



IRREGULAR

Heartbeat



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Chapter 1

DIANA STEPPED UP TO THE glass wall and discreetly tried to get a look at her reflection between the large, red letters spelling *Emergency Department*. Neat hair, boring clothes. Not even close to the rock star look she'd sported last year.

She clutched her extra large mocha for a second longer, then tossed the empty paper cup into the wastebasket and wiped her damp hands on her slacks. A glance at her cell phone confirmed she was twenty minutes early. *Well, better early than late*. This was her last chance at a career in medicine, and if she blew it by making a bad impression...

She swallowed. *I won't*.

The electronic door opened with a hiss. Immediately, the clean smell of disinfectant reminded her of her father's practice and calmed her. The entrance area was an empty space designed in imposing granite like a bank, and her echoing steps reinforced that impression. She tried to look confident and at ease as she addressed the woman behind the glass wall at the admission desk.

"Good morning. I'm Diana Petrell, the new resident. I'm looking for Dr. Emily Barnes, if she's here already."

"Hi, Dr. Petrell. We've been expecting you. Here's your paperwork and your ID card. It gets you through here," she pointed to the door in the glass wall, "and into the locker room, cafeteria, and so on." When Diana needed two tries to swipe the card in the right direction, the woman laughed softly. "I'm Stacy. Welcome to Seattle General Hospital."

Diana laughed with her but couldn't say more than "thank you" as Stacy rapidly gave her directions to the locker room.

“Get changed and then find Tony, the day-shift charge nurse.” Stacy pointed toward a lanky guy in blue scrubs at the far end of the counter, who smiled and waved. “He’ll find Dr. Barnes for you,” she added with a grimace.

What’s that about? New arrivals demanded Stacy’s attention before Diana could find out more about Dr. Barnes.

She headed toward the locker room. As soon as she stepped into the drab beige corridor, a low-level background noise of hurried steps, beeps in various rhythms, and the screech of an uneven set of wheels enveloped her like the hug of a long-lost friend. She hurried past wheelchairs, IV poles, and supply carts to the staff-only area of the ED. When she located the women’s locker room, she managed to swipe her ID correctly on the first try and entered the windowless room.

Several of the dented metal lockers stood empty. The walls were painted puke green, but she supposed it might have been a friendly spring color a few years ago. Or probably decades.

A shelf next to the door held neatly folded blue scrub shirts and pants. Diana grabbed a comfortable size to accommodate her white, long-sleeved T-shirt that she planned to keep on underneath. She picked an unused locker and quickly changed. The soft cotton was perfect; she’d missed this.

She removed well-used white running shoes from her backpack and slipped them on. Still comfortable. They had survived the nine years in storage surprisingly well. She had rediscovered them in the same box that held her medical texts, her lab coats, and the dark red stethoscope Henry, her favorite brother, had given her for graduation.

Diana distributed a pen, a penlight, her smartphone, and a black notepad to the various pockets of her scrub shirt. Finally, she slung her ID badge and the stethoscope around her neck. The ritual reminded her of donning armor before a battle, but she wouldn’t go so far as to compare herself to a valiant knight. The unaccustomed weight pulled on her shoulders, and she would need several days to get used to it again.

She put on her much-rehearsed confident and friendly smile and went to find Tony. Showtime.

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“And here is the staff lounge and Dr. Barnes. Good luck.” Tony finished the short tour of the ED. He opened the door for her and left with a wink.

Was he hitting on her, or was this just his normal way of communication? She shrugged it off and turned her attention to the staff lounge.

The middle of the room was dominated by two dark leather couches flanking a large coffee table. Small circular burn marks indicated that it had been here longer than the no-smoking regulations. Mismatched desks with computer terminals lined two walls. Diana was happy to see a kitchenette with an industrial-sized coffee urn, a microwave, and a fridge. All the essentials to surviving a twelve-hour shift.

Diana’s focus shifted to Dr. Barnes, the attending who would be her supervisor. She had been unable to learn anything substantial about her from her new colleagues. Everyone had either twitched or frowned whenever Emily Barnes’s name had come up.

The slender, pale woman sent out don’t-talk-to-me vibes. She was sitting on one of the couches, typing on a laptop. Her strict posture screamed either ballet dancer or military. Or maybe librarian. The neat bun that imprisoned every strand of her light brown hair reinforced this impression.

Should she wait to be acknowledged? That wasn’t really Diana’s style. A polite greeting had never hurt anyone. “Good morning. Dr. Barnes?”

She looked up, nodded, and studied Diana for a moment with hard gray eyes. “New resident?”

What an unusual eye color and hair combination. “Yes. Hi, I’m Diana Petrell. I was told to meet you here.” Diana moved closer and offered her hand.

Dr. Barnes gave it a short, hard squeeze. She didn’t stand, and even though she looked up at Diana, she managed to make her feel smaller.

Impressive.

“You’re late.”

“I thought I was early.” A quick look at the clock on the wall confirmed her statement. Five to eight.

“You’re not. The morning shift started an hour ago.”

Diana bit the inside of her cheek to stop herself from reacting to the cold tone. Instead, she focused on the content of the statement. “I’m sorry. I was told to be here at eight. I’ll be on time from now on.” She struggled not to ball her hands into fists.

Dr. Barnes took her time moving the laptop to the side. It probably wasn't a coincidence that it aligned precisely with the edge of the table. "I expect punctuality, hard work, and preparation. If you can't commit to our schedule, this residency won't work. It's very unusual to begin your work here halfway through the program and in the middle of the year." She frowned, but the lines were barely visible in her immaculate makeup.

It was difficult to guess her age. Everything between twenty-five and fifty seemed possible. She was probably close to Diana's own thirty-seven.

"I'll evaluate your performance and supervise you until we decide what you can do on your own." Dr. Barnes pointed to the other couch. "Sit. Dr. Wallace emailed me your résumé. What kind of work did you really do?"

