



Heart

FAILURE

C H R I S Z E T T



Chapter One

“RILEY! WHAT THE HELL ARE YOU DOING?”

Dr. Jess Riley wrenched her foot off the fluoro pedal to stop the X-ray and inspected the intruder.

Like a pit bull in green scrubs, Dr. Watts charged into the cath lab. He stopped only inches from her patient.

Her team, decked out in full sterile garb, froze.

Jess gave him an isn't-it-obvious look and pointed at the patient and the big, illuminated *X-ray in use* sign that should have stopped him. “Whatever it is, now is not the right time.”

“You stole my patient! Are you so desperate for lab time you troll the surgical floor and poach my patients? You bitch!” Spittle flew from his mouth, as he hadn't even bothered to don the obligatory face mask.

Jess squared her shoulders and rose to her full five-ten. Not an easy feat, as the protective lead apron that covered her body seemed to weigh a ton after the two-hour intervention. Sweat slid down her shoulder blades and soaked her scrubs. She ignored her fatigue and discomfort and fixed her iciest glare on Watts. “I have no idea where your accusation is coming from. But I won't discuss this here in front of a patient during an intervention.” She didn't remind him that as a senior attending in the cardiology department, she didn't owe him or any other cardiac surgeon an explanation.

He held her gaze, not backing down an inch. After what felt like an eternity, he growled. “Nothing to discuss. Your boss will hear from me. He'll regret the day he decided to cave in to HR and hire a woman to do a man's job.” He stabbed the door button repeatedly as if the electronic door

would bend to his will and open any faster. As soon as the opening was wide enough, he stomped out.

Was he trapped in the dark ages? Jess clenched her jaw shut beneath the mask. The threat he would talk to the head of the cardiology department didn't faze her in the least. She trusted her boss to have her back, and she intended to have a word with him about Watts's unacceptable behavior.

But the insinuation stung. Did more colleagues think she'd been hired because of her gender? She'd thought she left this shit behind years ago.

She shook her head to clear it from the emotional fog before tears started to rise. Recently, her protective barriers had been thin like early spring ice, ready to crack at any second. But she wouldn't allow her hormones to reign and encourage the idiots who still thought women didn't belong in medicine. Especially now.

"Are you upset? Do you want me to continue?" Scott's voice oozed with friendliness.

Of course, the boy-scout image was a façade, and he was as eager as the next cardiology fellow to pounce on her territory as soon as she showed any signs of weakness. Sharks. All of them.

Getting worked up over her young colleague helped her to pull herself together. "No." He wasn't so advanced in his training that she trusted him with her high-risk patient.

"Hey, I was just asking." Scott pouted. Not a cute look on him.

There wasn't a reason to be this short with him, but she wasn't in the mood to coddle another male ego.

Jess leaned over the sterile drape to check on her patient. He was still snoring softly from the sedative he'd received earlier. At least something was going according to plan.

She met Kayla's gaze over the face mask. The dark-brown eyes of the nurse showed support and not judgment. "Let's finish him up and get a cup of coffee."

The idea of coffee sounded heavenly. Jess pushed the residual traces of anger, frustration, and annoyance to the back of her mind and continued with the angioplasty. The most difficult part had been over before the interruption, and the rest she could do in her sleep.

Fifteen minutes later, Scott wheeled the patient to the recovery room.

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Jess peeled off the sterile paper gown and gloves. The draft from the air conditioning sent a trail of goose bumps over her arms. She opened the lead apron to let even more air in and stretched. She couldn't wait to get off her feet for a short break.

Kayla sorted the instruments from the table, discarding the sharps in the safety container. "Will I see you this Saturday at the free clinic?"

"No, I swapped the shift. My mom's birthday is this weekend." And she couldn't miss that for the second year in a row. Besides, she was long overdue for a personal visit and talk.

"The patients will miss you, but your mom should come first." Kayla crunched the sterile wrap into a big ball and stuffed it into the trash. "What did Watts mean, you stole his patient?"

Jess shrugged. She honestly had no idea. She saw hundreds of patients each month and didn't need to search for more.

Before she could answer, Scott joined them, twirling his face mask in his hand. "We didn't steal him; he didn't want surgery. Really. Sheila said so."

"What? Who didn't want surgery?" Jess frowned. "And who the fuck is Sheila?"

"Um, Sheila is my girlfriend. She's a nurse on the cardiac surgery floor." Scott beamed at the mention of her name. "I guess Dr. Watts meant our last patient. He was scheduled for coronary surgery, but he was afraid. His son and the surgeons pressured him, and Sheila asked me to take a look at him. And I talked to him, and..." He trailed off as if he only now noticed the twin sets of glares on him.

"You mean, you really did poach on the surgery floor, and now Dr. Watts is blaming Jess?" Kayla's voice hardened, and she crossed her arms over her chest.

"Hey, I was right. Everything went well. No harm, no foul." Scott tried his best boyish grin.

That didn't help his case at all. Jess clenched her fists and fought the urge to yell. "Yes, everything went well. But you don't have a fucking clue what you did. You lied to me. You not only kept the backstory from me but told me an outright lie—that the cardiac surgeons had referred his case to us."

"But I just wanted—"

Jess held up her hand. She wasn't in the mood for whiny, entitled arguments. "No. I don't want to hear any of your shit. You think about what you've done and apologize to Dr. Watts." She held his gaze until he looked down.

Jess was about to turn on her heels and leave as a wave of nausea rolled through her. *Oh, fuck! Not now.* She tore off the vest and the restricting skirt of her lead apron and flung them on the stool in the corner, but even that didn't help.

As if chased by a bear, she sprinted to the bathroom. Jess made it in time to lose her breakfast as well as her dignity.

After retching for what felt like hours, she knelt on the cold tiles and tried to muster the energy to get back up again.

"Jess?" Kayla's voice came from outside the stall. "Are you okay?"

"Just a minute." Jess rose on weak knees and flushed. She wanted to pinch her cheeks for some color and straighten her hair, but she needed to wash her hands first. Ugh. Jess shook herself. Without intention, she had clutched the yucky toilet seat like a lifebelt.

Jess squared her shoulders, opened the stall, and brushed past Kayla to the sink. She washed her hands twice and disinfected them, then rinsed out her mouth. The tap water tasted horrible, but it was cool and fresh. Finally, she finger-combed her short hair and risked a glance in the mirror. Yup, she looked like death warmed over, and no amount of cold water could help her there.

Kayla's concerned gaze met her in the mirror. Her skin seemed even darker than usual next to Jess's unnatural paleness.

With a sigh, Jess faced her and leaned against the sink. "I'm fine."

"Nuh-uh." Kayla lifted the edge of her mouth in a half smile. "Didn't you just lecture your puppy about telling lies?"

Jess grinned against her will. "He's not my puppy. I only took him for a walk today."

"Not the point. What's wrong? Are you sick?" Her gaze raked Jess from head to toe. "Did the asshole surgeon and his comments get to you?"

She could say yes and leave it at that. But Kayla was one of the few friends she had at work, and she was right. Telling lies was out of the question. But Jess hadn't told the truth to anyone yet, not even her mom, and wasn't sure she was ready.

