

The Edge of Control
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WARNING: This book contains sexually explicit content which is suitable only for mature readers.

This book contains an excerpt from the forthcoming book *Unguarded* by Lou Kelly. This excerpt has been set for this edition only and may not reflect the final content of the forthcoming edition.

Chapter 1

So angry.

That was the first thing I noticed about Ian James.

Okay, if I'm honest, the first thing I noticed was his ass. His tight, sculpted ass that filled out his navy blue scrubs as if they were leather chaps. Not that I know much about leather chaps, but lord, I could ogle that man's ass all day. If ass ogling became an Olympic sport, I'd be a gold medalist. The only points deducted from an otherwise perfect performance would be for indiscretion. It wasn't exactly appropriate for the brand new Chief of Medicine to be drooling over the most hostile nurse on the planet.

I sighed loudly over my coffee.

"David?" Caroline, the head ER nurse and my best friend, waved a hand in front of my face, and I actually jumped. *Smooth, real smooth.* Immediately, I tried to assess how obvious my leering had been on a scale of one to ten. Had I been leaning over the admitting desk with my chin in my hand, staring dreamily as the rest of the doctors and nurses on staff bustled around me? That would be a ten, right?

I cleared my throat as if that might indicate I'd been thinking clinical, medicinal thoughts. If fantasizing about violating a nurse in an examination room counted as

clinical, I was set. Otherwise ...

I scanned the Emergency Room wondering if anyone else had noticed. Southside General Hospital was one of the larger hospitals along the Hudson River - a five-tiered, beige, box-like building without much imagination - but we were within easy reach of New York City, so we were consistently busy.

Now, mid-morning on a Wednesday, the ER had just gotten through an unexpected rush after a multi-car pile-up. The incessant clamor of voices shouting directives, patients moaning, machines beeping, and families filing in and out had died to a slow, tired crawl. All of the doctors and nurses in sight, including Ian, were immersed in their paperwork. Caroline appeared to be the only one who'd noticed my reverie, so I was at least partially in the clear.

Until she followed my gaze and pursed her lips.

"Ian James," she groaned. "He'll be the death of me. I swear, I don't know where Human Resources finds these people. Were you staring because you were wondering why someone who doesn't actually *like* people would become a nurse?"

I coughed. "Something like that."

Uh no, actually, nothing like that. More like, was he gay, did he have a partner, would he want to do incredibly

dirty things in the on-call room if I asked?

Which I wouldn't.

Fantasizing was one thing, but taking even the smallest step toward making those fantasies a reality? Not my style. One did not get to be the youngest Chief of Medicine in the history of Southside General Hospital by fucking hostile nurses in on-call rooms. Or doing any fucking in on-call rooms for that matter.

God, I was pathetic.

"Have you had the pleasure of meeting him yet?"

Caroline asked sarcastically. This caused my pulse to race out of control and my face to flush a deep crimson. My family's roots were Scandinavian and I had the tall, blond-haired, blue-eyed look to prove my heritage. Oh yes, and the ability to broadcast embarrassment for miles. Such a useful trait.

"What? Oh ... um ... no. I'm actually very busy. I could see where you might think I wasn't, but ..."

Caroline laughed her loud, ungraceful, snorting laugh, which was part of the reason I adored her. We'd been close ever since we'd started working at Southside years ago, me in my first gig as an attending and her as a wet-behind-the-ears ER nurse.

Not that Caroline had ever been anything but in charge. She was six feet tall with carrot-top hair that she kept cut

so close to her scalp it looked shaved. She was also prone to wearing huge, exotic dangling earrings, and she could drink anyone under the table. Her presence, and the fact that my stint in the ER had been my favorite position at the hospital, explained why I could be found there during any free moment of my day.

My eyes drifted back to Ian. Now I had another reason to visit. Or maybe a reason to stay away and avoid temptation.

"Don't be afraid," Caroline chided, punching me in the arm hard enough that it hurt. "You're the Chief of Medicine now, remember? You have power. Authority. He'll have to be at least passably polite." She adopted a booming, movie preview voice and flexed her rather impressive biceps. "Embrace your new persona."

I sighed, running one hand over my face. Would Ian think I looked old? I was reasonably fit - I'd even venture to say attractive - but I'd turned forty a couple months ago. There was gray hair at my temples now, although I hoped people didn't notice through the blond. But there was no denying it.

And unlike Caroline, there was nothing eccentric about me to warrant a second glance. At least, not in my opinion. Caroline was fond of telling me to *embrace my inner hottie*, but I had yet to figure out what that would look like. A

prominent tattoo? Unbuttoning an inappropriate number of buttons on my Oxford shirts? Wearing loafers to work instead of dress shoes? My inner hottie was a mystery, and whenever I prodded Caroline for further explanation, she called me a basket case - a much more apt descriptor.

And then there was Ian.

There was absolutely no question that Ian James warranted a second glance. And a third and a fourth. In contrast to my paler version of blond, Ian was golden and delicious. Golden brown hair, lightly tanned skin, and the kind of eyes that defied description. Brown, yes, but *golden* brown. He looked like a young Ewan McGregor. That would be the sculpted, lean-yet-muscular, naked Ewan McGregor from *The Pillow Book*, not the bearded Jedi with the light saber. And the fact that I knew about *The Pillow Book* at all proved just how gay I really was despite most people's apparent shock whenever I outed myself.

"You're staring again," Caroline said, giving me a probing once-over. Then she drew in a sharp, quick breath, and I could see the recognition dawning. I straightened, trying to project my best *we-are-at-work-so-don't-you-dare-say-it* eye rays.

"Oh. My. Goddess," she said. "You're attracted to him."

"No. I'm not."

"Yes. You are." Her grin took up half her face. "Well,

he is goddamn, flat-out, gorgeous," she admitted, "but doesn't the open rage turn you off?"

