

who'd
have
thought



G BENSON



CHAPTER 1

Hayden had to be up in four hours.

Four hours did not enough sleep make, and her eyes were burning. But after the stressful day she'd had, her brain wouldn't shut down. At the end of a week of night shifts, her body was taking its time settling back into its normal rhythm, even after her first shift back in the land of the living today. For about a minute, she'd contemplated going for a run—as if—but instead had eaten an entire frozen pizza. Frank, her oversized fluff-ball of a cat, had judged her from his place on top of her DVD player where he'd sat, accruing all the heat. There'd been narrowed eyes and everything. So, in a cheese-and-bread coma, Hayden had watched a movie and waited for her eyes to get heavy.

And waited.

Eventually, she'd given up and gone to bed, in the hope it would lead to sleep.

It had not.

Which meant Hayden had been left with three options: go for that run (really, never gonna happen), stare at the ceiling and count water stains, or do what she usually did when she couldn't sleep. She'd gone for option three, which consisted of trolling the Internet in the twilight hours of the morning. It was a pastime that bordered on embarrassing, but the strategy was one that almost never failed her.

She scrolled through Internet forums and advertisements to find the funniest. One guy was selling a goat he'd "accidentally" bought—Hayden wasn't sure she wanted to ask questions there. The goat did look pretty cute. It was still a baby.

Frank would hate her.

That was almost enough to make Hayden click *reply* and ask for it, but the image of a clawed-up goat and an unforgiving Frank in her tiny New York City apartment gave her pause. She huffed and kept scrolling. That cat needed to stop ruling her life. She could barely afford to feed herself, yet here she was, with the same grizzled beast she'd adopted eight years ago.

Someone was looking for a woman he swore he'd had a connection with on the subway. Apparently there'd been a spark. Snorting, Hayden scrolled on.

Spark. Sure. That, or he was stalkerish, and the poor woman had actually been edging away.

Though, that wasn't a fair thought. What if it had been love? Love that started on a dirty train car among all the germs and disdain? Did anyone ever find people on these missed connection posts? She opened another page, tapped a wrong button and watched the screen go black before opening up to her front camera. Looking back at her was the three-chinned version of herself that made her want to weep, even as she snorted. Front cameras were one of the worst inventions ever. Every time she turned it on, it was her face, looking like a thumb, that greeted her. She grinned to make herself look as hideous as possible and took the photo. Yup. She looked like a thumb. She sent it to her best friend with the caption: *Luce—why am I single?*

That would give Luce a laugh when they woke up.

Because Luce was most likely asleep, like Hayden should be.

It was now 3:21 a.m. This was getting ridiculous.

Exiting the messaging app, Hayden ended up at an empty browser page again. What was she doing? Oh. Yeah. She typed into the search bar *do people actually find each other through missed connections*. Her eyebrows rose. Whoa. There were a lot of hits. The first few articles listed announced that, yes, people did find each other that way. How romantic. And kind of gross. They could make a movie out of that crap.

She exited out of that page and went back to scrolling through junk posts. Some were clearly trolls:

For a small payment, I can clear your soul and ensure you reach your full potential!

That sounded creepy. And kind of like they were going to perform an exorcism.

Looking to trade my canoe for a shark, must not be full grown or have lasers on its head.

Sure.

Right person sought for a personal deal, will require at least one year of involvement, compensation promised.

Well, that was lacking the usual absurdity. Or details. Hayden's thumb hovered over the link, the sound of her faucet dripping in her kitchen reaching her ears. The super ignored her complaints, and she had no cash herself to fix it. *Compensation promised* sounded pretty heavenly. She clicked the link.

The message made her roll her eyes.

What a waste of time.

Looking for a woman who is discreet and reliable and interested in a long-term commitment, one year minimum. Person sought to fulfil all legal requirements necessary for a valid marriage within the state of New York. Compensation will be more than reasonable and only payable once all components of deal are completed. However, upon confirmation of the agreement, a smaller payment will be given as a show of good faith.

One, a small payment before generous compensation? Was that a joke? Two, this was clearly utter crap. No one would seriously want a fake marriage and offer money. God, Hayden loved Craigslist. This was better than the goat.

Or maybe it wasn't crap. Maybe someone needed a green card?

Though, with whatever money this was, if it were as generous as this person was hinting, Hayden would be able to afford the goat.

She laughed at herself, switched her phone off, and dumped it next to her bed.

Two hours of sleep, here she came.

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All it took was five minutes of being in the hospital building for Hayden to walk into a doorway. She'd love to blame her tiredness, but it was an almost daily occurrence. Really, it was a good week if she managed to have a solitary bruise rather than several. And this one was definitely going to bruise. Rolling her eyes at herself, she rubbed the spot on her elbow. Seriously, ow. Whoever called it a funny bone could go to hell.

Once upon a time, in a different life, Hayden had studied so much anatomy her head had been left spinning with it all. You'd think it would have left her more aware of her body, but still she walked into anything and everything.

People would be surprised how many parts of the body they could live without. There were twenty-six bones in your foot, and the fifty-two that made up both feet consisted of twenty-five percent of all the bones in the human body. People could lose

up to two liters of blood before death. Sometimes a little more. But really, they hit shock before that.

As an emergency nurse, Hayden saw a lot of that.

Like, a lot.

The lights in the locker room were dim. It was barely seven, and handover was about to start. She needed to wake up so she'd be able to take in the huge info dump about the patients soon to be in her care.

Other people stood around, as bleary-looking as Hayden felt, pulling on scrubs and stuffing their pockets with flashlights, swabs, and anything else they usually needed. Someone laughed, and Hayden flinched. Who were these people that could function enough to laugh in the morning?

"You look like hell."

Hayden sighed, smiling despite herself. Bloody Luce. "Thanks. That's just what a person likes to hear in the morning."

Blowing their bangs out of their eyes, Luce shrugged. "Yeah, well, I live for truth."

Well, that was true. They were the most honest person Hayden knew. Some might say tactless, but once you got to know them, you realized it was a love for a lack of bullshit. Once, over beers, Luce had made a joke that they'd spent the first twenty-five years of their life bullshitting their gender and had used up all the bullshit they had to give. Hayden had choked on her beer as Luce had thrown their arms wide, declaring, "Look at all the shits I do not give! Alas, my non-binary field of shits is barren." The bartender had cut the both of them off after that.

"I wouldn't have you any other way. Ready for handover?"

Luce's shoulders slumped. "Ugh. Yes. I suppose."

Hayden bumped her arm against her best friend's. "We can find coffee if we manage a break. Maybe at the cart with that cute coffee girl..."

Luce brightened considerably, a sly grin curling their lips up. "Well, if I must."

"Oh. You must. For me."

They sighed theatrically and pushed the double doors open to the emergency room. It was blissfully quiet. A rare thing. "You know, you really are selfish. But fine. For you, I shall."

"You could just ask her out."

"Don't be silly. I have to stare wistfully at her for at least another six months."

"Ah, yes, of course. The time-honored tradition of drooling from afar." Hayden had that down pat. She had some courage, and could approach someone she was interested

in if needed, but mostly it was all a bit too scary. Staring while hoping the other person made the first move usually worked best for her.

Except often the other person was doing that too, and so no one got anywhere.

At the emergency station, they both checked the board delegating who was where.

"Same beds as yesterday," Hayden said. "I wonder what delights I'll get today."

"You had the two from that car crash yesterday, didn't you?"

"Mhm." It had been a long, long day. "They were transferred to surgery. My friend in ICU messaged me and said they're both stable."

"Well, Thomson was the surgeon on, so that's not surprising."

"Ugh." Hayden made a disgusted face to match the noise she'd made. "Don't remind me." Hayden had had to deal with Samantha Thomson showing up and taking over the scene.

"Look," Luce said, "she's stone cold, but she's the best neurosurgeon in the state."

"More like the country. And she knows it."

Luce snorted. "True. She's got an ego."

"And she's rude."

"What the hell happened to make you dislike her so much?"

"Well—"

"Ladies, are we keeping you?" They both turned on the spot, grimacing at the emergency coordinator and the team behind him, eyes shot red after their night shift and no doubt dying to go home and sleep. Or, for some, to go home and get their kids up for school. The coordinator winced. "Sorry, Nakano, *folks*. Not ladies."

Luce gave him a salute. "No problem, Ben. We're good to go."

"Hayden."

She froze as he turned his intense gaze onto her.

"You look like you need coffee more than us."

"Doubtful, but close. I'm just still getting back into day shifts after last week's nights."

"Yeah, can't wait for that in a few days." His gaze swept over the rest of the day shift that trundled through the double doors. "All right, guys—er, people, your assignments are written up. Grab your nurse for handover, and I'll be handing over to this morning's coordinator, Blessing."