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“If you were anyone else, I’d ask if you were pregnant. But I guess not.” Kayla chuckled. “You’re still a lesbian, right?”

“Yeah, the last time I checked. But that’s got nothing to do with it.” The words slipped out before Jess could censor herself. Oops. She held her breath, waiting for Kayla’s reaction.

“No! Are you...? You can’t be...” Kayla’s eyes widened as her gaze swept over Jess’s sweat-soaked scrub shirt that clung to her torso and revealed more curves than usual. “You’re pregnant? How? No—scratch that. Why? Was it planned?” She pressed both hands to her mouth but couldn’t hide the wide grin.

“Yeah. Thirteen weeks pregnant. I’m due in July.” Saying it out loud was like coming out again. The weight lifting from her shoulders made her dizzy. “I thought it was past time. I turned thirty-seven last month. If I waited for the perfect relationship, I’d be too old.” At least that was the reason she was willing to admit to right now.

“Congratulations!” Kayla enveloped her in a hug.

“Thank you.” Jess soaked up the happiness emanating from her friend. All too soon, reality intruded, and Jess looked at Kayla. “Please don’t tell anyone yet.”

“Sure. I won’t gossip. But sooner or later everyone will know.” Kayla gestured to Jess’s middle.

Jess sighed. “Yeah, but you know the cath lab policy: no lab time for pregnant employees. The studies and recommendations all say it’s safe, but the chief of cardiology doesn’t care about that.”

“My lips are sealed.” Kayla made a zipping motion. “But you better hope Scott isn’t too clever and connects the dots. You looked really green.”

Jess slumped back against the sink. Time was running out, but she was determined to make the best use of her skills for as long as she could.

* * *

Jess clenched her teeth and swallowed a groan as another contraction tore through her. No, not a contraction. Braxton Hicks. Damn inconvenient, but nothing she couldn’t handle. She’d been handling it all day.

“And that’s why I called you.” When the emergency medicine resident finished prattling on about the EKG and handed her the printout, she

beamed like a preschooler who had painted her first rainbow. With her perky blonde ponytail, she looked not much older and not much smarter.

With one glance, Jess recognized the EKG pattern as a harmless atrial fibrillation with no sign of an acute heart attack. What a waste of time. She should have trusted her own resident to take this case, but she had always preferred her own judgment. Especially now since she had been banned from the cath lab for the last five months of her pregnancy—an eternity for an interventional cardiologist.

Jess addressed the patient. “Ever had an irregular heartbeat?”

“All the time. That’s why I take those yellow and white pills. Doesn’t bother me much.” The wrinkles in the woman’s face deepened. “What does this have to do with my pain?”

“Pain? Where?” Maybe this was getting interesting.

The woman pointed toward her lower abdomen. “Whenever I pee. Burns like hell.”

Not interesting at all for a cardiologist. “Your irregular heartbeat has nothing to do with it.” Jess smiled at the patient, but it probably seemed more as if she bared her teeth because in that moment, another wave of pain ripped through her.

The resident paled, and one of her eyelids twitched.

Jess could almost smell the fear. Good. She wouldn’t dare to call the cardiology department for more of this nonsense without checking with her attending first. “Anything to add?” The question was rhetorical, but the resident didn’t seem to know that.

It was comical to see her gather every ounce of courage she’d lost. She stood straighter, raised her chin, and balled her hands into fists until her knuckles whitened. “Um, Diana said she read a study that women were underdiagnosed because of atypical pain, and I thought—”

Okay. She had a point there, but Jess wasn’t in the mood for a lecture from someone a dozen years younger who thought herself too smart to play by the rules. And besides, she had looked at the EKG. Her trip to the ED had been a waste of time. “Have you even been to med school? What is the most important rule? Horses! Look it up!” Another wave of pain robbed her breath. Jess shut her mouth with a snap.

The kid’s upper lip trembled, and Jess regretted her words, especially in front of the patient.

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She could only hope that the nice old woman wouldn't log a completely justifiable complaint about her.

Since when had she turned into one of those yelling types who intimidated residents with the same old sayings? *If you hear hoofbeats it's always horses not zebras* might have some truth in it, but that was no reason to attack the young doctor like this. Jess had been in the same position more than once during her residency, and the feeling of helplessness while someone undermined your authority was the worst.

But she couldn't handle an overly emotional resident on top of her pain at the moment. She would apologize or teach her something or do whatever to make it up to her—later. Much later.

Jess turned on her heel as fast as she could with the grace of a beached whale. She had to get out of here and find a spot to calm down, to breathe. She flung the door open and stormed out of the room.

And promptly collided with an obstacle. A living obstacle who touched her belly and arm.

"Keep your hands off me. What are you doing here, standing in the way?" Jess stared at the dark-haired woman in scrubs. She seemed vaguely familiar.

Whoever she was, she was clever enough to raise her hands in a peace offering and step out of the way.

Jess hurried past her but didn't go far before more pain stopped her. She pressed her hands to her middle as if that would help and panted until it was over.

"Dr. Riley, are you okay? Can I help you?" The woman had followed her.

"Okay? I haven't been okay for nine fucking months." Not since she'd had the clever idea of having a baby before she was too old. Her voice shook, and she clutched her belly again. "I don't have time for this today."

"Do you want to lie down? Should I call your obstetrician?" The woman looked around as if she expected someone from ob/gyn to come around the corner.

Jess shrugged in an effort to appear nonchalant. "Just Braxton Hicks. No need to call anyone. I've still got work to do." She fought to steady her voice. No one needed to know about the pain. She was in control and knew what she was doing.

The other woman studied her for a moment, then attempted a professional smile. “We could check you out real quick without signing you in. If you’re right, you can return to work anytime.”

That smile sparked a memory. Kayla had shown her pictures when she’d told Jess about the scandal in the emergency department. One of their residents was a former rock star, a drummer, which had drawn publicity when it all had come out. “You’re the rock chick, right?” Jess pointed a finger at her. “What do you know?”

That seemed to shut her up. She looked as if she’d swallowed a lemon and didn’t protest as Jess walked away.

Jess knew she should return to her department, lay her feet up in the staff lounge, and drink one of those terrible herbal teas her mom was so fond of. But she needed ten minutes for herself and some fresh air. So she detoured to the back entrance and the small yard.

She’d almost reached the bench when hurried footsteps caught up to her. “Dr. Riley, I’m sorry to disturb you out here, but I don’t think you should be alone right now.”

Jess frowned. She opened her mouth to tell the rock chick what she thought about this disturbance, but no sound came out. Her pulse pounded faster and faster, echoing in her ears. Stars danced through her field of vision, and she didn’t know anymore where up and down were. She swayed, reaching out as if to balance on a log over a stream, then fell. Soft and fluffy darkness enveloped her, and finally, the pain in her abdomen was gone.

And then the pain roared back and chased the darkness away. It was even worse now, and her back and chest hurt too.

“Dr. Riley?” Someone shook her.