"No. I mean ... it wouldn't because ... I'm not ..."
Spluttering. Not impressive. I lowered my voice to a harsh whisper. "I'm *not* attracted to him. Do you know why? Because I'm now the Chief of Medicine, so I'm no longer attracted to anyone in this hospital. Ever. Again."

This time Caroline's snort was loud enough to attract the attention of several attendings. I forced myself to project invisibility. *I'm not here. You don't see me.*

"Dr. Carlson, could I get you to -"

"Later," Caroline snapped, pointing one finger in the opposite direction from which the attending had come. "He's busy."

"But -"

"Is someone dying?"

"No."

"Then. Not. Now. Do you need your hearing checked?"

She was better at this than I was.

Caroline turned back to me. "You're still human, David. A little crush never hurt anyone."

Crush? When had this progressed from ogling to crush?

Before I could stop her she turned around. "Ian. Come here a second. I want to introduce you to Dr. Carlson."

Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.

He'd been glaring at a stack of files, but now he looked up and turned his glare on me. This was obviously a huge inconvenience. I mean, there we were *all the way* across the room. I swear he groaned before putting down his work and heading over. When he arrived he stopped approximately two feet away and crossed his arms over his chest, making a handshake impossible.

"Hi," I said, wishing I had something more substantial to say.

In reply, his eyes narrowed and his expression grew even more strained. I mentally replayed my opening gambit, wondering where I'd gone wrong. *Hi*. Was it the inflection that had insulted him? Should I have used the more formal hello?

"Ian, this is Dr. Carlson. I'm sure you'll be working with him in the ER from time-to-time. Dr. Carlson is one of the most respected surgeons in the country. We're incredibly lucky to have him as Chief of Medicine. I think you'll find he's tough ... yet firm."

I stifled a laugh and since I'd just taken a sip of my coffee that meant I was in danger of it coming out my nose. I had to cough into my hand to stop myself from snarfing. Caroline's eyes gleamed, and I could tell she was enjoying my reaction. Ian, on the other hand, looked as if this were a set-up meant to humiliate him. He glanced from me to

Caroline, shifting his weight from one foot to the other, and I could see the color creep up the back of his neck to his ears.

"Is that all? I have notes to write up."

Caroline's smile faded. "Of course," she said, and once he'd walked away she added in a sing-song voice, "You're welcome."

If he heard, he didn't turn around.

A stab of guilt worked its way through my gut. I didn't know much about Ian, but I did know this: he was a brand new nurse in the first week of his first job and he was older than all of the other first years on staff. I wasn't sure by how much, but I placed him somewhere between twenty-six and twenty-nine. He was probably nervous and insecure, intimidated by my authority, and unsure of how to impress me.

Yes, that was the problem.

Downing the rest of my coffee, I shot more eye rays at Caroline before heading over to give Ian a second chance. Trying to make him feel comfortable, I slid across from him.

"Sorry," I said. "That wasn't meant to be a joke."

Now that I was this close, I could smell his cologne - or was it aftershave? The scent was fresh and intoxicating. There was something else layered with it. Lemons? Orange peel? Definitely in the citrus family. Usually the

hospital's familiar aroma of vomit, blood, and bleach masked every other scent, and when you worked here day in and day out you eventually stopped smelling any of it, so to find an unexpectedly wonderful fragrance ... I wanted to lean in and inhale as deeply as I could. My body moved a fraction of an inch in Ian's direction.

"Excuse me?" The words were sharp, literally propelling me backward. His face molded into a look of incredulity, causing his eyes to squint and little lines to form around the edges. It gave him a world-weary look, but unfortunately, this did nothing to make him any less attractive. If anything, it made him sexier. I cleared my throat.

"Back there," I said, nodding to where Caroline and I had been standing, "if you thought we were laughing at you, we weren't."

I could see the heat rising inside of him. One shouldn't be able to see that, but in this case, his fury was a palpable force. Ian's jaw tightened, both fists clenched, and his eyes shuttered, blocking out any shred of softness. Okay. Maybe I'd been wrong. Maybe he *hadn't* thought we were laughing at him, and now I'd implied that *I* thought he was laughable and insecure.

"Fuck off."

He turned and walked away, and my mouth literally fell

open.

No one said 'fuck off' to the Chief of Medicine. Maybe I was in the wrong here, and maybe I didn't have the authoritarian vibe down pat, but I was still in charge. It wouldn't be difficult to fire a nurse who was still in his hiring trial phase. In fact, if I wanted to, I had enough connections to make sure he never got hired in the greater metro area again.

Not that I'd ever do that, but still ...

What the hell should I do now? If the rest of the staff got wind of the fact that I'd been openly cursed at by a troublesome young nurse and did nothing in response, what tone would that set for the future? Plus, I was incredibly mad. Really, *really* pissed off. So mad my cock was hard and throbbing in my pants.

Wait. Was that pissed off or turned-on?

Who cared! I needed to step up. Discipline that sultry, saucy, young man in the severest fashion, most preferably by fucking him hard. *No, no, no.* I begged my brain to function rationally. Seriously. He would apologize or he would be let go.

That was all there was to it.

Chapter 2

Of course, nothing is ever that easy.

By the time I'd made up my mind about my next step, Ian had disappeared from sight. I walked up and down each hallway, looking for him, but he'd made himself scarce. I groaned. I was not going to chase after that man. He should be the one chasing after me.

Still, I couldn't help poking my head into every empty examining room as I walked past. My mind drifted and I found that the heat wouldn't leave my cheeks. Stupidly, I kept wondering if I could take him in a fight. I was taller, but not by much. And since I worked out daily, I also had more muscle on my bones than he did, but again ... not by much. Plus, something told me that Ian would be a scrappy fighter. He had the look of someone who could push an opponent up against the wall, grab him by the balls, and thrust his hot, probing tongue into -

Focus, I chided. Task at hand.

Mmm. Hand job.

Argh. Stop fantasizing.