Dr. Barnes had a long list of procedures, both diagnostic and therapeutic, to go through. After fifteen minutes, Diana was sweating. This was worse than her job interview last week. Dr. Wallace, the chief of staff, had at least been civil.

Just when Diana thought they were finished, Dr. Barnes presented her a case. "A thirty-year-old male with chest pain. He's pale and a bit short of breath. Vitals are stable. What do you think?"

Was this like a board examination? Diana decided to address the question as if it were. "First, I'd introduce myself to the patient and ask him about the pain and the situation he was in when it started. Then I'd interview him about his history, and then—"

"Skip it. Three differential diagnoses. Now." The tone was sharp enough to make Diana flinch.

Diana bit down any rebellious instincts to answer in the same manner. "Pneumothorax, pneumonia, and intercostal neuralgia. Without further information it's impossible to—"

"Pneumothorax. What do you do?" Dr. Barnes took a sip from her mug.

"If the X-ray confirms it, I'd put in a chest tube." Diana wished she could drink something too. She'd already used up the caffeine from her way to work and her mouth was dry. But she wouldn't give Dr. Barnes the satisfaction of appearing weak by asking for coffee. "Do you want me to explain how it's done?"

Dr. Barnes shook her head. "We'll save that for later. So, did you put in one before?"

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“Many. We regularly treated gunshot and knife wounds in LA.” Diana wanted to slap herself for bringing up the one topic she wanted to avoid: her last residency.

“Is that the reason you quit? Too much violence?” Dr. Barnes leaned forward. Her gray eyes seemed like lasers, ready to cut through any defense Diana could think of.

Diana squared her shoulders and forced herself to hold her gaze. Yes, she had something to hide, but she hadn’t done anything wrong. “During my final year, I had to interrupt my residency for personal reasons. The patients in the ED had nothing to do with it.” She had to take control of the discussion and tell Dr. Barnes something about the nine-year gap in her résumé before she asked too many questions. “I couldn’t work in the medical field after that, but I regularly read medical journals and visited conferences to stay up-to-date with current standards and new medications.” Diana tried to gauge Dr. Barnes’s reaction, but her features hadn’t moved out of the slightly displeased expression they had been in from the beginning. She continued before Dr. Barnes could interrupt her again. “You’ll see that I know how to evaluate patients, treat most of the standard problems, and, most importantly, I know when to ask for help.”

Dr. Barnes studied her for a moment, and Diana forced herself not to fidget. If she could bluff her way through contract negotiations with business sharks, she could appear confident now.

Finally, Dr. Barnes leaned back on the couch, but the deliberate movement didn’t seem relaxed. “Journals? Conferences? Commendable, but they can’t replace real experience. Today we’ll work all cases together and see how you’re doing. Without my approval, you won’t touch anyone or give any orders.” She waited for Diana to nod before she continued. “Just pretend you’re a medical student, and we’ll get along fine.”

Student? Was that some kind of a joke? Diana ground her teeth. Her return to medicine after a long absence was highly unusual, but she was no student. She had treated patients on her own before and knew her limits. She fought the urge to tell Dr. Barnes exactly that. It hurt to be on the bottom of the food chain again, but her ego wasn’t important today. She unclenched her jaws and faked a smile. “No problem. I’ll follow you. Let me know what you want me to do.” She would be the perfect demure

medical student until she earned Dr. Barnes's trust, and she damn well would be all adult about it.

Just when she thought the worst was over, Dr. Barnes fired more questions. "So, what does *personal reasons* mean? Housewife? Kids? Jail? Drugs?"

Diana laughed until she realized that the last bit hadn't been a joke. Did Dr. Barnes really think she could keep her medical license after nine years in jail? Unfortunately, the chief of staff had forbidden her to talk about the real reason she had spent the last few years out of a hospital. She hoped the story she had come up with didn't sound too weak, but the truth wasn't helpful if she wanted to gain respect as a physician. "No, nothing like that. I...um...I had other obligations. I worked with a friend and had no time for a full-time residency. We lived far from the next hospital...on a farm." Diana suppressed a wince. That sounded even less convincing when she said it out loud than in rehearsal.

She shifted on the couch and tried to think of an alternative direction of this discussion. Her gaze fell on the laptop. "I guess you're doing your charts electronically now. I hope that's an improvement to carrying around the high stacks, like we used to. How many patients have you got this morning? What can I do to help?"

From the look Dr. Barnes gave her, she had seen right through the feeble attempt at deflection, but instead of asking more questions, she hit a few keys on her laptop, then turned it around. "Here, take this one: female, twenty-one years, abdominal pain for five hours in the lower right quadrant, no emesis or diarrhea."

Diana grinned. Appendicitis was an easy enough start. Even her grandma would be able to make a diagnosis. Or was Dr. Barnes tricking her?

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Dr. Barnes led the way through another corridor stuffed with medical paraphernalia to a large room where several examination bays were separated by curtains. She pointed to the patient's chart in a metal holder at the entrance of one cubicle. "That's all the paper that's left; the rest is digital. Go inside and examine her. I'll watch, and we'll discuss the case outside before you recommend further diagnostics or treatment. Don't promise anything you can't keep."

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Diana swallowed a comeback. Everyone learned in their first week of internship to avoid promises. Convinced that her face muscles would ache terribly in the evening, she resumed her smile and entered the examination room.

As soon as she saw the patient, Diana's heartbeat quickened. *Finally back at work.* She quickly disinfected her hands, using the bottle next to the door. The alcohol helped to hide her clammy palms.

"Ms. Miller? I'm Dr. Petrell. You're here because of abdominal pain, is that correct?"

The young woman nodded and grimaced at the same time. Fear emanated from her in waves.

Diana sat on a stool to bring herself to eye level with the patient. This time her smile wasn't forced as she tried to project calm. "Can you tell me more about it?"