As Jess opened her eyes, the blue sky loomed above her. “What...what happened? Why am I on the ground?” She clutched her belly and moaned. After a moment, the pain passed, and she looked from one side to the other to reorient herself. A familiar figure leaned over her. Why couldn’t the woman leave her alone? She needed a minute to breathe, and everything would be okay again. “You, Rock Chick! I said I didn’t need help!”

A muscle twitched in the resident’s cheek. “That was before you fainted. Now, shut up and let me help. And that’s Dr. Rock Chick to you.” Her tone was even, direct, and full of authority.

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Before Jess knew what she was doing, she nodded. Maybe she had hit her head or something.

“Can you sit up?” The woman offered her hand.

The dizziness had receded, and she didn’t need the help of the persistent resident. “I didn’t faint,” Jess mumbled, more to herself. She used both hands to push herself into a sitting position.

“Fainted, collapsed, call it what you want. You had a syncope and an irregular tachycardia.” Rock Chick played doctor, pulled gloves and a stethoscope from her pocket, and worked through a physical exam before Jess could think about protesting. Maybe she did know what she was doing. She’d seemed competent enough the last few times she’d called cardiology for a consult. What was her name again? Diana something or other?

When Diana touched her belly, it hardened with another contraction.

Oh shit, were practice contractions supposed to be this painful? How much worse would the real ones be? Instinctively, Jess gripped the hand resting on her belly, never minding Diana’s groan of protest. Served her right for barging in like this.

Once the contraction had passed, the wimp extricated her fingers and stretched them, wincing.

If she wasn’t so pissed off at everything at that moment, Jess would have laughed at her pained expression.

Diana pressed her lips together and slung her stethoscope around her neck. “If I help, can you move to the bench?”

As she tried to get up, Jess noted two things: her pants were wet, and her knees had softened to jelly. Had she slipped and landed in a puddle? That might explain her fall. Another possible explanation flickered through her mind, but it wasn’t something she wanted to consider now.

First, she had to get up, and then she had to get away from the obnoxious resident. As she couldn’t do the latter without the former, she accepted Diana’s help. It wasn’t easy, and both gulped for air when Jess had settled onto the bench.

Diana hovered over her, much too close, rocking back and forth on the balls of her feet as if she was preparing for a tennis match. The intense stare matched a professional athlete too. “No way you can walk back now.”

Thank you for stating the obvious. But Jess didn’t want to give her the satisfaction of agreeing. “Just give me ten minutes, Rock Chick. I’ll be

fine.” She lay down to rest and pushed her sweat-dampened hair from her forehead. She’d allow herself the short respite, and then she’d get up and face the rest of her workday.

“What kind of denial are you in? You’re in labor, and I don’t know if we have ten minutes.”

Labor? Was this really labor? *It’s too soon. I’m not ready!* First kids never came early. She was sure she’d heard that somewhere. She had meant to read up on the medical side of delivery but had thought she still had time. The C-section was scheduled in ten days.

“Could you unlock your phone so I can call for a stretcher? I don’t have mine on me.” Diana’s voice barely broke through the thoughts that tumbled and crashed in Jess’s mind like a washing machine filled with broken parts.

When and where had she gotten Jess’s phone? She unlocked it and handed it back. Never mind.

How could she tell if she was in denial when the whole point of denial was to protect a mind from things it didn’t need or want to know? And why was she thinking about psychological defense mechanisms when her body was being ripped apart by one wave of pain after another?

Whatever Diana said on the call, Jess couldn’t hear a word.

Jess clutched her belly and tried to breathe the pain away as if that would suddenly work when it hadn’t done her any good during the last several hours.

Heat shot to her cheeks. She had been too stubborn to accept the truth. Waves of pain. For hours. Dr. Rock Chick was right. This was happening. She was in labor, and her water had broken. Jess didn’t know if she should laugh, cry, or kick herself. Since she’d decided she needed a baby in her life, everything had fallen apart. Her work, her relationship with her mom, her body. It was fitting that her body betrayed her today by going into labor instead of sticking to the plan—a nice, pain-free C-section with all the professional medical attention a person could ask for.

Instead, she got a dirty park bench and a former rock star turned emergency resident. Just perfect.

“Dr. Riley, I need to get you undressed to see how far you are.”

Jess let her head fall back and nodded. What else was there to do?

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Even though Diana's movements were careful, she couldn't help the fact that Jess's wet scrub pants stuck to her legs like a second skin and caught on her ugly, swollen ankles.

Jess bit her lip and looked away as Diana peeled them off the rest of the way. When another contraction started, much more painful than before, she couldn't help pulling up her legs and groan.

Diana looked back to the hospital entrance as if she'd rather flee than stay and help.

Jess could relate. If she could, she'd be out of here faster than she could say *delivery*. The reality of the situation hit her like a punch in the solar plexus and robbed her of her last breath. She was here with this resident, who wasn't even an obstetrician. Alone. Giving birth to her child. Her daughter. What if something happened to her baby? She gasped.

Think, Jess. You're a doctor too. What's the best plan to keep her safe? No doubt, the safest place for her baby was her womb, and she needed to do anything she could to keep her daughter inside as long as possible. *Delay until help arrives.* Not a sophisticated plan but the best she could come up with now.

Diana nodded with determination. But as she lowered her gaze between Jess's legs, she paled. "You need to push."

Was she crazy? "I can't. Not now. That's not the plan." Jess's eyes filled with tears.

"Are you kidding me? Fuck your plan. We don't have time for this. The head is crowning, and you need to push—now!" Despite her harsh words, Diana's movements were gentle. She pulled Jess's legs apart, holding eye contact all the time.

Jess wasn't convinced that pushing was the best option, but she couldn't come up with an alternative. Why hadn't she prepared for such a scenario? She always prepared for every fucking thing.

"Listen." Diana lowered her voice and squeezed Jess's knee. "I'm sorry that the birth is not going as you planned, but your child seems to be as stubborn as you are. We can do this but only with your help. So when the next contraction comes, you push. Okay?" Her expression was confident as if she'd done this a thousand times.

Another contraction came, and Jess was out of time. "Fuck!" She screamed the word like a war cry and pushed.

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“Yeah, fuck!” Diana screamed back as if they were charging into battle together.

Jess’s world reduced to a bloody fight, filled with pain, curses, and groans. She no longer knew or cared about the details. Her only clear thought was *push*, and so she did, until another cry pierced through the fog in her mind.

A shrill cry, full of anger at the unfairness of the world, full of need to belong, full of hope for a better future.

And when the crying bundle was placed in her arms, Jess’s pain evaporated in a surge of hormones and pure love.

Chapter Two

LENA LEANED CLOSER TO STUDY the curve of the new-formed leaf, and the sweet floral scent of the rose enveloped her like her grandma's hugs. She hadn't been the type to wear perfume but had always kept a few dried petals in her closet. Taking a deep breath as if she could store the scent, Lena smiled at the memory. She missed her every day. Grandma would have loved this garden.

After another glance at the flower, Lena focused on her sketchbook and added a few fine black lines.

"Beautiful. I love the detailed depiction of the petals and sepals." Maggie's voice came from directly behind her.