This was not my usual state. Ninety-nine percent of the time I was the model of professionalism. Hard working. (Workaholic) Focused. (Repressed) Dedicated (Boring). What was it about this guy that caused all the blood in my body

to surge into my groin whenever I thought about him?

Don't answer that, I told myself. But I did it anyway.

His lips were a major temptation. His pouty, soft, red lips. Or maybe I was drawn to the aura of danger surrounding him. No one was as hostile as Ian without fear being involved. So what was he afraid of?

Ian had only been at the hospital a week and already the stories about his brush-offs were legendary. He wouldn't shake hands with anyone, leaving person after person hanging awkwardly, and he didn't speak voluntarily. When the other nurses stood around the front desk exchanging gossip and laughter, Ian leaned against the wall across the room, arms crossed. Personal questions were answered with glares of epic proportions.

Or so I'd heard.

The truth was, I hadn't seen any of these things first hand. Aside from our disastrous introduction, we'd had one brief encounter in the ER on his first day. Other than that I'd been holed up in my office, buried in meetings and paperwork, barely able to schedule any OR time for for myself.

But the gossip about Ian had been rampant and I tried not to miss much when it came to the inner workings of this hospital. Running a hospital is all about interpersonal dynamics, and as an administrator, this was usually my

forte. Today was the first day I'd had a chance to observe Ian for any length of time and obviously, it wasn't going as planned.

I turned a corner and found a side door propped open with a brick. The heat of mid-September washed inside, negating the air conditioning, and I stopped to soak in the warmth. We were in the throes of an Indian summer, and I loved the lingering heat. New York has so few months of the year that aren't cold and miserable that I wanted to hold onto every last drop of sunshine. It was too easy to forget about the outside world when my whole day was spent in an unnatural, air-conditioned, florescent-lit environment. I tilted my head back and breathed in deep.

That's when I heard his voice - half of a one-sided conversation. He was standing just outside the door, talking on one of those temporary cell phones.

"I *said* I know. Don't lecture me, Elise. I didn't call you for ... no, that's not true, I ..."

I was tempted to listen in, try to glean something about him from spying, but that felt worse than ogling, so I positioned myself in the doorway instead, letting him know I was present.

The side door lead out to an alley, and Ian was leaning against the brick wall with his ankles crossed, posed like a young James Dean. He swallowed hard when he saw me.

"I gotta go," he said, shutting the phone off without a goodbye. He released his slouch and stood up straight. The alley was narrow and we were no more than a few feet apart. His only way inside was through the door I was blocking. I watched his eyes slide to the open end of the alley and for a split second I thought he might run.

Why on earth would he run?

Instead, he licked his lips and took a step closer to me. Now he was barely a foot away, and his presence stole my breath. He stared down at his worn sneakers - ripped Converse with purple shoelaces -- and then his eyes came up to meet mine. The tension was so great I felt oddly certain he would kiss me. It was a completely incongruous thought, but any second now I expected him to bridge the distance, pressing his mouth into mine, grinding his hips against my slacks and pushing his hands inside my shirt.

Or maybe that was wishful thinking.

He broke eye contact. "Sorry," he mumbled. "I've seen you around and you're a good guy. I shouldn't have told you to fuck off."

Then without waiting for my response, he shouldered past me, through the door and back into the hospital. His abrupt escape threw me off balance, physically and mentally. I stumbled, catching one hand on the door frame, and once again, I found myself watching his ass.

Chapter 3

"Let it go," I said out loud, chiding myself. "It's been two weeks. Let it fucking go!"

I buried my face in frustration. *Stop. Analyzing. Every. Word. Of course he's seen you around. You're the Chief of Medicine. Everyone at this hospital has seen you around. And yes, you're a nice guy.*

This was not debatable. David Carlson = nice guy. Okay, maybe it would be debatable if people lived in my brain and heard all the lurid thoughts I'd been having about a certain nurse who'd seen me around.

But it wasn't only that one encounter that had my mind on continual replay. There was more. Two days ago, his fingers had brushed mine during a trauma as he handed me a scalpel. There'd been that unmistakable spark.

Really? Handing over a scalpel?

But the action had felt purposeful.

Plus, every morning since our heated encounter, he'd found a moment to say hello.

True, this wasn't much to go on, but considering he said absolutely nothing to anyone else, the greeting felt like a lot. Not to mention he never said hello when others were around, as if saying hi was a gesture that embarrassed him.

I sat back, remembering this morning's hello. He'd been walking away from the front doors, having just wheeled a patient out, and we'd passed in the hallway. He'd looked up, and when he saw me, those wary eyes had cleared for a split second as he said, "hi". He had this way of looking at me from underneath his eyelashes that made me weak in the knees.

I'd said hello as well, but I'd tried to pack it with as much layered meaning as possible. *Hello, I adore you. Hi, you sexy thing. Hey there, come up to my office any time and I will take off every item of your clothing as slowly as possible and lick you from head to toe.*

On second thought, I hoped he hadn't gotten all that.

I closed my eyes and when I reopened them, I realized I was still on the same page of the report that I'd been staring at for the past half hour. Not good. I'd worked my entire life for this position and couldn't afford to become hopelessly distracted right when I'd finally achieved my goal.

A terrible thought occurred to me. *Was I one of those people who only found a thrill in pursuit, not in achievement?*

No. I knew better than that. I was Mr. Follow-Through. No one had fewer commitment issues than I did. This little obsession was just very badly timed.

I pounded my forehead against my desk and my office door opened tentatively as my secretary stepped inside. Albert is a little old man from Britain with wispy white hair, who wears a cardigan to work every day, drinks tea at noon and four, and says things like, "Well, that's a tasty crumpet now, isn't it?" Having him around felt more like employing a butler than a secretary.

"Everything all right, sir?" he asked. "Do you need something?"

"No. Just venting." I leaned back in my chair and pinched the bridge of my nose.

Albert shuffled his old man loafers. "Would a chocolate biscuit help?"

Best. Secretary. Ever.