Ms. Miller recounted her problems, and Diana listened intently, asking her to clarify some points and then questioned her about her prior illnesses, medications, and allergies. The familiar ritual helped her to overcome her nervousness.

"You don't take any medication? Not even occasionally over-the-counter pain meds or the pill?" Most patients forgot about those, and Diana had learned the hard way to never take anything for granted.

Ms. Miller shook her head and blushed. "We're careful," she mumbled.

Diana mentally added pregnancy to her internal checklist. Warming her stethoscope in one hand, she stood. "I need to examine you now. Tell me if anything hurts, okay?"

She hadn't done this in years, but the routine was still intact after thousands of patients. She worked her way down until she reached the abdomen.

When Diana pulled up the gown, the patient tensed and put both hands in front of her lower abdomen.

Diana looked up and met her gaze.

Ms. Miller's dark brown eyes were large and gleamed with unshed tears. Her lips trembled, but she didn't say anything.

Diana didn't like that part either, but not doing it wasn't an option. "I'll be careful, but I have to check for myself. I'm sorry." She smiled encouragingly, and Ms. Miller lowered her hands back to her sides. The

only thing Diana could do to make it more bearable was to finish it as fast as possible.

First, she checked with her stethoscope for bowel movement and then carefully palpated the patient's abdomen, avoiding the lower right quadrant until last. When she put her hand on the soft skin, the young woman moaned. Diana ignored it and pressed with all fingers as deep into the abdomen as the involuntary guarding would allow. Keeping eye contact with Ms. Miller, Diana ran through the other tests as fast as possible, mindful of Dr. Barnes's presence.

She leaned against the counter on the far wall, arms crossed over her chest. Whenever Diana glanced in her direction, her gaze bored into her.

Diana pulled down the patient's gown without touching her abdomen again. "Is the pain manageable while lying like this, or do you need something?"

Ms. Miller took a deep breath. "As long as you don't prod here again, I'm fine. What's it? What will happen now?"

Diana looked at her with what she hoped was her most reassuring expression. "I'll just discuss this with my colleague, and one of us will be back soon to let you know. Just rest for a minute."

Ms. Miller nodded and closed her eyes.

Dr. Barnes stepped past her and held the curtain open. When Diana followed, she led her to a large counter with a computer terminal. A couple of nurses interrupted their conversation midsentence and scattered in different directions.

Diana looked at Dr. Barnes to find out if her new boss was the cause of their sudden exit.

Her face showed no reaction. "So?"

Diana smiled. "I think it's appendicitis."

Dr. Barnes merely raised her eyebrows.

Couldn't that woman just say what she wanted from her? Diana hated guessing games. "Do you want a more elaborate answer?" When she nodded, Diana continued without hesitation. "The presentation is classical for an appendicitis, as is the age. But she's a young woman with a boyfriend and without regular contraception, so we have to rule out an ectopic pregnancy. A urinary tract infection could cause the symptoms, but the result of the clinical examination isn't really typical for that. She could just have some

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indigestion or the first manifestation of a chronic inflammatory disease like Crohn's, but I think that's the least likely diagnosis."

Dr. Barnes's expression was still neutral. "What would be your next step?"

Any med student and probably most fans of *Grey's Anatomy* could answer that question, but Diana had promised herself to play by the rules, even the unwritten ones, this time. If Dr. Barnes wanted to quiz her, she'd smile and answer. "I would take blood tests, at least for leukocytes, C-reactive protein, and hCG, and a urine stick. Ultrasound. I'd give her some pain medication while we're waiting for the results and have her fast. And depending on the outcome, I'd inform either surgery or OB."

Dr. Barnes nodded. "We'll do that. Have you performed an ultrasound examination before?"

Diana shook her head. "The radiology department did them."

"Now it's your responsibility." Dr. Barnes twisted her lips in a mixture of a snarl and a grin. "It's a useful skill, but you can't learn it from journals." She started to walk but kept on talking.

Diana clenched her jaw and hurried after her.

"Learn the basics and practice a lot. You can often get a much faster diagnosis than waiting for the lab results." She went on about the different uses of ultrasound in the ED as she grabbed a portable ultrasound machine from an unused treatment room. On their way back to the patient, she stopped a nurse and ordered some morphine for Ms. Miller.

Diana made a mental note of the dosage.

Dr. Barnes set up the ultrasound next to Ms. Miller and pointed out the basic features to Diana. Then she turned to the patient, who watched the machine warily.

"Ms. Miller, I'm Dr. Barnes." Her voice was marginally warmer than before. "I'm going to do an ultrasound examination to see what we've got here. We think it's appendicitis, but we need to check a few things before we can call surgery. You'll get something for the pain."

Ms. Miller flinched at the mention of surgery but lay back as the nurse administered the medication.

Dr. Barnes quickly examined the patient. Appendicitis, as Diana had suspected. She helped Diana to reproduce the same result. She leaned in

close to place her hand over Diana's, gently angling the probe in the right direction. Her touch was warm and soft, unlike her demeanor so far.

When Diana managed to find the enlarged appendix with its dilated walls, she grinned with pride. Only an hour into her first day, she had already learned something new and useful. And her aloof boss was actually a good teacher.

Dr. Barnes's explanation of the surgery to Ms. Miller pulled Diana out of her thoughts.

"Don't worry, Ms. Miller." Dr. Barnes smiled and patted the young woman's hand. She seemed genuine, just a little stiff. "It's a routine procedure, and our surgical team works hard to keep pain and scaring to a minimum. You'll be back on your feet soon."