If her pen had been on the paper, Lena would have ruined the sketch. She hadn't heard Maggie approach or noticed the rhythmic snipping of the garden shears had stopped. "Thank you. But what's a sepal?" Not used to compliments, her face flushed, probably as pink as the rose.

"The small, green, leaf-like parts beneath the petals." Maggie took a seat on the wooden chair next to the patch of grass Lena sat on. She removed her gardening gloves and wiped her forehead with a fabric handkerchief.

"Do you want some water or tea? I can get something from my kitchen." Lena gestured to the garden house.

"Water would be lovely. But I can get it. If you don't mind me rummaging around your kitchen." She rose from the chair with an agility that belied her age.

"No, stay, please. I feel bad enough that you won't let me help you with the gardening." Lena secured her sketchbook closed with a wide band and

tucked the pen into one of the loops on the elastic. She placed the book on the side table next to Maggie's chair and hurried into the house.

It was just a few steps from front door to fridge, and she grabbed a large glass bottle she had filled earlier and left to chill. The fridge was pretty bare, but at the sight of the last bit of organic cheese, her stomach growled.

Had Maggie stopped for lunch? Probably not. She had been as immersed in her work as Lena.

Back outside, Lena placed two plates with cheese and apple slices on the small table and poured them both water. "Do you want something for the water? Mint?"

"Lemon balm, thanks."

Maggie had planted dozens of different herbs in all parts of the garden, but Lena was sure she remembered where the lemon balm was hidden. She found it a few steps away and rubbed a leaf between her fingers to release the citrusy scent. She plucked a few leaves and held them up. "Is this enough for you?"

Maggie nodded her approval and took half of the leaves into her glass. "Melissa officinalis."

Lena mentally repeated the name a few times. She'd sketch that one next and write down both names. "Is there anything I can help you with today? Carry something heavy?"

Smiling, Maggie shook her head. "I need to work to stay flexible. You have tai chi and youth on your side. I'm battling old age with the help of my plants."

And the workout was certainly effective. Maggie had to be in her late sixties—judging by the soft, wrinkly skin and hair that was mostly gray-and-white with only a hint of brown—but she moved like a much younger woman. Lena hoped she would be that fit in forty years.

They nibbled on their snack in companionable silence until a phone rang from the middle of the plant bed Maggie had been working in.

"Let me get it." Lena made her way between the roses, lavender, and half a dozen different green shrubs she couldn't name. She followed the ringtone until it stopped. Where was that phone? After a short break, the ringing started again. "Someone really wants to talk to you."

"They always call to sell me things I don't need. My name and number must be on a very gullible list somewhere." Maggie chuckled.

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Lena snorted. Maggie might be the least gullible older woman she had ever met. “Ah, here it is.” She snatched the phone from its hiding place under a rose bush in amazing shades of tangerine and burnt orange. “Oh, the hospital. I hope it’s nothing serious.” She hurried to bring the phone to its owner.

“It’ll be Jess. It’s Friday and time for her to cancel our monthly dinner. Again.” The resignation in her voice was nothing new.

Lena pressed her lips together and swallowed a reply. She couldn’t understand Maggie’s daughter. If Lena had a mother as wonderful as Maggie, she wouldn’t stay away all the time. As far as Maggie had told her, they didn’t have any problems or disagreements; Jess was only too busy with work. Lena handed the phone over as it stopped ringing. “Oh, sorry.”

Before Maggie could reply, it started again, and she answered it. “Riley. Yes. Oh. Oh.” She paled, and the phone shook in her hand. “Okay. How is she? Can I...? Tell her I’ll be with her as soon as possible. Emergency department. Thank you.” She hung up and stared at the phone as if it could provide more information or guidance.

Lena reached over and took her hands, which trembled like a frightened bird. “Hey, what happened?”

“Jess...she...” Maggie looked at her with wide eyes, tears clinging to their corners.

Did she have an accident? “What happened?” She repeated the question in a soft tone.

“She had her baby. I’m a grandma.” As if speaking the words out loud allowed Maggie to understand their meaning, her face transformed. A wide grin illuminated her face like the first rays of sunshine after a storm. “I’m a grandma!”

Lena couldn’t help but grin with her. “Congratulations.” She squeezed the still-trembling hands, but it wasn’t enough to convey what she was feeling. Before she could question herself, she pulled Maggie in for a hug.

Maggie returned the embrace as if they were friends or family and not landlady and tenant. The scent of crushed herbs and warm soil, like summer, enveloped her, and Lena never wanted to let go.

Which was precisely why she retreated to a safe distance after another mumbled congratulations. She couldn’t allow herself the illusion of being part of a happy family if the reality was just the opposite.

“Thank you.” Maggie brushed at her dirt-stained jeans. “I need to change and drive to the hospital.” But she remained rooted on the spot. “I don’t have a present. The quilt isn’t ready. Flowers? Maybe I should cut some flowers.” She reached for the roses and pricked herself on a thorn. “Ouch.”

“Careful. Why don’t you go change, and I’ll get the flowers?” Lena had thought nothing could faze Maggie, who had shown grace and composure even when her neighbor had had a heart attack right here in the garden. She’d taken care of her friend and called the ambulance as if she’d prepared for such an event.

Maggie hastened off toward the house, and Lena decided to pick the flowers quickly enough to have time to change herself. No way would she let Maggie drive herself to the hospital in Seattle and end up in a car crash.

To her surprise, Maggie handed her the car key without discussion.

Maggie’s car was a cute Prius that drove so smooth and silent that Lena didn’t even mind the afternoon traffic. Such a difference from her old, dying Ford.

Maggie looked at the small silver watch on her wrist. She didn’t say anything about driving faster but fidgeted in her seat.

“You didn’t tell me, is it a boy or girl?” Lena tried to distract her. “Did your daughter decide on a name yet?”

“A girl.” She sighed. “Jess was still undecided about the name, last I knew.” Maggie’s tone was very neutral.

Lena glanced to her right.

Maggie smiled, but it was laced with tension

Uh-oh. She had wanted to redirect Maggie’s thoughts in a positive direction. “Were you hoping for a girl when you had Jess?”

“When I was pregnant with Jess, I wished for a boy, not because I preferred boys but because I thought it would be easier for my husband to bond with a son.” She chuckled. “But those two did all right. Actually, more than all right. She always trailed after him, and he encouraged her. She loved to hide in his office when he had patients in there. I will never know what age-inappropriate things she learned by listening in on those conversations.”

“So your husband was a doctor too?”

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“Yes, a cardiologist, same as Jess. He mainly worked in private practice, not in the hospital. More time for golf.” She said the last bit in a tone that suggested she was teasing.

Lena had never met Maggie’s husband; he had died a few years ago.

“What does Jess’s partner do? Is he a doctor too?”

Maggie laughed. “No, there isn’t a he in the picture. Or a girlfriend. Jess decided to have a child on her own. I don’t know why she thinks that being a single mother is a wise decision with the work hours she keeps.”

Lena agreed, but it wasn’t her place to say so. She’d never known her father either, and the short time she’d lived with her mother alone hadn’t been an advertisement for happy family life. For a moment, the reminder of what she’d missed itched like an old scar. But what was done was done.