"Yes," I said decisively.

Albert smiled. "Righty then. I'll go get some."

My grin lingered even after he'd shut the door. I truly did have the most amazing staff. Southside General was filled with first-rate surgeons and stellar nurses, any of whom could have been working in New York City, but they were attracted to Southside either out of loyalty, having grown up here, or because they saw this as a stepping-stone in their careers.

Our location meant we had a high turn-over rate, but I didn't begrudge that fact. Instead, I planned to use it to

our advantage, luring in top-notch employees with the promise of abundant staff development. We might not be able to pay the salaries that hospitals in Manhattan paid, but our employees would have their pick of jobs if they decided to leave.

Caroline said this was the kind of open-mindedness that would make me an excellent Chief - along with the fact that I had genuine affection for my staff. But if she knew exactly how much *genuine affection* I was wasting on one staff member in particular she might not be so approving.

I shook my head.

Better not lie to myself. Genuine affection wasn't what I felt towards Ian. It was lust, pure and simple. Goddamn lust. And for whatever reason, I couldn't seem to stifle it. I'd progressed from ass ogling, to constant obsessing, to the point where Ian seemed to be everywhere I looked.

Maddening.

It didn't help that the man had a thousand quirky qualities I couldn't stop noticing now that he was omnipresent. Like the fact that he changed the color of his shoelaces every few days. Or that he read textbooks during his lunch break, a different one practically every day. There was the way his hair fell into his face and he blew it upwards with a puff of breath without seeming to realize what he was doing. And while I was watching him, he was

usually watching everyone else, almost longingly. Maybe that was just my imagination, but there was no denying that when the rest of the staff were joking around with one another, swapping stories and playful barbs, Ian was attuned.

Why didn't he join in?

Made me ache.

"Okay, enough." I stood abruptly. I had a lunch hour board meeting, and I couldn't afford to be preoccupied. Not when I had to deal with Judge Muller, asshole extraordinaire and Chairman of the Board - a man with the exact opposite philosophy of governing the hospital from the one I employed.

Bruce was all about staff retention, favoring raises for the elite, upper-crust physicians who could be trotted out for public relations purposes, while advocating for reductions of benefits and training for everyone else. I'd need all my mental faculties to resist stabbing a hypodermic needle into his eye.

I sighed, rethinking the chocolate biscuits.

"On second thought, save the cookies for later, Albert," I called out. "We'll celebrate if I survive my first board meeting as Chief."

* * *

Two hours later, the conference room was finally emptying out, and one-by-one the hospital board members were trickling back to their everyday lives. I'd spent the entire meeting on the defensive, trying to justify every single course in our continuing education program, while simultaneously parrying demands to cut the nursing staff by three percent and the ancillary staff by one percent. Not to mention advocating for a surgical theater that no one wanted to pay for, but would pan out in the long run by attracting amazing surgeons and future donors.

About the only part of the budget I didn't have to defend was the free clinic, which had surprised the hell out of me, but I supposed the clinic was a good tax write-off. Bruce had defended the clinic himself, and I was damn certain he wasn't concerned about its charitable mission.

By the end of the meeting, I was sweating profusely and my shirt clung to my chest. Dr. Philip Michaels edged up beside me and grinned. "Nice job today," he said. "You did great for a first-timer."

I laughed, putting on an air of mock bravado. "Just wait until our next meeting. I'll have you all eating out of the palm of my hand."

Several of the others overheard my comment and added their good-natured jibes. Dr. Walter Hutchinson and Samuel Lieberman took turns slapping me on the back and wishing me

luck. Took the sting out of the beating I'd taken. Everyone had wanted to indoctrinate the new Chief to their way of thinking, but now people were laying off, remembering that outside of this board room, we were friends.

Most of us, anyway.

Judge Muller made his way towards me through the throng as I was gathering up my papers and I inwardly cringed. When he clapped me heartily on the back, as if he hadn't mere moments ago been trying to wrest all authority from my grasp, it didn't feel as reassuring as it had when Hutchinson and Lieberman had done the same thing.

Bruce was the type of man who stood too close, invading my personal space, and I found myself staring at him eye-to-eye. His eyes were dark blue - striking - but there was a coldness to them that I couldn't stand.

"David," he bellowed, making me want to stuff his tie down his throat. "Hope I wasn't too hard on you today. Wouldn't be any fun if we didn't put you through the ringer though, eh?" He laughed loudly and I forced a laugh in return. The smell of his breath, laden with garlic from the Caesar Salad he'd been eating during the meeting, turned my stomach.

The judge was in his early sixties, a silver fox with deep pock marks on his face. He was a big guy, not fat, but solid and imposing, taller than me by several inches with a

thick frame and meaty hands. His slap on the back felt like getting slammed with a two-by-four. All around us, the others dispersed rapidly, and I couldn't help wondering how many of them felt the same way that I did about Bruce.

"No problem," I said. "It's just business, right?"

He squeezed my arm in what I assumed was supposed to be a friendly gesture. Felt like getting clamped in a vice.

"You've got to relax," he said, a sentiment completely at odds with the pain he was currently inflicting. "Let the board do its job. There's no need to micro-manage things, David. You're new at this, but trust me, job stress was probably half of what caused Littinger to off himself. We don't need the scandal of a repeat performance."

For some reason, the reference to my predecessor made my body run white hot, like someone had poured boiling water down my spine. Strange, considering I'd been cleaning up Littinger's mess even before I officially took over his vacated position. I'd handled the news conferences, briefed the staff, organized the memorial...

Talking about Littinger was nothing new, but it was the casual way that Judge Muller mentioned him that rubbed me wrong. As if the man had earned no respect.

I thought over my last meeting with Littinger, right before he'd stuck a gun down his throat and pulled the trigger. The old guy had been wasted. Caroline and I had

happened upon him in an Irish pub, and we'd sat down at his booth.