Over the course of the next few hours, they repeated the examination, medical quiz, and teaching routine again and again with different patients. Most cases were as easy as the first one, but Dr. Barnes never seemed satisfied with her performance. Every time Diana thought she had made a favorable impression, Dr. Barnes fired more questions at her. When Diana didn't come up with an answer or an alternative diagnosis fast enough, she had to endure another snide remark. She started to really hate Dr. Barnes's cold gray eyes. Not that they were unattractive or anything, quite the opposite, but they remained the most expressive feature in her artificially smooth poker face.

Finally, the night shift arrived, and Diana was free to go.

"Dr. Petrell."

Dr. Barnes's voice stopped her from opening the locker room door. Diana's hand clenched around the doorknob.

"Don't forget. Seven a.m., sharp."

Did she think Diana was a child who couldn't keep track of her appointments herself? She turned around to tell her that she didn't need the reminder, but the corridor was empty. *Arrogant bitch.*

Diana entered the locker room and closed the door with more force than necessary. At least they wouldn't change at the same time. She needed a minute alone to decompress. Reining in her temper all day had left her shoulders tense, and a headache spread its tendrils from the knots in her neck to her forehead. She sighed as she changed out of her rumbled scrubs.

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If only she had brought a comfortable pair of jeans instead of her formal first-day-at-work outfit, which hadn't impressed anyone.

Diana closed her eyes for a moment and leaned her forehead against the locker. The cool metal brought only minimal relief. Her fingers twitched, aching to beat a rhythm on the metal, to convert her tension into music. Instead, she forced herself to turn around and leave.

She had survived her first day. Why should her second chance be easier than her first?

Chapter 2

EMILY WOKE WITH A RACING heart. Had there been a noise? Listening for a minute, she couldn't detect anything. Her bedroom and the rest of the apartment were completely silent; not even the neighbor's dog barked. The predawn twilight cast long shadows without movements. She was alone.

Her heartbeat slowed, but why was she still breathing so fast? Several diagnoses ran through her mind. Pulmonary embolism, panic attack, acute coronary syndrome. *Yeah, right.* She rolled her eyes. More likely, it had been a nightmare. As she untangled herself from the sweaty sheet, she became aware of the throbbing between her legs. *Or maybe you missed the obvious, Dr. Barnes: arousal.*

She groaned. *Not that dream again.* What had triggered it this time? She shrugged; it wasn't important.

Yawning, she rolled over to get some more sleep.

The sounds of passing cars turned into the sea lapping against the shore; the solid mattress transformed into shifting sand, and the soft cotton sheets caressed her skin as the ocean breeze had that night. She took a deep breath. Salt, sweat, and her own arousal still smelled the same. Only smoke was missing.

Don't go there. She moved to her other side, willing her brain to go back to sleep, preferably a dreamless one. It didn't comply. It never did.

When she closed her eyes again, stars twinkled above her, brighter in her memory than they could have been that night. Sparks and smoke from the big fire on the beach flickered through her peripheral vision. The crackling and hissing of the logs, the laughter of the other students, the lingering taste of the rich Merlot on her tongue. Everything rolled over

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her like breaking waves until the tide threatened to pull her under, and she struggled to escape the overwhelming memory.

Her pulse beat in her neck and temples as if the drums were within her. Some students had been playing for hours around the fire, keeping a hypnotic rhythm, slowly accelerating and decelerating seemingly without direction. Players had been coming and going, drifting in and out without breaking the sound tapestry. A new player wove in and added another layer of rhythm. Emily immediately sensed the difference. It was no longer a soothing background. Suddenly, it demanded her full attention.

At first, she couldn't discern the dark shapes sitting on the big logs until her eyes adjusted to the flickering light. And then she saw her.

She sat with her back toward Emily. The big drum between her legs was barely visible from behind. Broad shoulders and muscular arms drew Emily's gaze. Around one well-defined biceps coiled a sinuous shape, glittering emerald green in the glow of the fire. It snaked over her right shoulder to her back, then widened to a scaled body before getting lost in her black tank top and the darkness enveloping her. The rhythmic movement of her shoulders, arms, and hands was mesmerizing. Muscles and tendons shifted under her skin, taunting Emily to name them, but she had momentarily forgotten everything she had learned in anatomy class.

Emily lost all sense of time as she concentrated only on those hands. Her blood pounded in the same cadence as the drum. The vibrations emanating from it touched her skin. The hands played on Emily now. Her skin burned, and her breasts became heavy beneath the stranger's touch. Or was it her own? Fingers glided over a stomach taut as a drum and buried in the wetness between her legs. The rhythm quickened. The other drummers tried to keep up with her, but failed. The stranger's hands flew faster than anyone else's. Emily's hands flew as well. Hours, days, or only minutes later, her playing climaxed and Emily with it.

Emily woke again with a racing heart, her limbs weak with lassitude. The relief brought by the orgasm mixed with shame and regret. Why would her stupid libido replay that scene on the beach over and over again?

After nearly fifteen years, she had thought she was finally over her eye-opening experience. Periodically, the dream reminded her of the moment she had admitted to herself that she was a lesbian or at least attracted to a sexy pair of arms and a tattoo. Not that this revelation had translated

into her everyday life. Work was her main focus; reading came second. She had a friend to spend an evening out occasionally. A lover wasn't part of the plan anymore after her two short relationships during college. The short time with her boyfriend had taught her that she wasn't into men, and her girlfriend had shown her that she didn't need the distraction of a relationship.

The alarm clock startled her out of her musings and compelled her to head toward the bathroom. Without waiting for the water to heat, she stepped beneath the cold spray of the shower, as if it could banish the dream and the lingering feelings of dissatisfaction and loneliness.

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After changing, Emily immediately headed to the staff lounge. She needed a coffee. Extra large. She didn't like the bitter taste, but her usual Darjeeling tea wouldn't be enough today. Her trip down memory lane had left her exhausted.

Dr. Petrell was already sitting on the couch, one leg tucked underneath her, studying the screen of her laptop.