Interesting to see Blessing was coordinating. She was a superstar, completely organized, and she rocked at handling difficult patients. Because of that, she often ended up on the floor rather than coordinating the shift. But Hayden wasn't complaining. It was always a smoother day when she was running things.

Everyone started to disperse, Luce disappearing to the code team's corner. Jealousy swirled up in Hayden's chest. She loved being on the code team. Luce poked their tongue out at her, so Hayden pretended to be the more mature one and ignored the gesture.

She glanced at the board again and headed for Tasha, standing near one of the nurses' stations with a pile of folders in front of her.

"Morning."

Tasha gave a weary wave, somehow not looking as half-dead as most of the others. "Hey, Hayden. How was your night?"

"Better than yours, I'd wager."

"It wasn't so bad, actually. One arrest, but other than that, mostly smooth." She pulled one of the files out. "Bed three has a homeless guy that was brought in. He's sleeping it off. Once he's awake, if you could do the usual—try getting him in the shower if you can. He hasn't passed urine yet, BSL stable..."

Hayden sunk into the language she knew and understood better than English at times.

She had three of her four beds full, one ready to transfer out in bed four. Tasha, the goddess that she was, had already arranged everything for the transfer. All Hayden had to do was some intravenous antibiotics in twenty minutes. The homeless man was another story. Unfortunately, he was a regular through their doors and would refuse all help and discharge himself once he was awake. Hayden had met him once, and she might have some luck getting some of the mediocre hospital sandwiches into him and getting him into a shower beforehand. Maybe. The third patient, bed one, was an elderly woman, found by the nurses in her assisted-living facility in her bathroom, bleeding from a head wound. She had been dazed and confused, disoriented to time, place, and person, though according to the family member who came in, she was usually lucid. One of her pupils was bigger than the other, and she had a suspected brain bleed. They were waiting on the results from her scan, and she was on thirty-minute neurological observations.

"Neuro?" Hayden sighed and made her disgusted face again. "Ugh."

"You don't like neuro patients?" Tasha asked. After her detailed handover, she finally looked ready to fall asleep on her feet. Out of nowhere, though, she brightened, a gleam in her eye. "Oh, wait. I know. It means Dr. Thomson will be down."

"Exactly." Hayden tugged the folders over to herself, checking the medication charts and notes as per protocol so she could ask any questions or check any missed

medications. It all meant she wouldn't have to call Tasha later and wake her up. "Another patient shared with Thomson."

And, yeah, okay, maybe neuro patients weren't always her favorite.

A patient started yelling from the other side of the emergency room, and they both turned around. One of the other nurses bustled over, waving her hand in the general direction of everyone looking over to see if she needed help. Medical language for *I've got this*.

Tasha turned back to Hayden. "You really don't like her."

"She's rude."

"She's damn good at her job. And easy on the eyes."

"I'll tell your boyfriend."

She waved her hand dismissively. "Like he'd care. He thinks the same."

"She's, like, fifty."

Okay, Hayden was exaggerating. And also didn't want to agree that, yes, the rude surgeon was easy on the eyes. Surgeons' egos could be big enough, especially neurosurgeons', but Thomson's rivalled any other she'd seen. And she was rude. In case Hayden hadn't mentioned that.

"She is not fifty." Tasha sounded as exasperated as she looked. "She's, like, forty-two."

"How do you know that?"

Hayden really needed to start her day. And stop gossiping.

"Pablo's often her scrub nurse. He feeds me information. He also says she's not that arrogant."

"Your boyfriend is useful."

"Oh, he's more than that." Tasha winked and Hayden straightened.

"Okay. Time for you to go home and enjoy that, then. And leave me to my sexless day."

Tasha pouted. "He's on day shift."

"Oh, poor you. At least he'll come home and make you dinner. I'm going home to a giant, angry cat."

"How is Frank?"

"As cantankerous as ever. I love him."

"Such a cat lady."

"Yes, I am. Now go away. I'm busy."

Hayden threw her a grin, and Tasha turned to leave, saying over her shoulder, "Have a good day. Enjoy Thomson! Maybe she'll send a resident."

“Here’s hoping.”

Hayden hugged the folders to her chest and looked around the room. Half the beds were full. But anything could happen in the next few hours. For now, it was strangely calm and quiet—no, she couldn’t even think the *Q* word. Every nurse ever knew that it was cursed. Hayden didn’t even believe in that crap, but it was such a taboo that even she couldn’t say it.

The second someone said the *Q* word, the phones always started ringing off the hook, the patients kicked up, and the waiting room filled. And she was far too tired to deal with that today.

Before doing anything else, she walked around and checked her three patients, ensuring they were who Tasha had said they were, plus that they were still breathing. Bed three was still out cold, his breath rising in a steady rhythm and not due anything else for an hour. Not a lot she could do there for now. Everyone knew his story. They’d all learned he had been in the Vietnam War and had been on the streets for far too long. There’d been a family, long ago, with three young kids before he’d ended up homeless. He didn’t see them. Nor did he want to, from what she could gather.

He’d been failed on so many levels by the government. And the hospital system couldn’t do much for him. It was a mess.

Bed four gave her a merry wave, his apple cheeks rounding even more. She introduced herself and let him know he’d be off to the cardiovascular ward within the next two hours.

It would probably be more like four.

Bed one was asleep, curled into a tiny ball in the middle of her sheets. The family member, a son, was next to the bed in a chair, head tipped back as he snored.

She had twenty minutes until the next neuro observations were due on bed one. So she went to the medication room and started making up the antibiotic she’d need soon. At this rate, she’d be getting a coffee at a normal coffee break time, not at lunchtime.

“Hayden, I’m bored.”

Who else but Luce? Hayden laughed, swirling the vial filled with saline gently. “Careful, that’s awfully close to the *Q* word.”

“Close but not. I was all excited to get the code team, but nothing’s happening.”

“That’s generally considered a good thing, Luce.” Hayden smirked as she checked the vial to see if all the powder had dissolved. Nope. She kept swirling her wrist. “Come check this for me.”

Since it was second nature for all injectables to be checked by two nurses, Luce looked it over and signed the chart even as they kept talking.

"Yeah, I know. But this is weird. I haven't seen the emergency room this empty in a long time."

"Well, that means we get our coffee." Hayden grabbed a syringe and drew up the antibiotic into it, capping it off with a sterile lid.

"True. I heard you have a neuro patient."

"Yup. Hopefully the scan shows nothing so there will be no Dr. Thomson for me."

"I won't lie. I hope she shows up. I can watch you get all frustrated."

Hayden put all her things in a kidney dish and balanced it on the folder. "She's arrogant."

"She's not *that* bad."

"Okay, fine, she's rude."

"They can all be rude. As can we. Why does this one have you so annoyed?"

Already back out on the floor near where patients could overhear, Hayden threw her hand in the air. "Later."

She laughed to herself when she heard the indignant huff from back in the treatment room.

It turned out bed four was a delightful, jolly man who had her laughing in seconds. She gave him his antibiotic, had a quick listen to his heart, and gave him a once-over, ensuring nothing about his condition had changed. Nothing had, and she documented it, and made her way to bed one.

"Mrs. Botvinnik?"

There was no movement from the bed, so Hayden drew the curtains around it. The man sitting in the chair stirred, and Hayden gave him her attention.

"Hi. I'm Hayden, your mother's nurse today. I'm here to do her neurological observations."

"Stewart." He glanced around, rubbing at his eyes. "I didn't mean to fall asleep."

"Never mind. You need rest too." Hayden turned her eyes back to her patient. "Mrs Botvinnik?"

"She'll prefer Winnie."

Hayden flashed Stewart a smile. "Winnie?" No stirring. Not even a facial twitch. She rubbed her shoulder. "Winnie?" This time a little harder. "Winnie, can you wake up? I know you're tired, but I need to see how you're doing."

A flinch this time, and with one more shake, she stirred. A touch more difficult to rouse than what Tasha had said.

Winnie stared up at her with watery blue eyes.

“Good morning, Winnie. I’m sorry to wake you up. I’m Hayden, your nurse. Do you know where you are?”

She looked around. “At home.”

Nope. “Do you know what the date is?”

She pursed her lips, clearly thinking. “It’s March. 1994. I... I don’t know what day.”

“Good job.” It was August 2016. But there was no point in distressing her. “And who’s this here?”

Turning her head, she beamed dazzlingly. Her entire face lit up, the lines deepening to make her look like the happiest woman on earth. And Hayden watched Stewart’s heart break, hers twinging in empathy. “That’s my Hans.”