He'd been insipid - sweating profusely and virtually incoherent, clutching at my arm and rambling about how I'd take over his position, and do better than he'd ever done. He'd made a mess of everything. Screwed up the hospital, had an affair that his wife and three grown children would never be able to forgive, made a joke of himself.

No control, he'd said, over and over again. *Never any control*.

The memory of his desperation stung. Should I have seen what he was about to do? Helped him in some way? He'd been a weak and ineffectual Chief of Medicine, the kind of man who was indecisive and got laughed at behind his back, but he'd been a damn fine surgeon.

I took a deep, calming breath, bringing myself back to the present.

"Yeah. I get what you're saying, Bruce. Don't work too hard, right? Never one of my faults."

This was a complete lie, but when it came to Bruce I found that shallow, well-worn jokes were the way to go. He was one of those guys who liked that sort of thing - the easy laugh. The amiable persona.

"I should head down to the ER to check in," I said, extricating myself from his grip before my circulation

disappeared.

"Good, good," he said. "I'll come with you. We can talk more about the capital campaign on the way down."

Great. Let's waste even more time on top of an already bloated and useless board meeting.

I smiled. "Perfect."

We left the conference room and followed the familiar path downstairs to the ER, Bruce haranguing me the whole time, and I prayed there would be a crisis in progress when we arrived. Multi-car pile-up? Massive traumas?

Unfortunately for me, everything appeared to be running smoothly. The waiting room was full, but not overflowing, the janitor was busy mopping up someone's vomit, the phone was ringing incessantly, and the patients were complaining loudly about how long they'd been sitting there. Business as usual.

"I have to check the board." I nodded toward the massive dry erase board where we kept track of patients and staff. To my relief, Bruce didn't attempt to ensnare me any longer.

"Hmm? Oh right. Carry on."

Thank god.

Or not.

I followed his gaze to the source of his distraction and instantly, my guts were being ripped out by a snarling

wildebeest. He was looking at Ian. Leering at Ian. And not in the *I-would-never-actually-touch-you* way in which I had leered. This was something different. The judge's eyes snapped onto him like a predator.

My heart pounded as Bruce approached and laid one hand on the small of Ian's back. I expected a quick rebuff. A fist to the face, perhaps? And if Ian *had* hit Bruce, I wouldn't have stopped him. I would've called Caroline over and popped some corn. But Ian stood completely still. He didn't even flinch. I couldn't hear the words Bruce whispered in his ear, but Ian nodded, just once. A clipped nod.

Then Bruce swaggered away, visibly gloating before disappearing into the men's room. I looked around to see if anyone else had noticed their exchange, but the admitting area was too busy, everyone caught up in their own demands.

When I looked back, Ian still hadn't moved a muscle. If I didn't know better, I would've sworn he wasn't breathing. His hands were clenched into fists at his sides, and his face was rigid.

Then he stepped forward and followed Bruce.

Chapter 4

There were multiple explanations for why one man might follow another into the men's bathroom. They both needed to pee. Ian had decided they should finish their conversation in private.

Or they were about to have sex.

No.

That was my diseased, obsessed mind at work. My lustful brain couldn't help associating Ian with all things carnal. Judge Muller was married. Prominently married with two sons. And Ian was - well, he was gorgeous, young, and presumably single. At least, I'd never seen a wedding ring. Certainly, he wasn't desperate enough to voluntarily fuck a man like Bruce.

Or was he?

I stared blankly at the board. To an outside observer it would've appeared that I was deep in thought, contemplating the complex workings of the ER.

And I was contemplating, all right.

The pounding of my heart felt like the prelude to a massive coronary. My palms were sweating and it occurred to me that I might actually be having a heart attack. But I knew better than that.

Get a grip.

Without knowing exactly what I was going to do, I turned sharply and walked to the men's room door. I stood with my hand poised against the smooth wooden surface, trying to decide whether I should go in.

There was no way they were having sex. It would be too great a risk, even for an arrogant bastard like Bruce. Definitely too great a risk for a first year nurse. If I walked in right now, they'd be talking. Maybe they'd stop as soon as they saw me, and I'd ... well, I'd use the bathroom. Simple.

I breathed in through my nose and out through my mouth. Then slowly, I pushed open the door.

* * *

They were having sex.

The men's room had three stalls just past the urinals. The last stall against the far wall was the handicapped stall, and it was there that I could see two sets of feet with dress pants and scrubs around the respective ankles. The heavy sound of panting mixed with the occasional stifled groan, and I could hear the quiet slap of one body against another. Bruce's guttural moaning echoed against the tiles.

I twisted around, ready to get out of there. I was sweating all over, and my body throbbed with a mixture of

nausea and muffled desire.

How could Ian possibly be attracted to Bruce Muller?

Obviously, I had to leave. Right now. This was ... what was this? One of my board members - the goddamn Chairman of the Board - was fucking one of my nurses right here, just a few feet away from me. I couldn't think clearly.

Should I confront them? No. Confronting them would cause a scandal ... over what? Two men voluntarily screwing? I'd watched Ian consider his options and then go inside. He was an adult. Bruce was an adult. And as a gay man myself, I knew the kind of harassment I'd be setting them both up for if this leaked out.

Not that I cared much about Bruce's fate. That man probably had a hundred scandals lurking under his perfect man-of-the-community façade. But Ian?

He might not be friendly with his co-workers, but Ian was an excellent nurse. In the last two weeks, I'd made a point of observing him, and not all of that time had been ass ogling. When it came to patients, he had a calm, gentle manner that soothed even the most anxious person. This was especially true with children. Unlike others, he didn't over assert himself with little kids. You could tell that they liked him and the feeling was mutual. Ian was organized and prompt, arriving ten minutes early for every shift, and Caroline had grudgingly admitted he was growing on her.

Did he really deserve to lose his job over a fairly common indiscretion? Hospital liaisons didn't happen as often as television dramas might want people to believe, but they sure as hell happened.