Since their first meeting on Monday, Dr. Petrell had beaten her to work every day this week, a feat Emily grudgingly admired. She'd been afraid a resident starting in the middle of the year would be rusty and would slow down the well-oiled machine of her ED. Despite receiving special treatment by the chief of staff, Dr. Petrell hadn't even shown a hint of entitlement. Instead, she had worked hard to get up to speed.

When Emily sat on the couch on the opposite side of the table, Dr. Petrell looked up and smiled. "Good morning, Dr. Barnes."

"You weren't late on the first day." Emily flinched, and the still-too-hot coffee nearly spilled over. She placed her mug on the table, wishing she could lay her head next to it. Why had she admitted this now? She must have been even more in need of coffee than she had thought. Telling newbies they were late was her first-day ritual. Maybe it was her way of passing on her own frustration at being the one who got all the extra assignments, such as playing babysitter for new residents. Whatever it was, it usually felt good. But not this time.

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Dr. Petrell didn't question her or demand an apology. She only said, "Okay," with the same friendly tone she used on everyone. Her gaze seemed to want an explanation, though.

Emily blew on her coffee and took a small sip to buy some time. When the taste registered, she almost spat it out. "Ew! Who brewed this?" She went to the fridge for some milk or creamer to make it tolerable.

"It's left over from the night shift." Dr. Petrell laughed and held up her travel mug. "I brought my own, or I'd have warned you. Don't you usually drink tea?"

"Mm-hmm. Sometimes I need more caffeine." Emily sniffed the milk. *Drinkable*. She doctored her coffee and returned to the couch. Time to direct the conversation to work. "What have we got?" She gestured toward the laptop.

"Nothing." Dr. Petrell handed it over. "I'm sure the waiting room will fill up soon enough, but the night shift managed to clear the board."

Emily checked the computer program herself. Every patient in the ED was ready to either go home or to another department. Shit. No work to distract her. Now she had to have "the talk" with Dr. Petrell.

She was a competent resident, never complained, and was always professional with the patients. The first few days Emily had watched her closely and could detect only minor mistakes, nothing life-threatening so far. She had to admit that Dr. Petrell was as good as the other residents she had trained herself. Maybe even better because she brought a maturity to the work that could only be gained through time. The ten or more years she had on the other residents put her closer to Emily's own thirty-six and made working together easier. Why was it so difficult to tell her that?

"The next cases are yours alone. Call me to sign off on them or if you need help. I'll be in my office." There. She had said it all. Well, most of it. Between the lines. Somewhere.

She handed back the laptop, took her mug, and stood. Ignoring Dr. Petrell's open mouth, she fled the room.

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Emily clicked *refresh* on her screen for the thousandth time today. She grinned. *Cyberstalking, only completely harmless*. Still nothing new. How long could it possibly take to write a few notes? She reached for her mug to

keep herself from checking the digital file again. Empty. Should she go and get another coffee? It would give her a reason to pass the nurses' station to check on Dr. Petrell's progress. But she was one cup short of a heart attack already.

She looked around her tiny office to find another distraction. Her journals were stacked and sorted by publication date; her textbooks were freshly dusted, and the box of pens had been neatly divided into blacks and blues. Her digital to-do list was empty.

Waiting for Dr. Petrell to finish with her patients had been surprisingly productive for Emily. She had answered all her emails, written two case reports, finished an article, and peer-reviewed another. A warm feeling of accomplishment made her smile. Dr. Wallace would be proud of her when she published another article.

Today had been one of the rare days without a real emergency or an overflowing waiting room. Dr. Petrell hadn't needed her help, but she had dutifully reported on every patient before sending them home. Now it was close to the end of day shift, and Emily was bored out of her mind.

Water. She jumped up and squeezed past the desk. She could get a bottle of water from the vending machine in the waiting room. That would get her past the nurses' station.

Just as she reached for the door handle, someone knocked.

She opened the door and came face-to-face with Dr. Petrell. Were those eyes brown or green? That wasn't something she should care about when she looked at a resident. Heat rose to her cheeks. Her stupid fair complexion always gave her away, no matter how much makeup she used. She took a step back and returned to her desk.

"Come in. Sit." Emily gestured to the visitor's chair, concentrated on opening the digital files, and hoped her blush would fade fast.

"I've just finished with the last patient." Dr. Petrell recited the symptoms, the diagnosis, and the proposed treatment.

Signing the discharge order without looking at the patient was a temptation. A simple cold did not warrant the attention of two physicians. But frustration with her extra duties was no reason to do them only halfway, and it was finally something to do. She sighed and rose. "Let's have a look."

"Dr. Barnes! Diana!" Courtney stormed into her office without knocking. "We have multiple victims from a pileup coming in." The second-

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year resident's voice rose higher with every word in either trepidation or anticipation. Probably both. She turned on her heel and ran back toward the treatment area.

"Don't run!" Emily shook her head. She had told her repeatedly that running around the ED was unprofessional. When would Courtney finally learn some restraint?

Dr. Petrell chuckled but sobered when they followed Courtney. She didn't comment on the news that her evening plans would be derailed.

Emily made quick work of her checkup on the cold victim and joined her waiting colleagues, residents, and nurses.

On the opposite side of the room, Dr. Petrell stood without joining in on in the chatter and speculation of the team.

Emily took the opportunity to study her. Several strands of her dark brown hair had escaped her short ponytail, which, combined with her healthy complexion, gave her a much younger appearance. The wrinkled blue scrubs hung loosely over her long-sleeved shirt and revealed no hint of her figure. Dr. Petrell's lips lifted in a half-smile, and her right hand drummed on her thigh in a complex rhythm, faster than Emily could follow. It was hypnotic, and Emily stared longer at Dr. Petrell's thigh and her long, muscular fingers than politeness allowed. They reminded her of something or someone. The link hovered at the edge of her consciousness.

