, Ashley was facing her subordinate whose expression suggested she might have sustained an acute stroke.

She picked up one of the drinks—scotch with no ice—from the middle of the table, drained half the glass, and put it down. She gazed at Nadia who wasn’t blinking.

Clasping her hands was no good; she couldn’t keep her fingers from fidgeting. And for the love of God, why did Nadia still show no signs of life? Her face was blank, her eyes unresponsive.

As the silence lengthened, it became more strained and unbearable. What had possessed Ashley to agree to this meeting in the first place? She cursed herself for letting loneliness overtake her reason. There was no excuse for being in this situation, and with Nadia, of all people.

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“Look, I didn’t know it was you. Of course I didn’t. I only figured it out when I saw you here.”

Nadia blinked once, slowly, but said nothing.

“For God’s sake, Nadezhda, say something!” It was unprofessional to yell at a subordinate. It showed poor self-control, and typically, Ashley never did that. But Nadia’s comatose state alarmed her. Were her thoughts so horrible that they could cripple a woman trained to perform optimally under stress?

Finally, Nadia’s gaze sharpened and she met Ashley’s eyes with cool intensity. “Dr. Rylan, I do not know what the appropriate thing to say in this type of situation is.” Her voice was monotone, even more expressionless than usual.

“It’s Ashley.” Nadia’s look made her want to squirm in her seat. “Please call me Ashley.”

Nadia stared at her, unblinking.

The painful silence between them drew out again. Ashley finished her drink, hoping the alcohol would numb her embarrassment and calm her nerves. But to her complete horror, Nadia’s new frozen state included glaring at her. She clutched the empty glass.

Ashley had never been good at confrontation. And trying to talk to Nadia right now was worse than taking her oral board exam. At least then the intimidating surgeons had attempted to be pleasant.

Maybe she should just leave, put some distance between them so that they might both process the situation.

Still holding her gaze, Nadia pushed the second drink toward Ashley. “I’m on call.”

Ashley picked up the drink and drained the glass. It was the first act of kindness Nadia had ever shown her. Perhaps Ashley was facing a human after all. “Why did you order drinks, then?” She asked the first question that popped into her head.

“Are you asking if I’m an irresponsible physician?”

So much for being nice. Nadia’s murderous expression made Ashley regret she had thought, let alone asked, the question. But it wasn’t her nature to fight fire with fire. “No! Of course not.”

Ashley looked down at her empty glass. Perhaps leaving would be the better option. But something made Ashley want to stay, even though she could think of nothing to say that would relieve the tension.

“I didn’t know you liked women,” Ashley blurted out before she had the good sense to stop herself.

The wall that was Nadia’s face didn’t crack. “I keep my private life private.”

“Right.”

Her minimalistic answers weren’t helping the situation. “I don’t exactly broadcast my sexual orientation, but I don’t hide it either.” Why was she even explaining herself to her junior fellow?

“I wasn’t aware you liked women.” Nadia looked away with an unmistakable discomfort.

Ashley blinked. Nadia had volunteered saying something instead of giving clipped replies to Ashley’s statements. And her reaction—another unexpected show of emotion, however slight. *So... closeted.*

Nadia cleared her throat. “Not that it matters. It’s none of my business.”

She met her eyes again, looking at Ashley with the usual arrogance. Ashley shifted in her seat. She doubted she would ever look at Nadia the same way again. If the circumstances were different—*very* different—she probably would have slept with Nadia tonight. *She’s a very attractive woman.* Ashley immediately pushed down the thought, scolding herself for having it in the first place.

“It’s certainly not my place to discuss this with anyone,” Nadia added, her tone shutting down further discussion on the topic.

“Right,” Ashley said. “Good to know.”

“I hope I can rely on the same discretion from you?”

How could Nadia maintain such a stone-faced expression? And how did she make it look so sexy?

Ashley frowned, equally mad at her inappropriate thoughts and at Nadia’s question. “I’m surprised you’d even ask me that. Why would I want to tell anyone about any of this?”

“I don’t know what you may or may not do, Dr. Rylan.”

Nadia’s use of her formal title, a painful reminder of how wrong the situation was, made Ashley wince.

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“For example, why did you think it was appropriate to even approach me tonight?” Nadia continued.

She kept her eyes locked on Ashley. *Christ*. Her confidence made chills run down Ashley’s spine. “I didn’t know it was you.”

“You did when you saw me. You could have walked away.”

“I suspected. I wasn’t sure.”

“So testing a hypothesis was a sufficient reason to embarrass me?” Nadia delivered every word with clinical precision.

“What?” The accusation set Ashley back on her heels. She never intended to embarrass anyone.

“You could have simply walked away. I would have never known, and you could have pretended you didn’t either. Life would go on as usual.”

“I, uh...” *The statement made sense*. “I should have. I didn’t think it through. I just acted. I’m sorry.”

Nadia cringed.

“But you aren’t a victim here,” Ashley added.

“I’m the one in the compromising position.”

“We’re both in a compromising position! And it’s far worse for me.”

“I told you I won’t tell anyone.”

“And I’m not going to tell anyone either,” Ashley said, jabbing the air to punctuate her words.