Plus, Bruce wasn't an employee, so theoretically, he didn't have any pull over a nurse's job. That ruled out sexual harassment. Maybe I was only thinking of confronting them because I was jealous. Because I wanted it to be me in there with Ian, and not some overbearing, arrogant -

Bruce's panting became louder, faster, more aggressive. Ian made a muffled noise, and a picture flashed into my head unbidden: Bruce's meaty hand over Ian's mouth. His cock driving hard into Ian's perfect ass. Then before I could think anything else, Bruce erupted in an explosive moan, and I knew I had to leave. I pushed forward, as quietly as I could and reached for the door. I'd just leaned my weight into it when I heard the snap of a condom and the flush of the toilet.

And then Ian made a different sort of noise.

The sound wasn't stifled this time, and it wasn't a moan of pleasure. It was a catch of the breath, almost as if the tail end of a cry had escaped unbidden. A sob? A whimper?

Too late. My momentum had already swung the door open and I was outside. Dr. Martino Rodriguez was approaching the

men's room, unaware of the shit he was about to step into, so I did the only thing I could think to do.

"Hey, Martino. You got a second? I wanted to follow up with you on that patient you admitted earlier."

I steered him away from the men's room as if I'd been oblivious to his trajectory. I couldn't believe my mouth was forming words into coherent conversation when the only thought in my brain was: *What the hell just happened?*

Chapter 5

I've heard that people who witness miracles instantly begin to doubt what they experienced, even if their revelation felt profoundly real to them in the moment. That's exactly how I felt about Ian's reaction to his restroom tryst. Later that day, as I sat in my office, turning the memory over in my mind, I doubted what I'd felt so sure of before I'd left the bathroom.

Had Ian wanted to have sex with Bruce?

That was the question.

I replayed their interaction in the admitting area: the touch on the back, the way Ian had frozen in place. The way he hadn't followed immediately after Bruce.

On the other hand, they'd obviously had previous contact. He hadn't reacted with surprise to Bruce's overture, and he hadn't reacted at all to Bruce's mouth against his ear. Plus, he'd gone into the men's room. Voluntarily. He'd thought about his options and gone in.

That was the part I kept coming back to.

So what if he'd made a strange sound after having sex? People did a lot of things during or after orgasm. Who was I to judge what that noise meant, especially when I was prone to reading into that detail exactly what I wanted: that Ian did not - *could not* - possibly want Bruce Muller.

Still. If there was one thing I knew as a physician, it was the sounds people made when they were in pain, and this had been the sound of a person suffering.

I got up out of my chair, deciding that my only course of action was to confront Ian, confidentially, and ask him if the encounter had been consensual. That was the mature, responsible thing to do.

As I walked down to the ER, I rehearsed a speech in my head. The rational, logical part of my brain was reminding myself that I should be contacting Human Resources, writing this up, including them in on a meeting, but my mouth grew dry at the thought. They would certainly use this infraction as an excuse to let Ian go.

Would that be so bad?

If I wasn't blinded by lust, would I care if a brand new employee screwed up and got fired? Ian James was trouble. I knew this with every fiber of my being. He was the kind of trouble that caused men like me to stop listening to the rational voices that had gotten them this far in life.

Then I remembered the look in his eyes when he'd glanced at me from under those long lashes ... that inquiring, almost pained look that made me desperate to save him.

I felt like a little girl with golden ringlets picking

petals off a daisy. *Fire him. Fire him not. Fire him. Fire him not.*

I rounded the corner on a *Fire him* beat, but the first thing I saw was an actual little girl with actual golden ringlets. She couldn't have been more than four, and she was beaming at Ian as he crouched in front of her. The two of them were communicating in sign language, and when they stopped he brushed the stray hairs back from her forehead.

She looked just like him.

Beside them was a woman about Ian's age, maybe a little older. She had gorgeous, sculpted cheekbones and long blond hair that cascaded down to her waist. On the Kinsey scale of sexuality, I'm completely gay, not even tempted to call myself bi, but she was exquisite. Could have been a model if it weren't for a long, thick scar down the side of her face. She spoke in sing-song to a baby boy on her hip who looked to be about nine or ten months old.

"Who's my favorite baby in the whole wide world? Who is the best baby ever?"

After a moment, Ian stood up and kissed her on the cheek. Exactly on her scar.

"Sorry. I'm running late," he said.

She studied him with openly adoring eyes then tapped the little girl on the shoulder. "No problem. We're happy to see where you work. Aren't we, Annie?"

I watched the child strain to read her lips. Annie nodded and Ian took the baby with a practiced movement, lifting him high overhead, then planting a raspberry on his belly. The baby laughed in that squealing way babies do, and Ian grinned.

That smile completely took my breath away. Filled the whole goddamn room with blinding light. I couldn't have pried my eyes away with a crowbar, and I wasn't the only one. All around the ER, the other employees openly stared, and you could hear the collective shock as everyone simultaneously thought: *Ian James has a family?*

Deb Palmer, Caroline's right-hand woman and one of Ian's fellow nurses, breathed out. "Well, would you look at that."

Oblivious, Ian and his wife were carrying on a quiet conversation while the little girl pulled at Ian's pant leg. I forced myself to turn away, moving up to the front desk. Immediately, someone was vying for my attention, and for once I was grateful. Out of the corner of my eye I watched Ian sign off on one last piece of paper, clock out, and then jog after his family as they headed to the door.

Chapter 6

My fifteenth floor penthouse apartment was posh, by any standards, a classic bachelor pad with a gay man's twist. All the fixtures matched. The kitchen was stainless steel, the living room spotless glass, the bedroom luscious black silk. I'd turned the guest bedroom into a weight room, I had an entertainment system most people would kill for, a selection of liquor in the kitchen cabinets that could stock a full bar, and porn on pay-per-view.

But all I wanted was him.

Still.

Fuck all. He was married, having an affair with a pompous asshole who was practically my arch enemy, alienated just about everyone he met, and I *still* wanted him in a desperate way I hadn't felt since ...