Dr. Petrell looked up and seemed to notice Emily's gaze on her. Her fingers stilled. "I hate waiting."

Her throat was suddenly dry, and Emily had to swallow a few times before she could answer. "Who doesn't?" She looked around to avoid staring as Dr. Petrell retied her messy ponytail.

The automatic doors opened, and the first paramedics entered with their patient on a stretcher.

Emily sighed with relief. She could return her focus from Dr. Petrell's hands—and the connection she couldn't grasp—to her job. Quickly, she organized the group into teams and assigned each to a patient. She had to suppress an inappropriate smile. Finally, some real work.

Chapter 3

DIANA SHOVED HER HANDS INTO her scrub pockets to avoid fidgeting and giving away her tension while she waited for the ambulance. The adrenaline triggered by the words *pileup* and *multiple victims* had flooded her with energy, and now she fought the urge to move to burn it off. She remembered and relished that feeling of harnessed power from when she was younger, but now something had changed, as if a new note had crept into a familiar song, slightly off-key.

What if she got a patient she couldn't handle?

Shut up. You've done this before. It was true; she had successfully treated polytrauma patients, but that had been years ago. Her recent experience consisted of doing simulations and reading guidelines. She had never suffered from stage fright, but she guessed the dread churning in her stomach was exactly that. How ironic that she developed it now.

When the first patient arrived, Diana followed her assigned team into the trauma room. She knew only Tony by name and Dr. Clarkson, who took the lead. Diana hadn't worked with the attending yet, but she seemed nice enough and, more important now, exuded confidence.

As soon as the paramedics had wheeled the stretcher into the room, everyone jumped into position and started working on the patient simultaneously. One of them recited the patient's vitals and presumably some details on what had happened, but Diana only caught half of it as she fumbled with her face guard. She snapped on her gloves and rushed to the patient to help with transferring him to the hospital's stretcher. As soon as he was settled there, the other staff cut away clothes, attached monitoring, and inserted needles.

Irregular Heartbeat

Dr. Clarkson systematically performed a quick body check. Everyone seemed to have found their part in the complex choreography without orders, and Diana looked for an opening for her to contribute something.

“Dr. Petrell, get up here and start a central line.” Dr. Clarkson moved to the head of the patient and checked his pupils again before turning to one of the nurses. “Let’s intubate him.”

Happy that she had something to do, Diana exchanged her barely used gloves for the sterile ones a nurse offered and slipped into a paper coat. Awareness of her colleagues’ movements receded as her focus narrowed to the small part of skin below the right clavicle. Disinfection, drape, needle, wire, central line, syringe with saline, suture. Everything she needed appeared like magic next to her hands before she could even think of the next step. She had never done this so fast. Proud of her accomplishment, Diana looked up to see what she could do next and met dark eyes glaring at her.

“Finished? I need to get started here.” The X-ray tech elbowed Diana out of the way to place a digital detector under the patient, then turned, and shooed her away with a hand motion.

Diana moved back with the rest of the team. Some left the room, but most flattened themselves against the wall, like Diana.

Dr. Clarkson was the first at the monitor. “Pneumothorax.”

Shit. Had she pierced his lung during the placement of the central line? Diana glanced at the monitor.

No, the pneumothorax was on the left side and most likely caused by the impact of the car, along with the broken ribs. She exhaled and turned to Dr. Clarkson. “I can place the chest tube.”

“Maybe next time. See if you can stop the bleeding up there.” Dr. Clarkson had already moved to the patient’s left side. “Tony, call radiology for a CT and get him a bed in the SICU. We need to move him along soon.”

Suturing a superficial head laceration might be part of the team effort, but it seemed tame in comparison to the real work Dr. Clarkson did in stabilizing the patient.

“Status?” Dr. Barnes entered the room with an older man whose green scrubs and cocky posture identified him as a surgeon.

Without looking up from her work, Dr. Clarkson listed the patient's vitals, his injuries, and their treatment so far. When had she done an ultrasound? Set his wrist? How had Diana missed this?

"Nothing immediate for you, Richard." Dr. Barnes stepped up next to Diana and leaned over her shoulder to check the patient's pupils. Her body pressed into Diana's back, its softness and warmth in drastic contrast to the coldness of her voice. Diana didn't dare to move. "Liz, send him via a CT to the SICU. He can wait there for a spot in the OR if the neurosurgeons don't claim him."

Dr. Barnes left as fast as she had come. When the door closed behind her, Dr. Clarkson exchanged a gaze with Tony, who rolled his eyes.

"Aye, aye, Captain Barnes." Dr. Clarkson chuckled and shook her head.

Biting her lip to keep from laughing, Diana finished the suture. So she wasn't the only one Dr. Barnes checked on constantly. Not even an attending like Dr. Clarkson was safe.

She cleaned the suture site with a wet gauze and put a dressing on it. Good, the bleeding had stopped for now. She checked the patient for something else to do. Nothing else stuck out to her. "Want me to do the paperwork?"

Dr. Clarkson nodded. "Most things should already be logged. But check it and clean up the text, please. I'll see if I can reach his family."

By the time Diana had finished, the transport team had come and whisked away the patient. Dr. Clarkson looked over her shoulder and read the report, pointing out a few things she had missed, then signed off on it. She stood as close as Dr. Barnes had done, but Diana didn't mind this time. Why did Dr. Barnes make her nervous?

As a cleaner swept around their feet, Dr. Clarkson pulled Diana to the side. "Let's have a look at the other rooms. Maybe we can help somewhere."

Finally, after a couple of hours, the digital whiteboard had cleared, and Diana looked for Dr. Barnes to see if she could go or if there was still work somewhere. She found her at the nurses' station, talking to Dr. Clarkson.

Dr. Barnes frowned. "What are you still doing here?"

Why the hell did Dr. Barnes sound so annoyed with her? "Um, I just finished in room three. Do you need my help somewhere else?"