Stewart looked at Hayden, a muscle clenching in his jaw even as he gave a tight-lipped smile. “That’s my dad. He’s been gone for nearly ten years.”

“Okay.”

Same result as for Tasha. She ran through some of the other tests before turning the light on Winnie’s eyes. One pupil still larger than the other. However, now neither reacted to light. Hayden checked the chart to be sure, but Tasha had clearly documented that both had reacted to light on her check. Keeping her face placid, she marked it down beside the ‘Glasgow Coma Scale’ field on the patient chart, and tucked the folder under her arm. “Great job, Winnie. You can rest again now. Stewart, I’m going to see if I can hurry the doctor up.”

“All right.” He took his mother’s hand in his own. She gazed at him blankly.

Walking quickly to the nurses’ desk, she paged the Neuro number and stood by the phone, bouncing on her toes.

“All okay?” Blessing asked.

“Bed one, elderly woman who had a fall.”

Blessing grabbed her patient list, flicking through to find the bed and look at the notes she’d scrawled all over it at her handover with Ben.

“Her consciousness level isn’t good—her GCS has fallen two more points. Neuro needs to come and review her.”

Yay. Samantha Thomson.

“Okay.” Blessing jotted it all down on her sheet. “Keep me posted.”

“Will do,” Hayden said. “She’s only seventy.”

By the age of twenty-seven, nursing had changed Hayden’s perspective of old. Seventy years old wasn’t old. Fifty was young.

The phone rang, and Hayden snatched it up, telling the Neuro resident the situation and asking him to come down. He said he'd be there as soon as possible. She hoped he got the hint that it needed to be soon.

It only took five minutes. The double doors opened, and Dr. Thomson walked through, an intern hurrying in her wake. Sighing, she turned back to watch Winnie from the desk. In a swirl of some kind of understated perfume, Samantha Thomson strode up to the desk.

"You're bed one's nurse?"

Good morning, Dr. Thomson. Yes, I'm well, thank you. Tired. I know, isn't going from night shift to day shift a bitch?

"Yes, I am."

"Her GCS has dropped?" Thomson held her hand out for the folder, her bright green eyes far too alert for so early. She had a fan of lines around them, but Hayden could never place how that had happened. You usually got lines from making some kind of expression. Thomson's go-to expression was perpetually stony.

"Yes, two points." Never say Hayden couldn't be professional. "She's harder to rouse than her night nurse described. One pupil is still blown, but now neither reacts to light. Still no orientation to time, place, or person."

"She was fully orientated before the fall?"

"According to her son, yes."

Without saying anything further, Thomson turned and walked to bed one. The intern scurried after her, and Hayden was left feeling abandoned. She'd at least thought they could share a grimace or something. Camaraderie. She followed quickly, her hands deep in her scrub pockets. It was obviously a bleed, but how bad?

Dr. Thomson was running her own neuro tests when Hayden slipped past the curtains the jumpy intern had at least thought to pull around the bed. Thomson had a pixie cut, her hair a deep auburn color. Keeping it so short must stop it from falling in front of her face as she leaned over patients. Hayden had thought of doing that but was pretty attached to her curls. Her *abuela* would probably kill her if she cut it all off.

Stewart watched on, his brow furrowed. Thomson flashed her flashlight around and straightened.

"Your mother has suffered an intracranial bleed from her fall. She requires emergency surgery. I'll leave my intern available for any questions you may have."

And she turned, slipping her flashlight into the breast pocket in her lab coat. Hayden followed her. Thomson had the worst bedside manner.

“Do you have a time for the surgery?” Hayden asked.

Thomson had her tablet open as she zoomed in on a scan of the patient’s brain. She didn’t look up. “This bleed is complicated. When did she last eat and drink?”

“She refused food overnight, and Tasha told her son not to give her any more water from 0300 in case surgery was needed.”

“Then she’ll be next on the list.”

And she was gone.

“Great. Thanks.”

Muttering to herself was never a good look. Across the room, Luce caught her eye, clearly trying to smother their smirk. Hayden made a face and turned around to make sure Stewart and Winnie were okay and not suffering hypothermia from their surgeon’s visit.

And also to make sure the intern didn’t scar them.

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“I’m just saying it’s your fault.”

Luce shook their head. “Nope. You have no basis for that.”

“You said you were bored.”

“So?”

“That’s like saying it was quiet.” Hayden dropped her head back against the booth in the sticky, old diner they were in. Both had finished the shift from hell craving junk food. Their day had not stayed chill. And there had definitely not been a fun coffee break. All Hayden had managed was to shove a sandwich into her mouth sometime around two p.m. The seat under her creaked, and the stuffing splitting out of a crack in the vinyl under her was a weird gray color. But the burgers here were to die for.

“That’s a ridiculous superstition, and you know it. It’s like saying it’s going to be cold in winter and getting surprised when it is, which is always. It’s *never* quiet for long in the ER. It’s far more unlikely that *nothing* happens when you say it’s quiet.”

“Yeah, all right. I just want someone to blame.”

“Blame the idiot who thought driving drunk on a main highway was a great idea.”

The waitress put a plate filled with dirty burgers and fries in front of each of them.

“Or that patient that sliced his arm half off with his power saw.” Hayden’s mouth watered as the smell of grease hit her nostrils. It was layered with the scent of ketchup: everything good in the world. “There was so much blood, I have no idea how he drove himself in. At least the bone was clean-cut, though. God, I’m hungry.”

The waitress, slightly green tinged, threw her a highly unimpressed look and walked away. Sometimes Hayden forgot that these conversations weren't normal for other people.

"Thank you!" she called after her.

The waitress kept walking, and Hayden couldn't blame her.

"Think she'll vomit?" Luce asked.

"Maybe."

"At least you weren't on the code team."

Hayden smirked as she stuffed a fry in her mouth. It was too hot, deliciously so. And so salty. "What happened to being all smug about getting my favorite spot?"

Neither had had the time today to speak to each other, let alone find out what was going on in the other's little corner of the ER world. Hayden took a huge bite of her burger, her moan bordering on orgasmic.

"We had two people on meth come in," Luce said. "One coded twice. One of the crash victims was coding when they came in, and after that we had a couple of patients, one after the other. I didn't pee for so long, my bladder ballooned so much I looked pregnant."

Hayden would never admit it, but she was now pretty glad she hadn't been on the code team. She wiped some ketchup off her finger and asked, "Want to know the best part?"

"What?"

"We get to do it again tomorrow. Twelve-hour shift, my pal."

Luce threw the closest thing to their hand at Hayden's head. Since it was only the plastic cover off a toothpick, it fell woefully short. "Why would you do that?"

"I'm a masochist."

"One who needs to learn manners. Don't speak with your mouth full."

"Do you like seafood?" Hayden opened her mouth wider.

"Oh my God. Seriously?"

Hayden swallowed and grinned. "You find me charming."

"Not even at all."

By the time they finished their burgers, both of them were heavy-lidded. It was almost nine and the unpaid extra forty minutes they'd had to stay behind to finish their paperwork had been painful. When the bill arrived, Hayden brought out her card and waved off the bills Luce sleepily tried to hand her.

"I've got this one. You got the last one."

“Thanks.”

A loud beep rang out as her card was run through the machine. Declined. The waitress frowned at her. “Want me to run it again?”

“Yeah, please.”

Heat was crawling up Hayden’s neck, and she gnawed at her lip. It couldn’t be empty yet, surely? She still had another full week before payday. The resounding beep almost made her flinch. She plastered a smile across her face.

“No problem. I think I forgot to activate that card.”

Luce tried to push the bills back at her, but Hayden waved her off. She pulled her wallet open again and grabbed some bills, handing them over to the waitress with a tip that could only just be called sufficient.

They pulled their jackets on and stepped outside. How was her account empty already? She’d tried so hard to budget properly this month.

“Hey.” Luce’s voice was softer than usual. “You okay?”

Hayden put on that same smile that would probably fail any kind of happy test. “Yeah. Yeah, I’m good. Just thinking about the day. I’ll see you tomorrow?”

For a second, Hayden thought Luce was going to say something else, but then they said, “Yeah, of course. Wanna share a cab?”

She shook her head. “Thanks, I’ll take the bus.”

“You sure?”

“Yep.”

“Okay, bye. And thanks again for dinner.”

Hayden watched Luce walk towards the street. Her lip stung where her teeth were biting at it, and she made herself stop. Money was the worst. She’d had to send more away to her family than usual this month, but she’d still thought she had some left over. Now it looked like it would be ramen with a side of peanut butter and jelly for the next week or two. She had some cans of soup too. Yum.

Sighing, she started the walk home. The area turned shabbier as she left the busier, more affluent areas behind.