I sat up in bed and ran both hands through my hair. The clock on my bedside table said 2:00 AM. I'd finally scheduled myself a surgery and that meant I'd have to be up in a few short hours. No one wants a tired surgeon, so I willed myself to fall asleep, but now a new thought was churning through my brain.

Never. I'd never felt this much desire. Not even for the lover I'd spent ten years of my life with, the man whose pictures still adorned my refrigerator, bureau, and the

mantle over my faux fireplace.

Brent.

He'd been gone over two years now, but it still felt like a betrayal to admit how little passion there'd been between us. We'd been comfortable. More like friends with benefits than actual life partners. The one thing we'd shared had been mutual ambition. Both of us had been on the Chief of Medicine track at different hospitals, so we'd respected one another's need to work endless hours, attend weekend and evening events, and cancel vacations.

At the time, after a string of men had left me because of my ridiculous work schedule, I'd felt like this made him my perfect mate. No fuss. Mutual support. Like minds. But then he'd gotten cancer and died, and I'd been left with survivor's guilt, wondering why I'd been allowed to succeed while he'd been cremated.

I hated thinking of Brent, and that only made my betrayal feel more acute. How could I hate thinking about someone who'd once been my best friend? What would he think of me now, lying here alone, lusting after a young man I hardly knew instead of reveling in the final achievement of our goal?

An unexpected answer came to mind.

He'd be pleased.

No, he wouldn't, I argued with myself. *You're letting*

yourself off the hook.

But the thought persisted. I'd spent a lifetime being careful. He'd be pleased that I was finally making a mess.

* * *

By 10:00 AM the next morning I was on my fourth cup of coffee and my eyes burned. Surgery had gone well, and I'd been thankful for the reprieve. I'd always loved the focus that surgery demanded. Made everything else come clear, like turning the lens on a microscope to change the image of the specimen below from blurry to pin-point sharp.

By the time the procedure was done, I'd known what I was going to do.

Ian was exiting an exam room with a patient's chart in hand, but I caught him before he could make his way to the front desk. I touched his arm lightly and felt his muscles stiffen under my fingertips.

"I'd like to see you in my office when you have a moment," I said, making sure the tone of my voice was even and calm, but also clearly a directive, not a suggestion or request. He was wearing the same dark blue scrubs that moved on his body like liquid.

"Is something wrong?"

I smiled. "I'm sure everything is fine. What time's

your break?"

Ian glanced at the clock. "Twenty minutes?" he said, sounding unsure. His usual abrasiveness was missing, but I couldn't bring myself to feel good about that fact.

"Fine," I said. "See you then."

I turned and brushed past him, not looking back to see if he was watching me go. Let him watch my ass for once.

By the time I got to my office, navigating my way through endless interruptions, Caroline was already there talking to Albert about *The Way the Earth Moves*. I'd requested her presence, both as Ian's supervisor and as my friend.

"Can you imagine what Fredrico will do when he finds out the baby isn't his?" she was saying. "I don't know why Laura didn't tell him about Sonny when she had the chance." Caroline was munching on one of the chocolate cookies Albert now kept stashed in a jar on his desk.

"I know," Albert agreed. "Not a wise decision. One has to wonder what she was thinking, getting involved with a mobster in the first place."

I cleared my throat to alert them to my presence.

"I'll tell you what she was thinking," I said. "Laura was thinking that if she came clean there would be no drama with which to fill sweeps week. Or wait. Better yet, maybe she wasn't thinking anything because she doesn't exist."

Caroline and Albert both scowled at me, and Albert's look was distinctly hurt, making me feel like I'd just kicked a puppy.

"You're no fun," Caroline said, grabbing a second cookie from the jar. "Don't mind him, Albert. He's just grumpy because he got no sleep."

"How do you know that?" I demanded, wondering if I looked worse than I thought.

"You get these dark circles under your eyes if you sleep for less than six hours. They stand out because you're blond and pale," Caroline said. "Don't worry. They're endearing. They make people want to hug you. Come on, Albert. Group hug."

"Get back!" I protested, but it did no good. Caroline had just wrapped her arms around me, and Albert looked dangerously close to joining her, when the door opened and Ian walked in.

Damn.

It hadn't been twenty minutes yet, and I'd wanted to brief Caroline before the meeting, but now she'd have to wing it. The usual hostility that layered Ian's persona was ramped up to a high degree, and this time there was no doubt that fear was the true emotion pulsing from him.

I extricated myself from Caroline's grasp. "Ian," I said. "Come on in."

His gaze flitted between me and Caroline, and then he glanced at Albert. I gave a silent shake of my head to dissuade Albert from offering Ian a cookie, and the old man sat back down, straightening his gray cardigan. "Shall I hold the phones, sir?"

"Yes, that would be great."

I held my office door wide open. As Caroline entered, her eyebrows raised high onto her forehead, and she gave me a look full of expectation and curiosity, but all I could do was shrug apologetically. She'd find out what this meeting was about soon enough.

Ian, on the other hand, seemed to oscillate between misery and fury.

"Am I getting fired?" he asked, as soon as the door had shut behind him. "Because I haven't done anything wrong."

He ran his fingers through his golden hair, and I wanted to touch him. Not in a sexual way, this time, but in a comforting way.

"No," I said. "Please. Have a seat."

He and Caroline took adjacent chairs across from my desk. Caroline crossed her long legs and Ian leaned forward.

"What's this about?" he asked, looking to Caroline rather than me. Since she was his direct supervisor I knew he was used to dealing with her, but I couldn't help wondering if there was some other reason he didn't want to

look at me.

"I don't know," Caroline answered honestly. "David?"

There was no putting this off. I folded and unfolded my hands. Cleared my throat. "I should have invited Human Resources to this meeting," I said, "but I'd rather keep this discreet for now. Ian, Caroline is not only your supervisor, but she's a close friend of mine, and I trust her completely. She won't share this with anyone else."