“Oh?” was all she could answer without betraying her thoughts.

“I’m sorry, that was mean. But Jess is convinced that she can do anything she wants on her own. She’s too stubborn and independent for her own good. For her sake, I hope she’s right.”

The more Lena learned about Jess, the more she wondered how she could be so different from her mother. But that wasn’t fair. She probably had lots of redeeming qualities.

After twenty minutes, the fancy sat-nav in Maggie’s car announced that they had to leave the highway, and Lena concentrated on the unfamiliar roads until they arrived at the hospital. She stopped in front of the main entrance.

“You go on in, and I’ll park the car. I’ll wait in the lobby until you’re finished.”

“Nonsense. Come with me. I’ll introduce you. And who can resist a peek at a newborn baby?” Maggie talked rapidly in an uncharacteristically high voice.

Honestly, Lena wasn’t eager to meet Jess, but she did love babies. And beneath the reasons Maggie had listed probably lurked the wish for backup. “You’re right, I can’t resist.”

After lucking out with a parking spot close to the entrance, they made their way inside. The main hall was cool and empty, and their steps echoed on the stone floor. Lena followed Maggie to the admission desk, where a bored-looking young woman worked behind a glass wall.

“Hello, I’m Mrs. Riley. I’m here to see my daughter, Dr. Jessica Riley.”

“Oh my God! Yes!” The woman’s oversized bun wobbled as she nodded. “Diana...um, I mean Dr. Petrell delivered the baby all on her own in the garden. Half-naked! She tore off her scrub shirt to cover the baby, like a superhero. It was awesome! Come in!” She pressed a button, and a door opened. “They’re in room seven.”

Garden? Maggie hadn’t said anything about that, and by the way she paled, maybe she hadn’t known. She stood frozen in front of the admission desk.

“Room seven. Thank you,” Lena said to the woman.

As Maggie hadn’t moved yet, Lena took her arm and led her through the door. The smell of disinfectant and fear assaulted her as soon as they entered the ER proper, reminding her of her grandma’s last day.

She leaned into the roses she carried and breathed against the knot in her stomach until it dissolved. *Concentrate!* Signs with numbers and arrows led her in the right direction. They reached room seven without meeting anyone. Lena was unsure of the protocol but decided knocking was the polite thing to do.

“What now?” A loud voice barked from the other side.

That seemed to rouse Maggie from her shock. She opened the door. “Jessica Eleanor Riley. Is that the way to answer a knocking?” Her tone was more exasperated than angry.

Suppressing a snicker, Lena followed Maggie inside. That was exactly the tone her grandma would have used on her. The last time she’d needed to, Lena hadn’t been older than fourteen.

A woman in her late thirties rested on a gurney. The headrest was up so she was more sitting than lying, and she cradled a tightly wrapped bundle in her arms. Her dark-blue scrubs contrasted with her pale face. Short dark hair was curly where sweat had plastered it to the temples. Her frown faded as she recognized her visitor. “Oh. Mom. Hi.”

And that sheepish tone was the same in which Lena would have answered fifteen years ago. Finally, something she could relate to.

“Here’s Ella, your granddaughter.” A proud smile spread on Jess’s face, and she glowed with the joy of new motherhood. It transformed her completely. Now her natural attractiveness outshone her exhaustion, and the cornflower blue eyes sparkled with the same beauty as Maggie’s.

Lena couldn’t help but smile with her.

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Carefully, Maggie hugged her daughter and grandchild at once. After a moment, she retreated and stroked Jess's face. "Oh, Jessi, you look tired. Are you okay?"

The love in her voice pricked Lena like the thorns of the roses she held. Her chest tightened until she had trouble breathing. She needed to get out of here. This was a private moment, and she had no right to intrude. She took a step back and collided with someone.

Strong hands grabbed her shoulders and steadied her. "Whoa. Careful. Beautiful roses."

Lena turned around.

The woman she had bumped into smiled down at her. She was clad in the same dark-blue scrubs as Jess. Her dark hair was fastened in a short ponytail, but several strands had escaped and gave her a slightly informal look. "Hi, I'm Dr. Petrell. You must be family."

Family? No amount of wishful thinking would make Lena part of a family again anytime soon. "No, no. I'm here as a friend to Maggie. She's the family."

Maggie witnessed the exchange with arched eyebrows.

"I have to leave now. Call me if you need anything. I'll take the bus home." Without meeting Maggie's gaze, Lena held the flowers and the car key out to her.

As soon as Maggie took them, Lena fled from the room. *This is not your family.* She was alone and that had been her decision. Now she needed to own it.

All the way outside, she balled her fists and bit the inside of her cheek to keep the tears from falling.

Chapter Three

JESS STUMBLED OVER A STUFFED penguin in her kitchen and nearly lost her precious cargo. If she hadn't been so out of breath, she would have laughed at the absurdity of juggling half a dozen containers of breast milk.

Shouldn't it be easier to get ready for work now than during her pregnancy? She no longer resembled a whale about to beach, but instead of feeling rejuvenated, Jess was tired and weak like never before. Even in the worst times of her residency, she hadn't felt as sleep deprived as she did now.

Every time her mom had visited during the last four weeks, Jess had fallen asleep talking. She still hadn't decided if she was embarrassed or grateful her mom had taken to sending her to bed like an overtired toddler.

And that had made her too ashamed to even consider inviting Kayla.

Admittedly, the maternity leave hadn't helped with her circadian rhythm. Much like her residency, she was woken at all times of night and day to deal with emergencies. In this case, the emergency of her daughter believing she might die any second from starvation or loneliness. And the shift never ended and went on and on for a month.

When her boss had called to ask her to cut the leave short because they were short staffed, she'd been delighted. Getting out of the house and leaving Ella's care in professional hands for the day seemed like the perfect remedy for her exhaustion. In the last years, working as an attending had more fueled than drained her energy levels despite the long hours.

Only she wasn't ready. No professional help was in sight. The hospital daycare had changed their policy last month without warning and didn't accept kids younger than one year anymore. The only halfway acceptable daycare out of the dozen she'd visited in the city didn't have a free spot on

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short notice, no matter how much she offered to pay. If her mother hadn't offered to step in, she wouldn't be able to go to work. And that was the tip of the iceberg. She hadn't lost her weight. She hadn't read any of the articles she'd saved for her leave. She hadn't even managed the simple task of getting a haircut.

Jess picked up the penguin and set it on the kitchen counter next to her half-empty cup of coffee. She took a sip and winced. Tepid and bitter, it didn't help to calm her churning stomach. She hadn't felt so unprepared for her day since her first week of college.

Stroking the soft fur of the penguin, she went through her mental checklist. Milk. Check. Stuffed animal. Check. Baby's bag with diapers, wipes, and change of clothes. Check. Mom's bag with keycard, money, phone, and the latest edition of *Journal of Cardiology* in case she was awake enough to read more than two lines. Check. What was missing? *Just go. You're running late already. Stop with your stupid lists.*

At the elevator, the vague feeling of having lost something remained. What was missing?

When the doors opened with a ping, she entered and pressed the button for the parking deck.

Ella.