Her building came up quickly, blending in with the other older ones around it. As usual, the door stuck as she turned her key, so she shoved her shoulder into it, and it budged with a squawk. Yawning, she still took the stairs to the third floor, stumbling into her apartment. Frank sat in the middle of the living room, glaring at her reproachfully.

“Hi, Frank. Good day?”

He made a chirrup noise that sounded like a growl to most people. Not to her, though. She loved his noises. He'd been in the cat shelter for three years before she'd brought him home. She scooped him up, and his face made him look as if he hated it, but she knew better. He purred, once, then struggled to be put down, running to his food bowl.

Which was still half-full, but apparently if it was not completely full, he was starving. Grumbling to herself, she went to the pantry. The shelves were mostly empty. There were those cans of soup. Enough for a few days. Some beans to mix into some vegetables. Some jars of sauce, some pasta.

She'd be fine.

If she walked home until payday and didn't eat out, it would all be okay.

Frank let out a meow that sounded too deep to be from a cat, and Hayden grabbed the bag of cat food, something she never ran out of. She poured it out and he set to scarfing it down, purring so loudly she could barely hear the crunch as he chewed.

"You better want to cuddle me tonight, Frank. I've had a long day."

He didn't even pause.

On her scratched-up old coffee table, Hayden spotted the mail she'd left there the night before. She fell back onto the sofa, groaning so loudly even Frank looked up.

"Sorry."

He sniffed and went back to his food. She went through the first two things, junk and some election stuff she was never going to read. The last one in the pile made her groan again. It was a late notice on her cell bill. She'd completely forgotten.

She should just make it in time to payday before they cut it off. *Again*. She was really sick of always being one paycheck away from disaster.

"Frank, can't you get out on the street and earn us some dough?"

He stalked over from his bowl and jumped up on the couch, licking his face. He settled himself a few feet away.

"Or, you know, sit next to me?"

He turned so his butt was facing her.

"Cool. Thanks."

What if something else came up before payday? What would she do? She could stop sending that money each month. Skip paying her student loans.

Neither of those were going to happen, though. Couldn't she just win the lottery?

That would involve buying a ticket. Hayden always forgot that part.

She yanked her phone out of her back pocket, wriggling so she didn't have to stand up to do it. The jostling made Frank throw her a dirty look over his shoulder, so she poked her phone into his butt. He shuffled away a tiny bit more. She grinned.

She typed *how to get rich quick* into the search bar. She wasted a good twenty minutes that way, blinking heavily at the screen. For once, Google held no answers. She found a page about saving money, and the first option made her nope out pretty quickly.

"Stop buying that five-dollar coffee each day?" She turned to look at Frank, who sat steadily facing the opposite direction and ignored her. "How is that helpful to people with actual money issues? I get my coffee for a buck at the hospital coffee cart maybe three times a week. What is three dollars extra a week really going to do? Idiots."

Frank still didn't turn around. He could be so rude.

The number in the right-hand corner of her browser caught her eye; how did she have thirty-two browser pages open? This is what happened when she opened up a new page to ask all the inane questions that entered her head each day. She started exiting out of them all one by one, pausing at last night's Craigslist adventures.

Compensation.

That stupid word.

Also, you know, money. How much even was "generous compensation"?

Well, her student loans were probably way more than whatever that amount was. Ugh.

Curiosity piqued, she clicked on the *answer* button. She was a little buzzed from the one beer with dinner. Why not? They were never going to answer anyway. She quickly typed a response.

Hey. I saw your ad requiring a spouse for a year. I won't lie, it was the promise of compensation that caught my attention. I do come with a cat called Frank who has a stink eye to rival angry grandparents in the supermarket, but beyond that I come with no baggage. I'm clean, work full-time, and can be a bit too sarcastic at times. I'm also a klutz. I'm fluent in Spanish, if that's any use. Let me know if you'd like to meet.

She hit *send* and dragged herself off the couch for a shower.

Sleep was going to be bliss.

That message wasn't going to go anywhere.

CHAPTER 2

“Go talk to her.”

“No.”

“Luce. Do it.”

“She’s too pretty!”

Sitting at one of the tables outside the coffee cart, Hayden rolled her eyes. She’d found a dollar in her locker and decided to splurge on a coffee. It was worth it to watch Luce melt at the sight of the coffee girl. Who *was* cute. Her high cheekbones and black skin were complemented by a very mischievous smile. Whenever one was directed at Luce, they practically went nonverbal.

It was a little embarrassing to watch, and entirely entertaining.

But Hayden was being nice about the second part, because Luce had paid for both their coffees, being great like that. Hayden didn’t think they knew about her money issues. Not in their entirety. But still.

“There’s no such thing as *too* pretty.”

Luce turned around. “Oh, I’m sorry, Miss-I-Can’t-Even-Look-At-The-Waitress-At-My-Local-Café.”

Hayden pursed her lips and held their eye contact. “Yeah, okay, fine. But she really *was* pretty.”

“So is Clemmie.”

Hayden felt her grin turn wicked. “Oh, Clemmie? Not Clementine, like on her nametag?”

“Shit.”

“When did you get her nickname?”

“She told me, the other day.”

Hayden took a smug sip of her coffee. “And did you give her your name?”

“I mumbled something. Then paid and ran away.”

“Good job.”

“Thanks.” Luce grabbed both paper cups and stood. “Hayden, your phone’s been lighting up.”

“Oh.” Luce wandered off to the trash can, and Hayden grabbed her phone. She had an e-mail, the name only a generic string of numbers, and something strange rolled over in her stomach. Could it be?

Apparently it could.

Is tonight suitable for you to meet? Somewhere public, as I do believe there can be issues with meeting people from the Internet privately. If that's agreeable to you, we could meet at, say, 8:30 p.m. Location to be sent if you agree. I'll wear a black beanie. If you could let me know what you will be wearing, that would be helpful—though I don't recommend bringing your cat. Thank you.

“Oh, my fucking hell.”

“What?”

Hayden closed her mouth and looked up. Luce was watching her, their head cocked.

“Oh, nothing. My horoscope said something surprising.”

Hayden worked so well under pressure in the ER. But making something up on the spot? Not her thing at all. She hated lying. But no way was she admitting to this.

“You told me you thought horoscopes were a load of crap.”

Sometimes, Hayden thought it would be easier to have a friend who hadn't started out with her in the ER. Years of long and deliriously tiring shifts had a way of making the two of them divulge more random bits of information to each other than they might have normally.

“Yeah, well, it said to watch my back, and I'm tired, so I overreacted.”

Luce was still looking at her weirdly, and it was difficult not to squirm under the attention.

“Whatever,” they finally said. “We need to get back.”

Their fifteen-minute coffee break was up. Really, they should have accrued hours for all the ones they'd missed over the last few years, but that wasn't how it worked.

“I'll come in a sec. I just need to go to the bathroom.”

“Okay.”

Once Luce had walked away, Hayden dropped back down into her seat and chewed her lip. Did she reply? Hayden's response had been on a desperate whim; she'd never expected anything back. Did the reply she'd just gotten read like an axe murderer reply? Maybe it was an axe murderer. Wherever this person suggested to meet probably

wouldn't even be a real place; there'd just be an empty warehouse, and then next week Hayden would be found chopped to bits.

Wow, what an embarrassing way to go.

Local queer killed by axe murderer in fake pay-to-wed scheme.

After a second's consideration, she quickly typed a response.

Barring complications with work, I can meet at that time. I'll be wearing a red jacket and will be without Frank. You should thank me personally for that.

She hit *send*, swallowed heavily, and jammed her phone back in her pocket.

There was work to do, and Hayden had to go deal with a neuro consult.

~ ~ ~

This was ludicrous. Insanity.

It took three attempts to walk inside the café at the address that had been immediately messaged back to her.

Oh hell, Hayden was going to end up on the news. Some kind of special report. Last seen wearing a red jacket and a face of regret as she was pulled into unmarked van with a sign offering free candy.

She took a deep breath.

Clearly, Hayden had never grown out of her histrionics.

She pushed the door open, and the warmth and smells of coffee and sweeteners washed over her. Divine. The café gave an instant feel of coziness. It was like its own little world, with squishy chairs and people sitting around with laptops. Her cousin was one of those people who sat in cafés with their computer. Hayden had asked him if he wrote much while there, and he'd laughed and said the idea was to write more but usually he ended up on social media.

The café was maybe half-full. It was quite late, really, in the middle of the week. Someone sat with a stroller they were jiggling with their leg, clutching their coffee with an almost desperate gleam in their eye. Steer clear of that one, then.

And Hayden spotted it.