I could see the rapid rise and fall of Ian's chest, the worry and confusion on his face.

"The other day after the board meeting -"

His eyes snapped up. *Panic. Wild desperation.* Now he knew exactly what this was about. God, I didn't want to finish speaking. The urge to let him off the hook and forget this whole thing was so strong, I almost backed out. But Caroline was sitting there expectantly, and it occurred to me that this was at least half the reason I'd included her. The first half was propriety, so I wouldn't be talking with an employee about sex alone in my office with nothing on record, but the second was moral support.

"I happened upon your liaison with Judge Muller in the men's room." I sounded like Albert. *Happened upon? Liaison?* But there was no good way of saying this. "I'm not judging you. I'm a gay man myself, so that's certainly not a factor, and if this was consensual, I'm prepared to let you go with

a stern warning. Off the books. But I need to be sure that the encounter was, in fact, consensual."

Caroline's mouth was literally hanging open, but to her credit she shut it swiftly and gathered her composure.

"Judge Muller is a board member," she said, turning to Ian.

"Did he pressure you?"

To say that Ian looked desperate would be the understatement of the year. His breathing was ragged and he bit his lower lip, pulling it hard through his teeth. He scanned my office, focusing in on the wide, panoramic windows behind my desk. For a fleeting moment I imagined Ian leaping off my fourth floor ledge, plummeting down to the earth below, and I was thankful they didn't open.

The silence in the room grew awkward and thick, and I exchanged a glance with Caroline. Her face was pale, and I knew we were both thinking the same thing. If either one of us said a word, it would end whatever internal debate was raging inside Ian's head.

A wave of adrenaline surged through my body, and I realized that despite my gut instincts, I'd come into this meeting expecting a certain outcome. Expecting Ian to admit to a consensual affair. Then I'd have done the right thing as Chief by confirming that fact. I'd issue a stern warning, and we'd all move on with business as usual. But now, the idea that the affair had *not* been consensual was planting

itself as a surety in my brain.

Ian's hand rested on his upper thigh, and I could see it tremble. At last, he breathed out hard and fast.

"Yes," he said. "Consensual."

So he'd made his decision. To lie.

For a second I was stunned into speechlessness. I'd been so sure he was about to come clean. Caroline's expression mirrored my thoughts, her brown eyes huge with surprise.

"How long have you and Judge Muller been involved?" she asked.

Ian stared at the edge of my desk. "A while."

"Does your wife know?" I tried to make the question sound gentle rather than judgmental, but he looked up quick.

"My wife?"

"The blond," I clarified. "I saw you with her and the kids."

Ian's lips parted and he shook his head. "She's not ... Elise is my sister. The kids are my niece and nephew. I live with them."

"Oh," I said. "I shouldn't have assumed."

Would it be terrible to admit that, despite everything, I was relieved?

"Does Judge Muller's wife know?" Caroline asked. There was a sharp edge to her voice, and Ian's cheeks flushed as

he shook his head.

"Ian," I said gently, "I want to ask you one more time. Has Judge Muller ever threatened your job in any way or promised you anything in exchange for sex?"

Again the silence was nearly unbearable. Took all my self control not to reach over and drag the confession out of him. I was so completely sure that the truth was there, just below the surface, buried under a layer of fear.

"Have you talked to Bruce yet?" he asked instead, avoiding my question entirely. First a lie, now avoidance. I shook my head.

Ian's face was openly pleading.

"Is there any chance you could ... not ... talk to him? Please? I promise that what happened was consensual and it won't happen again. I'll talk to Bruce and make him swear. I apologize and -"

He stopped mid-sentence as if the faucet had run dry.

I glanced over at Caroline and her face was white with suppressed rage. I knew her well enough to know this was getting under her skin. Not only did she despise Judge Muller almost as much as I did, but she was tireless when it came to protecting employees against sexual harassment.

"Ian," she said quietly, "if Judge Muller is threatening you, David and I will act as your advocates. We'll make sure your job is protected and -"

"It's not that simple," Ian snapped, his expression ragged.

This was the first time I'd seen him completely lose his cool, and I had a feeling this was also the first truly honest thing he'd said to us, but he seemed instantly determined to take it back.

"I'm in love with him," he said, bluntly. "I have been for years. I know it's wrong to have an affair, but ..."

It was a good performance. If he'd lead with this, I probably would've believed him, but it had taken him too long to decide on his course of action. Caroline and I exchanged glances, and on impulse, I fired off a question.

"What color are his eyes?"

Ian blinked hard. "What?"

"You heard me. You've been in love with him for years, right? So what color are his eyes?"

Ian laughed nervously. I could see him calculating, trying to recall and failing. Wondering if he should hazard a guess and risk being wrong. Finally, he turned away.

"I've told you the encounter was consensual," he said at last. "That's all you need to know. If you're not firing me, I'd like to get back to work. I'm sorry this happened, and I swear it won't happen again."

He made the declaration boldly, but the words were so hollow they made my chest constrict. Lies, avoidance, and

now false bravado. Ian's wall was in place, and it was obvious that no one would be getting through any time soon.

I sighed. "I'll be writing up an incident report for Human Resources." *And getting reamed for not including them in on this meeting.* "They'll probably want to meet with you to provide you with information about sexual harassment in the work place." I held up one hand to stop his protest. "Just in case."

"Ian," Caroline added, "you can talk to David or I any time. About anything."

"Night or day," I added. I took out a business card and wrote my home address and phone number on the back. "If you need help," I said, "don't hesitate to contact me."

Ian took the card. As he stood, his fingers brushed mine and his eyes came up to meet my gaze. For a split second the familiar electricity arced between us, but then the connection was gone, replaced by his look of tired shame.

"Yeah," he said. "Right."

He left without another word.

When he'd gone, Caroline turned to me. "Holy shit, David," she said. "Holy, fucking shit."

I couldn't have said it better myself.

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