Jess jumped out through the closing doors and narrowly missed being squashed by the metal. *Fuck, how can you forget your own child?*

It took three attempts to enter the code to her condo. Her racing heart wouldn't slow down even when she'd reached the sleeping baby. She was dizzy with relief that Ella hadn't noticed her absence.

With shaking hands, Jess lifted her daughter from the cradle and held her close for a minute. The scent of freshness and innocence washed over her and calmed her nerves like magic, better than any checklist ever could.

Loaded with both bags and the baby carrier, she resumed her journey to the car. Even when she had stowed everyone and everything safely in her BMW X5 and was on her way to her mom's house, her heart rate was still elevated.

Ella cooed in that adorable way to signal she was awake.

Jess glanced in the mirror but couldn't see her daughter's expression. The thirty-minute drive to Shoreline passed in the blink of an eye, and Jess nearly missed her mom's driveway because an ugly lump—that

might have qualified as a car fifteen or twenty years ago—was blocking most of the garage. Her mom's tiny Prius might fit next to it, but there wasn't enough space for her own SUV. She ran through a list of her mom's friends, all of whom were either retired academics like her or old hippies or both. Neither group would drive such a piece of shit. Maybe someone was doing work at the house?

Not that it mattered. She parked on the street, not caring that she blocked the driveway. That thing didn't look as if it was able to go far anyway.

Before she had again succeeded in juggling Ella, her bag, and the car keys, her mom appeared.

"Jess, let me help." Her mom took the baby carrier and peered inside. "Oh, Ella, look at you. How you've grown. Aren't you sweet?"

"Growing is all she's doing for now." Jess covered her mouth to hide a yawn. "But, yeah, she's sweet."

Her mom looked up and studied Jess until she squirmed. "Do you want to come inside? You look tired. Have some coffee? Breakfast? You can meet Lena."

Who was Lena again? Jess looked at her watch and sighed. It wasn't important. As much as she could have killed for another coffee, she needed to get going. Morning traffic was always difficult to predict. "I better head off now. Thank you so much for taking her on short notice. I'll find a reliable babysitter or daycare soon." Jess swallowed and looked down at her oversized sneakers that were the only shoes that fit her pregnancy-ridden feet.

"Don't worry about it. We'll have much fun, Ella and I. Won't we?" With the last words, she stuck her head into the carrier and said something in that tone reserved for babies and kittens. Or, in her mom's case, more often than not, for rare plants. "Will you stay for dinner?" she added in her regular voice.

"I don't know yet. Let's see how the day goes, okay?" Jess wasn't looking forward to driving to her mom's again in the evening when all she wanted to do was sleep. But she wouldn't have gotten so far in her career with a habit of admitting weakness, not even to the person who should know her best.

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“Sure. Say goodbye to Mommy.” Her mom talked to Ella as if she expected her to do just that.

Ridiculous but cute. “Bye.” Jess smiled and waved as she entered her car. No need to cuddle her daughter after she’d spent four weeks nonstop in her company. She should be happy to have some adult time, so why did her instincts make her want to cry or even grab the carrier from her mom? She clenched her jaw and forced herself to start the engine without hesitation. She gripped the steering wheel until her knuckles whitened. Missing her daughter might be normal, but this pain, as if she was stretched and stretched until something tore inside her, was absurd.

With a shake of her head, she drove to work as fast as she could.

* * *

Frantic beeping signaled an unnaturally high heartbeat. Some of her colleagues would mute the alarm in order to concentrate, but Jess flourished under the pressure. The monitor displaying the patient’s vital signs was probably flashing with all kinds of alarms as the blood pressure fell. She didn’t need to see it to know she had to act fast and finish the angioplasty to restore the oxygen supply to the heart.

Her vision stayed fixed on the X-ray monitor showing her attempts to place the catheter in the correct position. *Just a millimeter more.* That’s it. She exhaled and gave the signal to inflate the balloon.

Scott pressed the device and counted to five. He had been hovering behind her shoulder all day. Now that he had finished his regular cardiology fellowship and started the interventional cardiology one, Jess should have let him perform the procedure. But she was too damn happy to be back in the cath lab to care.

As soon as he finished, Jess held out her hand.

Wordlessly, Kayla offered her the right stent without being asked.

With a grateful smile, Jess finished the procedure. She had missed working in perfect synchronicity with colleagues who read her mind.

The patient’s heart rate dropped to normal levels, and the blood pressure rose again as blood flow in the most important coronary vessel was restored. Jess grinned. No matter how often she witnessed or performed the procedure, and no matter how well she understood the mechanism, this

part still retained some of the magic she had felt the first time she'd seen it as a student. She had instantly decided that it would be her future.

The most important work was done, and the rest was routine: closing the puncture wound and applying a pressure bandage. That was Scott's job.

With the knowledge of a job well done, Jess relaxed and her adrenaline level plummeted.

Stars danced in her vision, and she blinked to remove them. She didn't need clear vision to pull at a catheter, but steady hands would be nice. Hers shook like a student's when they first drew blood. She attempted to take a deep breath but sucked the paper mask against her lips.

"Everything okay? Jess?" Kayla's voice was muffled as if through a thick wall.

Jess nodded, unable to speak as her tongue stuck to the roof of her mouth. She stepped away from the table and ripped the mask from her face to gulp in some air. Her heart raced as if she was the patient on the table. What the fuck was happening?

Maybe it had been a mistake to put on her prepregnancy lead vest that was too tight now. But she had been too proud and vain to ask for a larger size, and now she was paying the price for all those shallow breaths over the last few hours. Her breasts hurt like hell, especially her much-too-sensitive nipples.

Sweat ran down her temples, along her neck, and under the lead vest and the sterile paper gown covering it. It stung her eyes like acid. She was cold and hot at the same time, and an uncontrollable tremor ran through her. She took a breath—not a deep one since her movement was still restricted as if a boa constrictor held her in its grasp.

Out. I need to get out of this dammed vest.

She dug deep inside her training to project calmness and confidence. "Scott, finish here, please. I'll start on the report."

With her last shred of strength, she tore off her gloves and gown, then opened her vest. Each step was a struggle, but she held her head high, not losing sight of her destination, the door where she would be able to pull off the constricting vest and sit.

Only the door swayed from side to side until it vanished from her view. "Not again," she mumbled as the floor rushed up to meet her.

Heart Failure

* * *

The reassuring beep-beep-beep of a heartbeat monitor drifted in and out of her consciousness. Something grabbed her shoulder and shook her. A hand.

“Dr. Riley, wake up!” The woman’s voice was warm and low but held so much authority that she wanted to comply.

But why? The heartbeat was steady. No reason for her to get up and look at it. She was as tired as if she’d run a marathon.

Marathon? No, she had been at work. Cath lab. But why was she lying somewhere in the hospital? Jess blinked, then squeezed her eyes shut as a glaring light blinded her. But the glimpse had been enough to recognize the room as part of the emergency department. *Why am I in the ED? Again? Is this a joke?* She tried to get up for a better view of her surroundings, but strong hands stopped her.

“Hey, Dr. Riley. Good to have you back. Stay down for a sec, okay?”