Black beanie, the person wearing it facing the other way. Maybe it wasn't them? Why would they face the other way when waiting for someone? Hayden walked up, her hands in her pockets. A few feet away, she stopped.

Walking away would be so simple. Turn, get swallowed up by the cool air outside, and delete the e-mails and pretend none of this had ever happened.

But if they'd shown up, maybe it was all real?

Hayden cleared her throat, loudly. Then paused. Had she really just done that?

The person turned halfway, and finally stood and turned properly.

And, for a split second at least, Hayden's heart stopped.

Samantha Thomson.

Samantha Thomson, the coldhearted neurosurgeon, wanted to pay someone to marry her. And Hayden had sent an e-mail of interest. And joked about her cat.

It was wildly inappropriate, and completely the wrong thing to do, but Hayden burst out laughing.

And for the first time ever, Hayden saw something like an emotion flash over Thomson's face. Her eyes actually widened, ever so slightly.

Or maybe she imagined it, because they narrowed immediately.

Hayden stopped laughing, swallowing it down so fast she almost hiccupped. Her lips twitched, and the laughter died out, the feeling dissipating as if it had never existed.

This was awkward.

"Uh, hi, Thomson."

She didn't answer. Those cool, green eyes were still appraising Hayden. If only Thomson wasn't a good half-foot taller, because right now, even in a neutral place like this, the power dynamic was way off.

"Hello..." Finally, Thomson had spoken. And obviously hadn't remembered Hayden's name.

"Hayden. Hayden Pérez."

"Of course."

Hands still in her pockets, Hayden rocked back on her heels. "So..."

Thomson was clearly trying to process this turn of events. To be honest, so was Hayden. This was not what she had been expecting. And right now, she wasn't sure if this outcome was better or *worse* than the axe murderer theory.

Unless Thomson was an axe murderer?

"Uh, are you going to get a coffee?" Thomson asked.

"A cof—what?"

"A beverage. Something to drink. It's what one usually does in a café."

"Uh...right. Yeah. I'll just go order one." Hayden turned to leave, remembered her manners, and turned back. "Do you want something?"

"I have tea."

"Right. I'll be back in a sec." Hayden turned to join the short line.

Oh. My. God.

Brain numb, Hayden ordered a chai latte, not wanting to be awake all night again, and gave her name. She used the last twenty-dollar bill in her wallet and tried not to cry at the tiny amount of change she received as she waited by the pickup area. The drink came far too quickly, the barista calling her name within minutes. She almost wanted to glare at him, but he was about sixteen, and looked like he might have peed his pants if she did. So she settled for a polite look and grabbed her drink, hoping it would ward off the chill Thomson constantly emitted.

Hayden took a deep breath and straightened her shoulders. The glass of her chai was burning her fingers, but she held it tighter anyway.

Was this real life? Were there candid cameras in the room? As she walked back over to Thomson, Hayden actually found herself checking the corners of the room for any sign of film equipment.

She slid into the chair across from Thomson—one of those armchair-like seats that were always too uncomfortable to sit up straight in, yet made you look like a bored teenager if you rested your back against it. Deciding for comfortable, Hayden sat back and crossed her legs.

Surprise, Thomson was sitting up. Her posture was impeccable. Lots of surgeons had a very subtle stoop, the by-product of bending over bodies all day, eyes tight with concentration. Not this woman, though.

"You work in the ER." Thomson poured some of her tea out. It was a green color. Was this woman even real?

"Yes."

"That's unfortunate."

Well, it wasn't as if Hayden liked working with her either. Wait. Unless that wasn't what she meant. "What—"

"It's unfortunate, because now you know about—" she waved her hand vaguely in the air—"this." She paused to take a sip of her tea and swallowed slowly, as if considering this entire situation much more carefully than Hayden was. Hayden was too busy tripping out and trying to sip her chai nonchalantly and then hiding that she'd burned her tongue. "But I suppose that would make it less suspicious. We would be able to say we met there."

"You're still thinking you would want..."

“As I said, in many ways, this makes more sense.”

“Ah.”

This was so awkward. For something to do with her hands, Hayden picked her warm glass back up and wrapped her fingers around it, holding it to her chest as she stared at Thomson, who was staring at Hayden.

“Why did you answer my ad?” Those eyes were on her again, and Hayden watched the woman with the stroller sit down with her second coffee. Poor woman.

Should she answer that one truthfully? It couldn't hurt.

“The idea of cash, and I really did think it was a joke. I didn't think anything would come of it.”

“Why did you come if you thought it was a joke?”

“I almost didn't. So, why did you reply to my response?”

Hayden looked back to Thomson and expected her to look away at the bold question as Hayden herself had done. But no. She kept that solid gaze on her.

“I've had a lot of responses. Many were easy to screen. I met a few people. Most thought it was a joke or they left me feeling uncomfortable. I was about to give up on it altogether, but your response was...amusing.” There'd been another word on the tip of her tongue, Hayden could tell.

“I'm a regular comedian.”

Thomson's face didn't even twitch. She sipped her tea again.

“So, why do you need to get fake married?” Hayden asked.

“One rule, if we do agree to this, is that you don't ask me that.” For some reason, Hayden's cheeks went hot, as if she'd already known the question was taboo. “When it becomes necessary, I'll tell you. But, for now, it's not necessary.”

“You think it's not necessary for me, the person you may want to fake marry, to know *why* you want to fake marry me?”

“Precisely.”

“If I'm going to agree to this, I want part of the deal to be that you tell me eventually.”

Thomson's lips pursed, and Hayden held her eye. “If we go through with it? Fine. But only when I feel the need to divulge that information.”

“Fine.” The reason wasn't actually so important. But damn, was Hayden curious. What could it be? Unless—“Wait. Is it for a green card? Because I *will* need to know that. I don't know a lot beyond what B-grade movies have taught me, but I do know that I'll need to do a hell of a lot to prove the marriage is legit.”

Which required, you know, defrauding the government. Which was illegal.

"No, it is not for that reason."

"Oh. Okay." Damn. That would have solved that puzzle. So then why? "Can I ask why it had to be a woman?"

"There were a few reasons, but I prefer women, so it worked."

A few reasons beyond preferring women? This mystery was not getting any closer to being solved.

"Was there a reason you didn't disclose your gender?"

"I simply forgot. Plus, for all intents and purposes, it didn't really matter. Did you think I was a man?"

Hayden shrugged. "I'm pansexual, so it didn't really bother me either way. And, well, it would all be fake, so like you said, it didn't really matter."

Had it been Hayden's imagination, or had Thomson flinched at the word "pansexual" and flicked her gaze around the other tables? Why would a lesbian, or however Thomson identified, care if someone heard that word?

"Well, that works for both of us, then," Thomson said.

And so it did.

"So you really want to do this?" Hayden asked.

"Do you think I put that ad out on a whim?"

God, she was so pompous.

"I don't know. You looked almost surprised that it was someone from work. Maybe you don't want to do it."

"I was surprised. I really did think that ad was a sure way to avoid anyone I knew. But it does add a certain...authenticity to it."

Hayden straightened up in her chair, a thought occurring to her. "Plus, you would be worried that, unless I was involved, I would tell everyone what you were doing."

Thomson's eyes narrowed, just slightly. "That did occur to me, yes."

"As much fun as it would be, I wouldn't do that. If you decide I'm not appropriate, I won't breathe a word."

And why did Hayden keep speaking like this was something she was considering? Marriage had zero importance to her, but surely to marry someone with the intent of divorcing them pretty quickly wasn't the best idea.

Though it was only a piece of paper.

And money.

"That is good to know." Thomson sat back in her chair, but somehow managed to remain looking as composed as ever and not like a rebellious and sulky teenager. "We

should discuss what it would entail, and once we're through, perhaps you should take some time and think about it."

"Okay."

Thomson nodded once. "Good. I would require the marriage to continue for a year, perhaps more, should things get complicated. But I do not foresee that happening. I do not require the wedding—" Hayden's stomach turned over at the word "—to be big nor public. An appointment at the courthouse would be sufficient. However..." Thomson actually hesitated, and Hayden almost felt her mouth drop open. "I do require that we wait a month and do be seen in public together a few times. And that we live together for that year. I have a large apartment with a spare room."

If not for a green card, why would she need to appear married? And a month was actually a short time to convince people it was legitimate. Hayden took a long sip of her latte. She really was going to have to think about this. Most of this could probably be kept from her family; they were in separate states, after all, as her sister liked to point out fairly bitterly. But her colleagues would all have to know. If they had to at least seem like a couple on the outside, there would be no hiding it from them.

Luce was going to pee herself laughing.

"So, what about at work?"