"You know that you have to clear overtime with me. We take work restrictions seriously in this hospital."

Irregular Heartbeat

Diana hadn't known that, but she was too tired to argue. "I will do that the next time."

Dr. Barnes had been about to say something else when Dr. Clarkson interrupted her. "We just made our round through the trauma rooms. The night shift has everything under control now. You're good to go." She smiled. "And thank you for staying longer. Good work, Dr. Petrell. Have a nice weekend."

Dr. Barnes still frowned but didn't contradict her colleague.

Diana nodded to both of them. "Thanks. See you on Monday."

Her mind reeling, she went to the locker room. It hadn't really been good work. She had been much too slow with their first patient, no matter how it had seemed to her at the time. And she had been so overwhelmed she hadn't seen the big picture. If she had been alone, the treatment could have ended as a catastrophe.

She peeled off her scrubs and wrinkled her nose at the smell of sweat, probably a mixture of her own and that of several patients. Rusty stains and smears covered them, but at least the hospital did the washing for her. She pulled on her jeans but then hesitated. The stains and smell extended to the long-sleeved shirt she wore underneath. No way would she wear that home and risk soiling her favorite leather jacket. She looked around to check that she was still alone before grabbing a fresh scrub shirt to change into.

Just as she had taken her shirt off, the door opened.

Diana jumped back with an undignified shriek and scrambled into the scrub shirt. Maybe they hadn't seen the tattoo. Closing the locker, she sneaked a look at the doorway.

Dr. Clarkson regarded her with raised eyebrows. "Everything okay?"

"Um, yeah. Just my shirt got dirtier than I expected, and I thought it was okay to borrow a scrub shirt. Is it okay?" Great. Now she had turned into a babbling fool.

"Sure. Everyone does that." She opened her locker and quickly undressed.

Diana concentrated on folding her shirt in a way that made sure the stains didn't touch anything else. "I'm sorry I wasn't much help with the first patient, Dr. Clarkson."

The attending had finished dressing and turned around, smiling. "Call me Liz. Everyone does. You're Diana, right?"

Diana nodded. She shoved her shirt into her backpack, wishing she could ball up and stow her problems away as easily.

“Don’t worry. We’ve all been there. It’s just your first week.” Liz dumped her scrubs into the hamper.

“I thought I could do better.” And she had done better, years ago.

“Then you will, the next time. Don’t overthink it. If you feel like it, we can talk on Monday and see how we can improve your training. Let’s get out of here.” Liz held the door open for her.

“Thank you.” She didn’t just mean the door, and judging by the look Liz gave her, she understood.

* * *

Diana’s cell phone blared and vibrated next to her ear. Who called in the middle of the night? Her pulse beat faster than the ringtone. Had she forgotten to do something important at the hospital? She grabbed the phone and answered without looking at the caller ID. “Petrell. Hello?”

“Hey, Dee. Did I wake you, old woman?” Mel was difficult to understand over the background of music and voices.

Diana let out a shaky breath. Not the hospital. Only her best friend and colleague. Former colleague, she reminded herself. “Um, yeah. How late is it? And you’re older, you know?”

“Midnight. And don’t you know that it’s impolite to mention a lady’s age?” Mel laughed. “I was wondering if you wanted to meet for a beer?”

A few weeks ago it would have been a normal time for her to go out, but now she only wanted to go back to sleep. “Rain check? Work was no fun today.”

“That’s what I wanted to celebrate with you, your first week as a doctor.” The background noise faded as if Mel had stepped outside. “Want to tell me about it?”

“Maybe later.” She yawned. “Much later. Why don’t you call me tomorrow morning? Or afternoon. If you really want to listen to me bitch about being on the bottom rung of the hierarchy again or my constant struggle to act like an adult or not fitting in with the other kids.”

“Sure. At least it’s something new and not about your ex making stupid life choices again.” Mel sighed. “I wanted to ask you a favor, but it can wait.

Irregular Heartbeat

Tomorrow evening we go out and party.” The last sentence was a statement, not a question.

Diana groaned. “Don’t you remember the last time we celebrated my first week as a doctor? We partied for two days, and I ended up going to work with a hangover. I can’t survive something like that again. I’m definitely not in my twenties anymore.”

“Me neither. We’ll just stay clear of hard liquor and tattoo artists this time, and we’ll be fine.”

Diana rubbed the small rod of Asclepius above her left ankle. “I’ll remind you of that tomorrow.”

“No need.” Someone called Mel’s name, and the intensity of the background noise increased again. “I’ll let you get back to sleep now.”

“Thanks. Enjoy your night.”

This time, Diana put the phone on the charger in the kitchen where it belonged before she returned to bed.

* * *

Taking a breath of the clear air, Diana stretched next to the entrance of Green Lake Park. Her muscles and tendons protested after a week of neglect. She had promised herself that she would keep in shape and take better care of her health during her second residency. At least she didn’t have to nurse a hangover after her evening out with Mel. They had kept the celebration low-key, eating pho in a small Vietnamese restaurant with a couple of beers instead of doing shots in a bar with women much too young for them. She’d had enough of that in LA, and she supposed Mel had secretly enjoyed the change of scenery as well.

Diana tightened her shoelaces, then set off at a moderate pace. Most of the trees around her were still caught in winter’s sleep, but here and there a few light green buds had broken free already. She was looking forward to the blooming cherry trees at the other side of the lake.

Diana swerved around a little girl and immediately collided with another woman going the opposite direction. Both grabbed each other and swayed until they found their balance.

“I’m sorry.”

“Sorry, I didn’t see—” Diana looked up. *Dr. Barnes? What are the chances?*

“Good morning, Dr. Petrell.” Dr. Barnes shifted from foot to foot and didn’t look directly at Diana. She wore running clothes that looked brand-new. And who put on makeup to go running?