That voice. “Rock Chick?” She opened her eyes again, and this time the light wasn’t unbearable. It was indeed the resident who had delivered Ella.

“Haven’t we been over this already?” She chuckled. “It’s Dr. Rock Chick or even Dr. Petrell, but you might as well call me Diana, as we’ve already seen each other half-naked.”

Jess nodded. She would never admit this out loud, but Diana’s presence alleviated her uneasiness. Jess trusted her, even though she barely knew her. “What happened?”

“What do you remember?” The mirth vanished from Diana’s voice.

Jess considered the question for a moment. “I had finished an intervention and was a bit dizzy and sweating. I guess I got dehydrated wearing the lead apron and fainted.”

“Mmh. That might be possible. But you didn’t just faint.” Diana rolled a stool from the side of the room and sat at eye level. A faint line between her brows spoke of her concern.

“What are you not telling me?” Had she hit her head? Broken something? Nothing hurt save for a faint ache in her breast and shoulder muscles, obviously from too many hours under the heavy protective garments.

Diana looked to the other end of the room. “Madison, please give us a minute.”

A nurse Jess hadn't even noticed until now shrugged and left with a long glance back to her patient. It was rare that a doctor turned into a patient in her own hospital.

Jess frowned. Not exactly true in her case. She had managed to wind up on a gurney in the emergency department twice in four weeks.

After Madison had closed the door, Diana swiveled back to Jess. Her gaze bored into Jess as if she wanted to read her thoughts. "Your colleagues thought the same as you did. Just a bit of dehydration and low blood pressure. They elevated your legs, but when you remained unconscious and they couldn't find your pulse, they were clever enough to hook you up to the EKG." Diana paused as if waiting for her reaction.

Jess made a "go on" gesture. "Tell me. In medical, not in English." She didn't need to be coddled like a patient; she wanted to know the facts.

"You had a VT, and they shocked you. They—"

"VT?" Jess wasn't sure she'd heard correctly. Maybe she needed the English version after all.

"Yeah, a ventricular tachycardia. I saw the EKG printout myself. You had a heart rate around one eighty with wide ventricular complexes and..."

The rest of Diana's explanation got drowned out by a buzzing in Jess's ears. Why? She was healthy, had never had any serious illnesses, not even as a child. Why would she develop a dangerous cardiac rhythm? So dangerous that they'd had to shock her? That made no sense. Maybe they'd gotten it wrong. Maybe Kayla and Scott had misjudged the rhythm. Maybe the cable had been faulty and transmitted extra signals. Maybe...

"Dr. Riley?" Diana squeezed her forearm and pulled her out of her thoughts.

"Call me Jess." This was not the time to insist on decorum.

"Jess, I guess this comes as a surprise, but the EKG left no doubt. You had a VT, and electric cardioversion was the right choice of treatment. Now we've got to find the cause. Any prior events? Known conditions? Anything in your medical history?"

"Okay. Sounds like a plan." Jess relaxed back as far as lying on a gurney with barely a cushion could be called relaxing. If she had to trust anyone at work, it might as well be Diana who had proven herself already. "Nothing. I've always been healthy, and I've had more than a few EKGs and echoes during my residency, as we practiced on each other. I've never

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had a problem with endurance training—I'm a long-distance runner." She snorted and rolled her eyes. "Not so much in the last year. And since Ella's birth, I haven't been as fit as I wanted to be. But maybe I have unrealistic expectations."

"Maybe. But VTs are not an usual occurrence postpartum. And..." Diana ran her hand through her shoulder-length hair, tousling it even more than before. "Before the birth in the garden, you fainted too. Your pulse was racing. I had no way to time it, but it was way over the normal limit. As you recovered in seconds, I chalked it up to stress and pain. Maybe you had a VT then too, only self-limiting that time."

Her first instinct was to deny it and accuse Diana of a vivid imagination. Throw in a sarcastic comment or two, then jump up and stalk out. Only her bones were as heavy as the lead gown had been, and she was more tired than ever. She'd probably land on her face if she attempted to get up right now.

Jess rubbed the upper right side of her chest, which was still tender after the electric shock. Something wasn't okay. If she was honest with herself, it hadn't been for a while. But still, a VT? She couldn't believe it.

Ding! Ding! Ding! The heart monitor came to life with a familiar alarm that drowned out the other sounds. Her breath froze. Beep-beep-beep. The sound of her own heartbeat wasn't steady and reassuring anymore. She craned her neck to catch a glimpse of the monitor behind her left shoulder.

The spikes of the EKG came much too fast, were much too wide. She couldn't deny what she saw with her own eyes. Another VT. With each spike, fear stabbed her chest with razor-sharp icicles.

The lines jiggled as her vision blurred. Dizziness and nausea rose as if she'd been too long on a roller coaster. "Fuck." Her head fell back on the cushion, and she closed her eyes and waited for consciousness to fade.

Only it didn't.

As if a magical button had been pressed, her heart rate switched from highly elevated to normal, and the wailing alarm of the monitor stopped. The sound of her pulse pounded in her ears, echoing the faint beeps that again reassured medical personnel that everything was all right.

But it wasn't. Having seen it with her own eyes, Jess was no longer able to deny it. Something was seriously wrong.

She could have died.

Ella! The idea of leaving her daughter was unimaginable.

Bile rose in her throat. Jess swallowed it and pushed her fears to the back of her mind. She needed to function, not to feel.

She caught Diana's gaze and tried to project authority she didn't feel at the moment. "I want you to do an echo."

Diana nodded. "I've already ordered one. The tech should be here any minute. And then we can—"

"No, I don't want any fucking tech to know my business." Jess gestured to the portable ultrasound machine in the corner of the room. It wasn't the most modern or best equipment the hospital had to offer, but it would be enough for a glimpse at her heart. "I want you to do it while I interpret the pictures. And I want whatever we see on the screen to remain between us." It was bad enough that she had collapsed at work and that her colleagues had had to treat her arrhythmia in the cath lab. No way would she involve them further.

With a neutral expression, Diana studied her for a moment.

Years of not only surviving but thriving in the hierarchical world of medicine had taught Jess to withstand even the most heated glare. Never had she needed to suppress the instinct to squirm the way she did now.

After a few seconds that felt like an hour, Diana stood and got the machine. She positioned herself on a stool next to the gurney as the machine's computer booted up. "You know, I've no experience. But I'm willing to try."

"Lucky for you, I'm a cardiologist. I'll talk you through it." Almost giddy with relief she didn't have to face one of the techs or her colleagues, Jess pulled down the thin sheet that covered her.

She was naked underneath and didn't want to know when and how that had happened. She slightly rolled onto her left side and repositioned the sticker of an EKG lead that dug into her skin as her left breast came to rest on the gurney. Jess suppressed a sigh. Even half a year ago, her breasts had still been the perky almost-but-not-quite-Bs she'd had since high school. During the pregnancy, they had become these bursting bags of milk. She directed her gaze to the monitor. This wasn't the time to think about the price her body had paid for Ella. Anyway, her daughter was worth every pound she'd gained.