Thomson actually paled, though her expression didn't change. "We don't have to be exceptionally public. But as we both work there, I would need them to think it was real. This was an added bonus to not having the person be someone I work with. I could have kept work and my private life separate. I have no friends at work to complicate the issue."

No friends at work? Really? But she was so warm.

Literal pee. There would be genuine pee from Luce. And worse, Hayden wouldn't be able to tell them the truth, because even though she might be able to swear Luce to absolute secrecy, she couldn't take any chances on this insane arrangement getting out somehow and Thomson refusing to pay after Hayden had put in all that effort.

Which meant lying.

"Okay."

"As for...compensation," she paused here, and Hayden had no idea why, "I would pay you twenty thousand when we agree, and twenty thousand once the papers were signed and you were moved in."

Forty thousand? This would net her forty thousand? Plus not having to pay rent for at least a year?

Was this all real? Was she dreaming?

“Ah—”

“And at the conclusion, a payment of two hundred thousand. I do understand that this is a large commitment—around a year of your life, not to mention other issues such as having to move out of your apartment and not dating for that time. Plus, there’s the deceit this entails.”

Hayden barely heard anything after the words “two hundred thousand.” Two hundred thousand? *Dollars*? That type of money seemed like a joke. Hayden didn’t have two hundred cents in her account. Even as the city’s top neurosurgeon, how did Thomson have that much money just lying around? Did she keep it under her mattress?

“I suggest you take a few days and think about it.”

“I’ll do it.”

Holy crap. Hayden said that.

“What?” Thomson actually sounded surprised. “I really believe you should think about it.”

“No. I’ll do it.”

Thomson might be her least favorite person in the hospital. This might all be absolutely insane. How would they live together? How did you occupy space with someone that you not only didn’t know, but didn’t even like?

And they were actually going to have to appear to be dating for a month.

And then appear married for a year?

Ew.

“Are you sure?” Thomson’s expression was, as usual, indiscernible.

“Yes.” In fact, two hundred forty thousand dollars’ worth of yes.

“This means pretending you can stand me.”

Hayden grimaced. So she really *hadn’t* hidden her dislike well at work. Though it was interesting that Thomson had even noticed. “I can manage that, Thomson. I did some drama classes at school.”

As if that could help.

Thomson’s lips pursed, and Hayden, for a split second, thought she might be suppressing a smile. “And maybe use Samantha. Or, really, Sam.”

Thoms—Sam—held her hand out across the table, and Hayden took it. They shook: Sam’s hand warm and firm.

“Okay...Sam.” Already that sounded too personal.

“Okay, Hayden.”

CHAPTER 3

Something cold was on Hayden's nose.

And it smelled like fish.

Cat-food breath.

Hayden opened her eyes and found herself eye-to-eye with Frank. He meowed plaintively in her face, the smell of cat-food breath intensifying dramatically. Foul. That was one word for it. She turned her head so hard her neck cricked. He meowed again, and she sleepily dropped her hand onto his back and moved it in some semblance of petting. He growled lightly and jumped off the bed, padding away. Another meow reached her, this time farther away and, if she wasn't mistaken, from the kitchen, where he'd be standing next to his bowl.

Which was no doubt half-full.

He was such an asshole.

Rubbing sleep from her eyes with one hand, she reached for her phone with the other. Her alarm was due to go off in four minutes. Right on time, Frank.

She had one e-mail from her sister, asking when she was next going home to see their mom. Sighing, she exited out and went on Twitter instead. She could answer that later. After scrolling through boring things for five minutes, she opened her e-mail app again. There'd been another one, but the one from her sister had made her nope out way too quickly.

It was Thomson.

Oh God, what had Hayden agreed to?

Samantha.

Sam.

Sam seemed too light for her. A nickname that didn't quite sit right. There'd been barely anything from her last night—she had no real emotion going on about this. The epitome of cold-ass, no-nonsense surgeon. It had been strange seeing her outside of work. The light in the café had been dimmer, more orange than the blinding fluorescence of the hospital. Although unsure when she'd noticed it, Hayden remembered the woman had a light smattering of freckles over her nose. It had made

her look more like a human than she did in the washed-out light and under the mask she plastered on at work.

Well, it wasn't really a mask. It seemed to be her face.

Had Hayden really agreed to get married? Had that been an actual thing?

And, the burning question, why did Thomson—damn it, *Sam* (that was really hard to break)—want to in the first place? Maybe she was going to lure Hayden in and axe-murder her inside her probably fancy-as-hell apartment?

No more axe-murder thoughts. This was getting stupid.

Also, no more late-night TV.

Another drawn-out meow came from the kitchen.

"I'm coming!"

But she didn't move. Instead, she opened the e-mail.

Hayden,

I feel we should arrange a time and place for the first "date." We don't have to do anything special. It's just so we appear to have spent a month together before signing the papers. I'm aware even a month is quite short to convince people, but it should be sufficient.

Also, I feel you agreed too readily. You should really think about this more. How do you know I will pay you? Why have you not asked more questions? You really need to be smarter about this.

How is tomorrow night at seven o'clock? Perhaps we can leave from the hospital together, if you're working. Better for appearances.

Sam

There it was, typed out: *Sam*. How strange.

All of this was strange.

Also, patronizing much? Of course Hayden needed to think about this more. Thank you very much, Samantha Thomson. And of course she had questions...like...

Like.

Okay, so maybe Hayden had been blinded by the money. But yes, now her thoughts were going overtime. How could she be sure she would get that money at the end? Could she get a contract?

Would a contract like that hold any legal ground?

Also, could there be a contract? Or would the existence of one prove their marriage a sham?

Maybe it could be more like a prenup? *If (when) the couple divorces, a one-off payment of 200,000 dollars will be made to the innocent party, but no further payments.*

Wait, what if Thomson—Sam—whatever—didn't file for divorce? And left Hayden in some weird limbo land of married to someone she barely knew?

Though after a year, they'd probably know each other.

Hayden shuddered and ignored the plaintive meow that floated into her room again. Maybe they could make a prenup that meant Hayden got a one-off payment as soon as they were married. Was that even legal? Could she ask a lawyer these questions?

So...hypothetically... I wanna marry someone for money?

They'd probably charge two hundred dollars just for her stupid hypothetical question.

This was all too hard. And stupid. But then, money...and money that would come her way soon.

Forty thousand within a month?

Hayden quickly scanned the e-mail again.

Also, better for *what* appearances? If it wasn't to convince green-card people, why did it matter? If they didn't have anything to prove on a legal basis, why were they doing this?

The meow that came from the kitchen sounded like a dying elephant, so Hayden rolled out of her bed and padded through to the kitchen, which took all of five seconds in her micro apartment. She replied to the e-mail, agreeing except to say that she'd need an extra half an hour in case the ER was a mess.

And also to clean up, but Hayden would never admit that to Samantha Thomson. She was going on a "date" with the Ice Queen herself and would not be going out smelling of twelve-hour shift.

All of a sudden, Hayden's hands were clammy. Leave from the hospital? Oh no. The ER would be a gossip pit. Everyone would know. And yeah, okay, that was the point, but that meant this insanity was actually happening.

She couldn't even talk to anyone about it.

Frank head-butted her leg and yowled.

"Okay, okay."

"Are you all right?"

Hayden looked up from the chart she was filling out at the edge of the nurses' station. Luce was staring at her.

"What?" Hayden asked.

"Are you okay? You've been spacey all day."

"Have not."

"Have too."

"I'm tired." Hayden stretched out her back, casting an eye over the patients she could see. All were doing okay, and the boy with a broken arm had been wheeled to surgery moments earlier, his parents hovering over the bed and following them. The poor kid was four and had almost been in hysterics. Until the pain medication had set in, and he'd just been plain hilarious. He told stories about a fart monster that scared people by farting the loudest. So much like Hayden's nephew. "Nothing else."

"Okay, if you're sure." Luce's voice was pretty clear on the fact that they didn't believe her. "I'm going to get a coffee. You want one?"

"Please!" Hayden smirked, capping her pen. "I won't offer to come. You need all the time you can get with Coffee Girl."

"She's not on today." Luce's cheeks went red immediately, their skin tone making it a dusky color. "Not that I, you know, know that."

"Well, well, Luce is a stalker. You would never have known."

"I just happened to go by there this morning, that's all."

"Sure, sure. I'll post bail when you get arrested."

"Not funny!"

Luce was already walking away. They really were hopeless with this coffee girl. It was tempting to just give her Luce's number, but Luce would hate that. So would Hayden, so she couldn't really blame them. She froze as she put the folder in its slot.

Over a year of no dating.

Okay, maybe Hayden wasn't a Casanova, but she enjoyed dates and flirting and going out, even if that area of her life hadn't been that active lately. She liked first kisses and first nights wrapped up in sheets.