“Good morning. I’m sorry, I was just so eager for my run. I’m looking forward to getting some sun.” Maybe this could be a good opportunity to get to know each other and ease the stiff atmosphere at work a little bit. Diana bounced on her toes and smiled. “Are you planning on using the trail around the lake too?”

“No. I’ve got, um, sensitive skin. I could never run in the sun. I usually go to the gym over there.” Dr. Barnes pointed at the other side of the street, then tucked her hair behind her ear.

Diana barely managed not to frown. Indoor running wasn’t what she’d consider her favorite workout. She wouldn’t exchange a beautiful lake and fresh air for a room full of sweaty people. It was a flimsy excuse; that’s why they had invented sunscreen.

Or had Dr. Barnes told her that to prevent an invitation to run together? Welcome back to the world of hierarchy: Attendings didn’t socialize with residents. But maybe the reminder was necessary; she’d been about to ask Dr. Barnes to join her.

Offering an empty smile, Diana nodded. “Okay. I’d better get going. See you tomorrow.”

“Wait, please.” Dr. Barnes swiped at her hair again even though it hadn’t moved an inch. “If you have a few minutes, I’d like to talk to you about Friday.”

Diana shrugged. This was certainly not the perfect setting for a critique of her work. But she should count herself lucky that it wasn’t within earshot of the other residents.

“I watched you handle some of the minor injuries. You were thorough and unhurried—”

“You mean slow. I know.” Diana didn’t want to listen to the polite paraphrases. She preferred her critique direct.

“It’s true. You could have been faster, but what mattered to me more was that you didn’t miss anything. That would be unacceptable.” Dr. Barnes’s voice had turned cold with her last sentence. “Getting overconfident is a typical mistake of residents.”

Irregular Heartbeat

Diana nodded. There wasn't really anything she could say. What was Dr. Barnes trying to tell her? Was it a warning that she was being watched, still on probation? Dr. Barnes could watch her as much as she liked; *overconfidence* wasn't her problem at the moment.

"You're more mature than the others. I guess the age difference shows."

That sounded almost like a compliment, but Dr. Barnes didn't do those. At least that's what the other residents said.

"Thank you."

"Maybe you lost medical experience, but your approach to work didn't suffer from your break." Dr. Barnes tilted her head and looked at her directly for the first time since the conversation had started. "What did you do in those nine years? Didn't you say you helped a friend and lived on a farm?"

Shit. Diana clenched her teeth and swallowed the rising anger. The almost-compliment had only been a prelude to the real question. "It's complicated. And has nothing to do with my work performance." She avoided Dr. Barnes's eyes. Why hadn't she thought of a better cover story? She had to end the conversation before she either lied or went against a direct order from her boss's boss. "Dr. Clarkson offered to help me on Monday to improve my speed. Is that okay with you?"

Dr. Barnes frowned. "Sure. If Liz wants to help you..."

"Great. See you on Monday, then." Diana hoped her tone didn't betray her apprehension.

Dr. Barnes just looked at her for a moment. Her features were carefully neutral, probably the same expression she wore at work when patients told her the weirdest stories. Then they softened slightly. "Enjoy your day off." She waved her hand and left without a backward glance.

Diana inhaled deeply, but the spring air that she had enjoyed earlier didn't help clear her head. She gazed upward. The sun was shining; small fluffy clouds dotted the brilliant blue, and the temperature was comfortable. A perfect spring day. She wouldn't let this encounter spoil her Sunday morning. She started her run, faster and faster.

When she reached the lake and merged on the round trail, she slowed down and concentrated on her heart rate. *This isn't a race. You've nothing to prove.* She chuckled, and an elderly couple sitting on a bench stared at her. Now that her embarrassment and, if she was honest, her anger with herself had faded, she could appreciate the irony of the situation.

In the past years, she had been the one others tried to impress. Too many people had fawned over her. That had been one of the many reasons she had left her old life and returned to medicine. She wanted to be treated like a normal person again. And now that she was, she didn't like it. Dr. Barnes had every right to question her.

Diana's defensive reaction wasn't how she thought she should behave now that she was supposedly all mature and grown-up. She promised herself to keep the next conversations with Dr. Barnes on a more professional level.

* * *

On her way back from the gym, Emily passed through the park. She lingered, hoping to meet Dr. Petrell again. *And what would you say to her? Your first talk didn't go very well either.* She didn't actually know where she had gone wrong. As Liz had done on Friday, she'd wanted to let her know that she had done a good job, but Dr. Petrell had reacted as if she had criticized her.

And just as she'd thought she gained some ground, she had lost it all with the question about the nine-year gap in her résumé. She had said before that it was a private matter, and Emily probably should have respected that. But what if she'd done something that could potentially damage the hospital's good reputation?

An icy shiver ran down Emily's spine. She wouldn't allow that.

Why was Dr. Petrell so closed off about her past? And why did Emily even care? Usually, she kept her distance from her co-workers, especially from the residents. They were only temporarily passing through her life. What made Dr. Petrell different?

Emily sighed. Why was it so difficult for her to understand people? Including herself. Sometimes she cursed her parents for raising her isolated from other kids, but it wasn't fair to lay the blame solely on them. She'd deliberately passed on enough chances at school and university to get out more, preferring the company of her books to that of her peers. If Jen hadn't been after her to be friends instead of roommates, she wouldn't even have a best friend.

A final look around the park didn't show her Dr. Petrell among the dense crowd of runners, bikers, skaters, and people out for a casual stroll. The same sunshine that had drawn them all out chased Emily back inside.

Irregular Heartbeat

If she didn't want to end up with undignified freckles and red blotches, she had to leave now.

She'd talk to Dr. Petrell on Monday. No, not talk, she'd just tell her that she appreciated her work. Direct and easy, no chance of another miscommunication.

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IRREGULAR HEARTBEAT

BY CHRIS ZETT

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