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Diana shook the gel bottle with an ease that spoke of experience. Either she had done more than a few ultrasound examinations before, or she took ketchup to every meal. The gel glistened on the small ultrasound wand when Diana squirted a blob on it. “This might be cold.”

Jess rolled her eyes. How often had she said the same thing?

“Sorry, I said that on autopilot. Where do you want me to start? I know how to check for pericardial tamponade, but we’re not looking for a hematoma now, right?” Diana hovered with the wand at the swell of Jess’s left breast.

It was obvious Diana knew more than she let on, but Jess appreciated that she let her have at least a little control over the situation. “Left parasternal, third intercostal space, index mark pointing to my right shoulder.”

As the wand made contact with her skin, Jess flinched and held her breath. Hopefully Diana thought it was cold and not fear that produced the reaction.

She needn’t have worried. Diana’s gaze stayed on the monitor as she twisted and angled the wand. It wasn’t hard to guess the exact moment she produced a clear picture. A proud smile lit up her face. Just as fast, it vanished again, replaced by a frown. “Oh.” The sound that escaped Diana was the last thing a patient wanted to hear.

The monitor was filled with white lines on a black background showing barely any movement. For any other patient, the sight would mean nothing. But Jess had spent more years than she’d like to admit looking at similar pictures, and the diagnosis sprung to her mind: acute heart failure. Oh, fuck.

That couldn’t be true. That wasn’t her heart. No, no, no.

But the cold gel freezing her skin and the lines on the monitor moving in sync with her pounding heart left no doubt. Icy waves crashed over her head, and she fought to keep from drowning in fear.

She clenched her fists. *Ella, think of Ella. Fight this!*

“I’m not a cardiologist, but...” Diana looked at her with concern. “This isn’t normal. The heart is hardly moving.”

“Yes. Freeze that picture for a second.” Jess leaned up and brushed Diana’s hand away from the console of the ultrasound machine. “Let me measure the EF.” With practiced movements, she confirmed what her trained gaze had already guesstimated. An absurdly low number stared back

at her. She hesitated over the save button but eventually pushed it. This was too serious to pretend it would go away on its own.

Jess let herself fall back on the gurney with a sigh. What had caused this? She tried to take a mental step back as if the lines and numbers on the screen belonged to another patient. “Myocarditis? Coronary ischemia? Both are unlikely.” What else? There was something, but she was so tired that her thoughts faded away as if shrouded by thick winter fog.

Diana studied her for a second. “I know it’s rare, but—”

“If it’s rare, you can forget about it. All residents want to capture the elusive zebra, but all we ever see are plain horses.” Jess grimaced. If she had a dollar for every suggestion of a rare disease from a student or resident that had turned out to be another routine case, she wouldn’t ever have to work another day.

“Indulge me for a second, just like I indulged in your secret examination here.” Diana’s tone was gently teasing, something Jess had never experienced at work.

Jess couldn’t summon the energy to protest. She nodded and gestured for Diana to go on.

“I recently read an article about peripartum cardiomyopathy and how it’s a severely underdiagnosed disease. Most women have a mild case, and the symptoms are similar to ordinary exhaustion and lack of sleep, but some develop an acute heart failure. What do you think?”

“PPCM?” The idea sliced through the fog in her mind like a signal fire. It was rare, but everything fit. She was a healthy woman without prior history of heart disease who had delivered a child not long ago. Maybe Diana was on to something. “We can’t test for it. We’d have to rule out everything else first. Let’s call a colleague of mine, and you present the facts. If he agrees with your conclusion, I’m willing to entertain the idea.”

“Who do you want me to call?” Diana fished her phone from her scrub pocket.

Jess considered this for a second. Whoever she called, the news would spread faster than a wildfire. If she had to face her department, she might as well start from the top and involve her boss right away. “Call Dr. Huong.”

* * *

Heart Failure

The angry vibration of her phone woke Jess from the first deep sleep she'd had in weeks. She reached for it, going more by feel than sight in the dark and unfamiliar hospital room that was illuminated by the monitor next to her bed.

Two past nine. Shit. She had intended to close her eyes for half an hour before calling her mom to let her know she'd have to stay the night, but that had been more than four hours ago.

She swiped to answer. "Hi, Mom."

"Jess, are you still at work? I don't know if I should be angry or concerned." Her mom didn't sound angry, so maybe she hadn't fucked up too much.

"Yeah, but..." How could she tell her mom on the phone that everything had changed this afternoon and her life had come tumbling down like a house of cards? "Something happened."

"Are you okay?" The concern in her mom's voice nearly broke her.

Jess swallowed and balled her hands into fists. The pain of the nails digging into the soft flesh kept the tears at bay. Barely. "Yes. No, not really. But I will be. It turns out I have PPCM and have to stay here. Can you watch Ella overnight?"

"Of course I'll take care of her, don't worry. But what is PPCM? Is this a kind of overnight shift?"

Oh, right. Her mom had her own PhD and had been married to a cardiologist for over forty years, but how could she expect her to know what this acronym meant? "No, It's a medical condition. Peripartum cardiomyopathy. It means my heart is temporarily damaged and I have to be careful for the next few weeks." *Or months.* But that wasn't something she wanted to think about or admit out loud. "The recovery rate is very good. It'll sort itself out when I take some medication." Or not, but she didn't want to think about that either.

"Oh my God, honey. What happened? Do you want me to come to the hospital?"

Yes. Her inner child she thought she'd outgrown over twenty years ago wanted her mom to come and hold her while they cried together. But that would be selfish. Her mom shouldn't have to drive here in the evening, lugging Ella around. They both needed their sleep. "No. I'm fine. If you take care of Ella, I can get a bit of sleep and come and get her in the

morning.” It took all the acting skills she had learned during med school to keep the neediness from her voice.

“Are you sure? But let me at least come and get you. Let me take care of you. I can stay with you in your condo, or you can come home with me.”

The way her mom insisted would have been annoying any other day. It reminded Jess that she was weak and helpless like Ella. She sighed. “Can we talk about it tomorrow? I’m too tired to think.”

“Oh, Jess, I’m so sorry, honey. What do you need right now?” The compassion was worse than the concern, and it tugged at Jess’s composure until it threatened to unravel.

I won’t cry. I won’t cry in a fucking hospital bed. In my own fucking department. Where anyone can come and see me and blab about it to the whole fucking staff. “Just...nothing. Please.” She choked on the last word.

“Okay. We’ll sort it all out later. Tomorrow morning I’ll pick you up, and we’ll plan the next steps together. When do you want me to come?” Here was the mom she needed. No fussing, just practical reassurance.

“Thanks.” The paperwork should be ready early, even if Jess had to do it herself. If she set her alarm to six, she could even get a couple of hours of paperwork in. “Could you come around eight?”

“I’ll be there. Sleep well. I love you.”

“Love you too.” Jess voice shook. When had she said this last to her mom?

She rubbed her eyes. Sleep. She needed to get back to sleep.

As if she could with all the problems looming ahead like the ascent of a mountain. She’d have to plan every step and handhold carefully so she wouldn’t fall.

TO CONTINUE READING,
PLEASE PURCHASE

HEART FAILURE

BY CHRIS ZETT

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