Over a year with none of that? Or, at least, without the opportunity of that?

Maybe she should rethink this. And not only because of all that, but this would really be turning her life upside down for a year. But then...

Two hundred forty thousand dollars. What she could do with that.

On that thought, she needed to message her sister back. Or suck it up and call.

“Hayden, Neuro will be here in five for that consult.”

“Righto.” Hayden tried to ignore the way her stomach felt as if it had dropped out of her body. Normally, that comment just filled her with a slight annoyance. But that flop in her stomach? She would really need to get that under control. Would Thomson—damn it, Sam—expect her to be flirty here? Or at least, like, friendly? Would it be too weird? Would Sam actually be *nice* after essentially proposing?

The insane image of Samantha Thomson on one knee and beaming up at her, holding out a hideous diamond ring invaded her mind, and she snorted, clapping her hand over her mouth and hoping no one noticed. The shift coordinator threw her a weird look, but Hayden just pretended she’d coughed.

Grabbing the file for her neuro patient, Hayden shook her head. She needed to calm down. That’s what she needed to do. Not imagine strange things that were never going to happen.

Her patient was laid out in her bed, dark skin sallow and her eyes nervous. Hayden touched her hand to hers. Her right eye was partially closed, the same side of her mouth drooping.

“*Hola, María. ¿Cómo te sientes?*” Hayden asked, checking how she was. It was times like this she was grateful her *abuela* ensured she spoke Spanish and kept her connected to her Honduran roots.

“*Estoy... estoy bien.*” María’s words were slurred, but her eyes had lit up when Hayden had switched straight to Spanish when she’d first come in two hours ago.

“*Bien—te vamos operar enseguida. ¿Está bien?*”

“*Mi... familia no... está aquí...*”

She’d been worried about her family since she’d arrived. They still weren’t there.

“*¿Todavía no están aquí?*” Hayden double-checked with her that they definitely still weren’t there.

“No.”

Hayden felt terrible for her, but she explained how important it was that María go to surgery as soon as possible and that maybe they could call them before she went.

It was cold comfort to offer a phone call to someone going into surgery if their family didn’t arrive in time. A phone call that would do little for María or her family.

“María Villanueva?”

Not letting go of the hand gripping hers, Hayden turned her head to see that the surgical team had arrived. “Yes, this is María.”

Sam didn’t even look up at the sound of her voice.

“Folder?” Sam asked, and Hayden held it out and Sam scanned it quickly. “Any change?”

“Stable since arrival by emergency flight after diagnosis of a large aneurysm.”

“Good.”

Sam—finally—walked around the edge of the bed. “I’m Dr. Thomson, the head of neurosurgery. I just need to check your eyes.”

Hayden translated in rapid Spanish and Sam blinked at her.

Sam turned back to María. “¿Está bien si miro en tus ojos?”

It was Hayden’s turn to stare at her. Her accent was horrendous, and she spoke slowly and translated directly, but still. She knew Spanish?

Sam moved her flashlight quickly, gaze roving over María’s face. She did a series of neurological tests, then put her flashlight away.

“Can you translate?” When Hayden agreed, she said, “I have your scans. You’re on the emergency list, so your surgery will be within the next hour or so. My intern here will take you through the paperwork and answer any questions you have.”

Hayden translated and María’s brow furrowed. “*Mi familia—*”

“Nurse?”

Hayden wrenched her head up. She abhorred being referred to that way. “Yes?”

If Sam saw the anger in her eyes, she didn’t react. Her face was as impassive as ever, her gaze steady. “She’ll need neurological observations every fifteen minutes rather than thirty now. That scan was worrying.”

And she turned and walked away, leaving Hayden wanting to throw something after her and María looking from Hayden to the same twitchy intern as the other day.

The intern stepped forward. “She’s a bit scary, ma’am.” He started pulling forms out of the folder in his arms, consent forms for the surgery, most likely. “But she’s the best you could wish for.”

Hayden translated that and, somehow, María’s grip on Hayden’s hand relaxed.

Maybe she’d misread the twitchy intern.

But seriously? *Nurse?*

~ ~ ~

The next night, showered and wearing black jeans and a white buttoned-up shirt with her favorite black ankle boots, Hayden was still seething. Her e-mail was full of eight drafts she’d started to type out before exiting from the app, huffing. All were filled with the start of some attempt to cancel this plan—not just the dinner, but the entire thing.

But dollar signs appeared behind her eyelids like a cartoon villain, and she couldn't bring herself to hit *send*.

So now she was hanging by the main entrance, throwing a wave to the odd coworker as they walked out, hoping Luce had left already and wouldn't see her.

"Hey, you look fancy."

Which, of course, was far too much to wish for.

"Not really." Hayden tried for casual with a one-shouldered shrug.

"You have your date boots on."

"No, I don't."

"Well, you do." Luce leaned against the wall. "I was with you when you bought them. You tapped the heels together and said, 'There's no place like their bedroom,' and laughed manically."

That was sadly true. Sometimes, Hayden thought her parents shouldn't have let her do drama at school. It had brought out a side to her no one had known had existed.

The thought of her parents as one entity made her stomach roll over.

"They were the first thing I found this morning when I was getting dressed."

"Fine, whatever. Want to get a drink?"

"I, uh, can't. I have plans."

As Hayden had suspected they would, Luce's eyes lit up. "So you do have a hot date."

"No, I—"

"Hayden."

This was a freaking nightmare. Burying her hands in her leather jacket's pockets, Hayden spun on her heel. "Thom—Sam. Hi."

Hayden didn't need to turn around to know that Luce's eyebrows had raised an inch. She could feel the eyeballs glaring into her back. Sam also wasn't in her scrubs but rather dark denim jeans and a loose green shirt. Her collarbones were on show. Hayden hadn't seen her own collarbones so clearly in a while. Not with her habit of enjoying food quite happily and doing little exercise besides walking. It had taken a few years of work on her self-esteem, but she'd ended up comfortable with her extra curves. She was certainly rocking them tonight with her boots.

"Are you ready to go?" Sam asked.

Hayden turned and almost wanted to laugh. Luce was gaping like a fish. They bounced back miraculously, though.

"Hi, Dr. Thomson."

Sam started walking out, and Hayden fell into step with her, avoiding Luce's eye. Within ten steps, she felt her phone vibrate. She ignored it, and they walked across the parking lot. It vibrated again. She would bet her last few dollars this would continue all night.

Luckily, Hayden only planned to order a water and make short work of the night. She had no money to actually do anything more than that and no desire to spend more time with Sam.

Apparently not one for small talk, Sam walked silently next to her. And somehow as they walked, that seething feeling grew. Their shoulders brushed, and the feeling was like electricity, going straight to the ball of anger in Hayden's gut. How would they even manage all of this if Sam couldn't even address her politely in the ER?

"Where are we going?" she bit out.

If Sam heard the anger in her voice, she didn't react. "A bar around the corner. Is that okay with you?"

"Fine."

They walked on in silence. In her pocket, Hayden's mobile vibrated again. And again.

"Are you going to get that?"

Apparently, it vibrated loudly. Hayden pulled it out of her pocket, and she had to stop herself from smirking. Nine messages. She opened them and felt some of that pressure ease in her chest as she almost laughed out loud. Various messages from *what was that about?* to *are you sleeping with Ice Queen?!* to *WHAT THE FREAKING HECK IS GOING ON?* filled her inbox.

Deciding to enrage Luce further, she typed out a *can't talk, busy* and put her phone on meeting mode.

They stopped outside a fairly fancy-looking bar. It even had someone standing out at the front to open the door. Hayden's face fell. Her teeth started biting at her lip. This was the kind of place that didn't give out glasses of water from the tap for free.

This was the kind of place that offered your sparkling water from a spring in a mountain Hayden had never heard of that fairies had blessed on a full moon.

"Uh..."

Sam's eyes were on her. "If you prefer another place, we can go there."

Hayden had ten dollars in her wallet. That stupid chai had been five bucks at the café the other day, and her bus card had needed a refill when it had rained randomly and made walking not an option. A water couldn't be more than a couple of dollars,

even at a place like this. And she'd just have one. And hope she'd be fine for the next few days. "No. Here's fine."

But her cheeks were warm. From shame over having to stress about money or still being too angry to meet Sam's eye, Hayden didn't know. The man opened the door, and Hayden followed Sam inside. Jazz music settled over her, and her eyes took a second to adjust. It was brighter than the night outside, but not by much. Small tables decorated the inside, shiny and silver, and booths with black leather lined the walls at the back. It was early for a place like this to be busy on a weekend, but it was already half-full, the murmuring of voices layered in with the sounds of the saxophone that drifted from the speakers.