Why was she having so little faith in her discretion? She had never gossiped or given any reason for Nadia to think so little of her.

“But *you* know.” Nadia’s hard exterior showed a slight crack. She looked—unsettled. “You know something about me I would have never told anyone at work. It’s...humiliating.” She spat out the word as if it left a bad taste in her mouth.

This is the emotion she chooses to portray? Ashley rolled her eyes. Nadia certainly had a flair for the dramatic.

“Big deal. So the great Keating gets horny like the rest of us. Get over yourself.”

“Stop,” Nadia hissed.

They stared at each other, neither willing to look away, although it took every muscle in Ashley’s body to hold her ground.

“*We* are not doing this.” Nadia glared at Ashley.

“Oh, we’re definitely not doing anything,” Ashley snapped. “I’m going home. We won’t speak of this again.”

“Agreed.”

Ashley dug into her purse for her wallet.

“It’s taken care of,” Nadia said.

Ashley’s hand froze. “I had the drinks. Let me pay for them.” It didn’t seem right to let Nadia pay; as a junior fellow, she earned considerably less than Ashley.

“Really?” Nadia raised her eyebrows. “You think it’s appropriate to give me money?” Her voice was charged with anger. “Haven’t you embarrassed me enough for one night?”

Again with *her* embarrassment. Ashley scoffed. “Fine.” Every one of her attempts to make this situation tolerable had been met with hostility. There was no point in trying to be nice. “Goodnight, Nadezhda.”

Ashley marched away, wishing she never had to see Nadia again. *What a total disaster.*

* * *

Nadia tossed in her empty bed, punching her pillow in frustration. She squeezed her eyes shut as if she could order herself to sleep. As a surgeon, she had learned to fall asleep anytime, anywhere. But tonight seemed to be an exception.

The evening at the bar had been a disaster. What were the odds that the woman online would turn out to be the chief? *Damn Rylan!*

Nadia rolled over restlessly, blindly grabbed the second pillow, and threw it across the room. Deciding to deal with one problem at a time, she shifted her focus back to the moment Rylan had appeared at the bar. The audacity! How dare she approach her looking so stunning tonight? That dark green blouse perfectly framed her body and matched her expressive blue eyes that shone even in the dim light. Nadia scoffed. *Who cared how Rylan dresses or what color her eyes were?*

In fact, Rylan’s fashionable outfits drove Nadia insane. She wore scrubs only in the OR. Maybe if she didn’t put so much effort into her wardrobe, she would be a better surgeon.

Professionally, Rylan was too sweet, too weak, and too timid to be a leader. Nadia had seen a different version of her at the bar, a version she

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had liked—well, *tolerated*—a little more, but she was still the same insecure people pleaser who consistently failed to impress her. Professionally speaking. The rest was irrelevant.

It was best to pretend the catastrophe at that bar had never happened and focus on her job as she had always done. It was two days before Nadia had to work with Rylan again. Something stirred in her at the thought, but she quickly pushed it down. There would be no more thinking about any people outside this bedroom tonight.

Nadia drew the covers over her head and squeezed her eyes harder. She would count sheep all night long if that meant keeping away unwelcome thoughts.

* * *

Ashley shut the door and leaned back against it. Other than making a fool of herself, she had accomplished nothing tonight. Now she was not only alone but also frustrated and embarrassed.

She scoffed. Nadia had acted as if she were the only one who was embarrassed, and as if that were the worst thing in the world. In the seven months they had worked together, Ashley had never seen her so upset. In fact, Nadia rarely showed any emotion at all. Seeing a new side of her made Ashley's stomach flip. Worse still, Ashley was more bothered thinking she had made Nadia uncomfortable than she was about her own feelings.

As she put on a T-shirt and pajama pants, she tried to shake her disappointment. If anything, she had learned tonight that she shouldn't try to change her life. She should just focus on what she was good at—surgery.

She picked up her laptop and sat on the sofa. She could do nothing to change what had happened, but she could avoid future misunderstandings. Blind dates, or hookups, or whatever this was called, were clearly not for her.

She clicked on the website, intending to delete the damned dating account that had gotten her into this trouble. Instead, she clicked on Margaret Bulkley's profile. She visualized Nadia's image in the empty silhouette.

Nadia had looked so different tonight out of her blue scrubs and into a V-neck top that tempted Ashley's eyes to wander. Not that the alternative, Nadia's steely face, was easier to endure. The mere thought of those striking

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high cheekbones that had seemed sharper than ever and those imperial brown eyes enhanced by her black eyeliner made Ashley shudder even now.

Ashley had never seen Nadia wear makeup before. It must be the reason she had been so inappropriately distracted tonight.

Not that she needs makeup. Ashley groaned. Why did she keep thinking of a woman she didn't want and could never have?

Shaking off her intrusive thoughts, Ashley deleted her account. It was for the best. Her routine was safe, if boring. It meant nobody got hurt or embarrassed or whatever. She would forget what happened tonight and go back to thinking of Nadia as nothing more than her junior colleague. Her life was not meant to change and that was that.

Her future resolved, Ashley dragged into her bedroom to face another night alone.

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