Hayden, feeling like a sheep, followed Sam over to an empty booth. She slid into one of the seats, the leather supple under her fingers. This was much nicer than the diners and bars Luce and Hayden usually frequented. The clean, polished table didn't even have any water rings on it. She ran her fingers over it. It was as smooth as it looked, gliding under the pads of her fingertips. When she looked up, Sam was watching her, her head cocked. Hayden quickly lifted her hand away and dropped it in her lap.

"Are you going to tell me why you're so angry?" Sam asked.

Hayden swallowed. She'd never been good at hiding how she felt. In Drama, her teacher had loved it and told her that all of her emotions simmered at the surface. He'd said it was a great quality in an actor, since she could access her emotions so easily. Sometimes, she thought it helped her as a nurse. Empathy was always right there. However, it didn't help in other facets of her life. Like this.

But okay. Sam wanted to know? Hayden would tell her. "If this is something we're going to do, you can't treat me like you did yesterday."

Sam's head actually snapped back sharply, as if surprised by the words. Which made Hayden more frustrated. Was it really so surprising?

"How did I treat you?" Sam asked.

"Rudely."

"How so?"

Why was her voice so calm? Hayden sat back against the booth. She opened her mouth to speak just as the waiter appeared at the table.

"Good evening, ladies. How are we this evening?"

"Fine." Sam looked up at him. "I'll have a gin and tonic."

"Of course, ma'am." The waiter turned to Hayden. "And for you?"

"A glass of water, thanks."

He tapped it into his tablet. When he'd left, Sam was watching her again.

"Don't you want something else? It's Saturday night. I assume you don't work tomorrow either?"

Hayden shook her head. "I have tomorrow off. I just want water."

"I'm paying." Sam seemed to have figured it out way too quickly. "This is part of our deal whether we go through with it or not."

"That's—that's not it." Liar. "Really."

"If you insist." Ugh. There it was again—patronizing. "So, how was I rude?"

"You addressed me as *Nurse*."

"You are a nurse."

Hayden opened her mouth and closed it again. She took a deep breath. "You know my name."

"Yes. But at that moment, I wasn't thinking about anything other than that surgery."

"You could still try a little harder. Especially if you want people to believe this could be something?"

Sam was cocking her head again. "Okay."

"Well, I—what?"

"Okay. I'll try to be a touch more, I don't know, warm?"

Did Sam even know *how* to be warm? "Uh, okay. Good."

"Have you been angry about this since yesterday?"

No point in denying it. "Yes."

The waiter appeared again, putting the drinks between them.

"Thank you," Sam said. "We'd also like to order a...?"

Those cool, green eyes bore into her again, and Hayden rolled her eyes. "Another gin and tonic, please."

"Right away." He disappeared again.

"Hayden." Her name sounded foreign on Sam's tongue. Hayden wasn't sure if she liked it or not. "I'm used to having work be only that: work. When I'm thinking about a patient, that's all I think of: their surgery and how I'm going to fix it. The ways I can operate to minimize risk. How to achieve the best outcome for them. Also, how to teach the interns and residents on my service what to do to improve." Her eyes brightened as she spoke about work, something almost excitable that Hayden didn't know could exist there. "But I'll try and be...friendlier. You're right; I have to if this is to be believable in any way."

“Okay.” That was all Hayden could really think to say to that. She took a sip of her water for something to do, Sam echoing the motion with her own drink. “How do you know Spanish?”

“It’s the most common language in the US after English. I also spent a year volunteering in a hospital in Bolivia and managed to expand the basics I learned in school.”

“Oh.”

“Are you a native speaker?”

“I’m bilingual, I guess. My grandmother preferred to speak Spanish with us so we would learn.”

“Hayden isn’t a Spanish name?”

“Dad won the argument of what to call me since my mom chose my sister Sofia’s name. My middle name is Alejandra, after my grandmother, María Alejandra.”

Her dad had insisted, more than won, apparently. Hayden was the first name of a poet he’d liked. Or so went the story she was told as a child.

“Are you close to your Dad?”

Hayden shifted in her seat. “More or less.”

And that was all Hayden wanted to talk about when it came to her family. Sam looked like she was about to ask more but, strangely, didn’t.

A silence fell between them. The bar was filling up, the noise level rising. The music was still in the background. Hayden wasn’t really one for jazz. She liked lyrics she could sink her teeth into, ones she could belt out and destroy in the shower—better yet, ones she could completely destroy by getting the lyrics *completely* wrong.

“Did you think about the e-mail I sent you?”

Hayden snapped her gaze back to Sam. “What?”

“The e-mail. About the questions.”

“You mean your patronizing e-mail?”

A smile played at Sam’s lips, and Hayden almost dropped her drink. She actually looked amused.

“It was hardly patronizing.”

“Yes, it was.” Hayden jutted her chin out. “It was incredibly patronizing.”

“And how was I supposed to point out that you were avoiding some of the more obvious questions about our arrangement without being, as you put it, patronizing?”

God she was infuriating. Sam crossed her arms in front of her, putting them on the table, eyebrows raised ever so slightly.

"I don't know." Hayden shrugged. "Maybe give me a few days to actually think about it and process to come up with the questions? It all happened pretty quickly."

"Well?" And she was watching Hayden again, her head tilted to one side.

"Well what?"

"You've had a few days. Do you have your questions?"

Seriously. Infuriating. "Of course I have."

"And?"

If she wasn't careful, Hayden was going to throw a drink in her smug face.

"How do I know you'll pay me the money?"

"Good question."

Hayden had a feeling this was what being on Sam's service would be like. Patronized and painfully poked along a learning curve. No wonder her intern was a jittery mess.

"We can't exactly make a contract that lays out the steps to this plan, highlighting the marriage as fake," Sam stated. "I'm not sure what a lawyer would say to that. We could lay out a simple contract that says that after a period of time, I pay you two hundred thousand. Though I'm not sure how admissible that would be. And if it takes more time, what then? Will you take me to court? How do either of us ensure the other will sign for a divorce?"

She had clearly thought this all out much more than Hayden's panicked nighttime brain had. Not wanting to seem completely stupid, Hayden decided to make the one suggestion she'd thought of. "What about a prenup?"

Something about the way Sam sat back in her chair seemed as if she was satisfied with the suggestion. "Exactly. I think that's the best option. We get a standard prenup, protecting each of our assets and income."

Hayden bit back a huff. Her biggest asset was Frank, and she was pretty certain Sam wouldn't want him.

"However, we put the stipulation in there that at the dissolution of the marriage you receive a one-time payment of two hundred thousand. That way, your interests, and also your assets, are protected, as are mine."

Hayden was chewing her lip again, but she didn't bother stopping herself. She wouldn't even be able to afford a lawyer to look over the prenup. She'd have to read it herself and hope it was valid.

"That seems tight."

"I think so," Sam stated in a way that meant she didn't think, she knew. "We can use this month to ensure this works for both of us and to give time for any more

questions. It can also be some time to make it seem like we're dating before going to the courthouse."

To get married. 'Cause, you know, that's what Hayden was agreeing to. Was it hot in here?

"Okay."

"And I will pay for a lawyer of your choosing to look over the prenup."

Well, apparently Sam could afford that. "Okay." Hayden sipped her drink, her teeth protesting at how cold it was. "And I want to know why you're doing this."

"No." Sam straightened, her shirt shifting to cover her collarbones at the motion. "I agreed that you would know eventually, but when I feel the need to tell you. I don't feel that need now."

"Fine."

"Why does it matter?" Sam had an expression on her face Hayden couldn't place.

"Curiosity."

"Killed the cat." Sam ran a finger around the rim of her glass. Apparently, she could get fidgety, even if only slightly, just like the other mere mortals she grudgingly shared this planet with. "Speaking of cats, I'm assuming yours would move in with you."

Moving in. Hayden did her best to shrug off the weird feeling that induced. She'd only lived with a partner once, and that hadn't ended well. "Well, he goes where I go. So, yes."

"Okay. Does he leave the apartment? As my apartment doesn't really have access to the street."

"No. He's a very lazy, happy housecat."

"Happy?"

"Okay, he's a very lazy, hates-everything housecat."

"I can't wait to meet him." Sam's voice was as dry as the gin in her glass, and Hayden bit the inside of her cheek in delight.

"Was that sarcasm?" Completely against her will, Hayden felt a corner of her lips trying to tug up into a smirk.

"Possibly."

"I didn't know you had it in you."

Sam sipped her drink. "There's a lot you don't know."

This was going to be the weirdest year of Hayden's life.

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WHO'D HAVE THOUGHT

BY G BENSON

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