

# GRAVEYARD SHIFT

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SAMPLE CHAPTERS

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"I just need a refill, doc." The emaciated, over-tanned woman glared at me from the black vinyl bed of St. Joseph's ER exam room number 4. "I ran out over the holidays. My stomach hurts so bad, I want to puke."

"Right, Ms. Goody," I said, eyeing the crumpled bag of chips she'd tossed at the garbage can and missed. Whenever the triage nurse wants to indicate that the patient's 10/10 abdominal pain is B.S., she'll write, *Says pain 10/10. Eating chips.*

And guess what? Narcotic addicts often complain about stomach pain, nausea, and vomiting.

It was 23:06, Lori Goody was my inaugural patient on my first emergency room night shift back in Montreal, and I was in no mood for bull when I had nine horrid hours to go.

I handed back her empty, yellow pill bottle. "The problem is, you refilled this prescription a week ago. You should have enough Dilaudid to last you until next month. It's only January eleventh."

The patient pushed herself into a sitting position, her brown eyes narrowed behind fake eyelashes. Since she looked like Miss Anorexia, I secretly marvelled that she had enough muscle mass to prop herself up. "What's your problem? You a doctor?"

"Yes. I'm Dr. Sze." I showed her my badge and adjusted the stethoscope hung around the back of my neck. "We're trying not to prescribe narcotics because over 17,000 Americans died from prescription opioids in 2017." It hit Canada, too—about half that number in the past two years—although most of them overdosed on synthetic Fentanyl bought unlabeled on the street. "Ms. Goody, I checked the blood work from your last visit. Your potassium was slightly high—"

She waved her hand at me. "I heard of you. Hope Sze." She pronounced it like Zee, which is close enough. "You're the one who's always running around with murderers."

Stung, I said, "I don't *run around*. I've solved a few cases—"

"Get me a real doctor. One who's not in school anymore, and one who doesn't think she's the police."

I glanced at the door behind me. I could grab the supervising physician. Even though I'm a doctor, I'm what used to be called an intern, and I think patients have the right to refuse trainees.

On the other hand, I'd have to bug Dr. Chia, who was finishing up her evening shift with me on the ambulatory, or walk-in, side. I'd already messed up an intubation with Dr. Chia at the beginning of my medical residency six months ago.

No, I'd battle it out for a few minutes with a narcotic-seeking patient instead of immediately weeping on my staff. I tried to smile. "Ms. Goody, I am an M.D. doing my post-graduate residency training—"

"Right. You're a resident. That's useless. Get me the real doctor."

I sucked in my cheeks and checked the door to my left and then the one behind me again, wishing that Lori Goody would take off.

The white-walled examining room barely felt big enough for the two of us plus the examining room bed, a chair, and the newly-added ledge that squashed me against the right wall as I checked the monitor for St. Joe's brand new electronic record system, SARKET.

"Got it? Or maybe you no understand Engleesh?" The patient jabbed a pink acrylic nail at me.

Oh, my God. She'd noticed my Asian heritage and was trying to

mimic a Chinese accent. My instinct was to face punch her, but as a doctor, you have to act professionally and smile even though patients will report you at the drop of a nun's cap.

"Maybe because you're too busy making *Fentanyl*?"

Ugh. She must have read those headlines like *China Is Poisoning America With Fentanyl*. I gazed at her, ignoring her T-shirt slogan, BL♣W ME, I'M IRISH. "Actually, China made Fentanyl a controlled substance, Ms. Goody—"

"For fuck's sake. Get me the real doctor. My heart is racing. You're giving me a heart attack." She placed her palm on her chest and hyperventilated, exaggerating the stringy tendons of her neck as well as minimal boobage.

Lori Goody was 35 years old. She'd only have a heart attack with seriously nasty genes and/or cocaine and speed.

Although, speaking of drugs, she had that look, the one my new boyfriend, Tucker, called "rode hard and put away wet": bleached brown hair, darker skin than me even though she was white enough to insult my ancestry, uneven teeth, frosted pink lipstick that might have looked good a few decades ago, and grimy running shoes with no socks despite the icy January weather.

I approached her cautiously, reaching for the navy stethoscope draping the back of my neck. "I can listen to your heart—"

She seized both ends of the stethoscope and wrenched them in opposite directions, to strangle me.

I immediately brought my fists together between us and tried to knock her arms away. Kind of like Wonder Woman banging her magic bracelets together and then spreading her arms apart.

I'd taken a few self-defence classes, but learned this move while practicing Akido with my friend Ginger. Also, external shoulder rotators are stronger than internal rotators. I knew that from our clinical methods course, when I practiced on another small, female medical student.

The problem was, Lori Goody had crossed both ends of the stethoscope so tightly around my neck, I couldn't wedge my fingers between the rubber tube and my own skin. The only way I could get any leeway was to press on my own throat, indenting it to try and wiggle under the stethoscope.

Not going to happen.

*C'mon, Hope. Time to change tactics.*

I dug my nails into her fingers to pry them off. I had long, strong nails, and I was willing to draw blood.

She didn't seem to feel my attempts to carve up her digits. Her grip tightened.

This close, her eyes glittered with glee, even more manic behind

those half-inch eyelashes. She cackled. "I'm going to kill you! I'm going to dance in your blood!"

*You'll never get a prescription that way*, I thought, but as I gasped, she wound it tighter.

My brain grew hazy. My vision darkened at the edges.

I'd faced down killers before, and I was going to die like this? Strangled by an opioid addict with my own stethoscope?

*Hell, no.*

I grabbed her shoulders and kned her in the stomach with everything I had. Her wiry abdominal muscles caved in.

She bent over with a silent gasp. The pressure eased a little, but not enough.

I drove my right thumb into her closest eye. It gave a pulpy squish.

She screeched so loudly that it made my eardrums crinkle up in horror, but the important part was that her hands loosened, and I could breathe again.

I stumbled backwards, spots in my vision. My stethoscope fell to the floor, its diaphragm banging on my toes, but I didn't care. As long as that weapon was away from my throat, I could afford to replace a stethoscope. *Add it to my line of credit, sir.*

I backed up so I could keep an eye on Lori Goody while I wrenched the door handle with my right hand. Now I thanked God for a tiny room. It made the exits literally two footsteps away.

"Oh, no you don't." Lori Goody leapt toward me, displaying her crooked teeth and—where did she get that?—a green-handled disposable scalpel, its steel blade pointed directly at me. "I'm going to cut your tits off."

What a bizarre thing to say. I flung the door open. Since it hinged inward, I had to take a step back to escape into the hall.

Dr. Callendar, a dreadful family medicine doctor who moonlit in the emergency room, stood framed in the doorway, blocking my exit. "What is going on—"

He broke off as Lori Goody lunged toward me.

I shoved Dr. Callendar backward as I scrambled for freedom. If he wanted to chat, or do hand to hand combat, better him than me.

Dr. Callendar was bigger than me, at least 5'7", but he put up no resistance, so we ended up stumbling into the hallway in a sort of human snowball, him, me, and a screeching Lori Goody, who yanked my hair backwards so hard that my scalp screamed and my neck spasmed as she jerked me upright.

I blocked out the agony. I reached for the claws of the beast ironically named Lori Goody, trying to imprison them.

I twisted my body clockwise as best I could with my hair still clenched.

I had to know where the scalpel was.

I caught a glimpse of the green scalpel handle. She was right-handed. That arm was coming down.

I brought my left arm up in a hard block, into her inner wrist. *Thank you, Ginger.*

"Bitch!" Lori Goody squeezed out, but her wrist flexed and her fingers spasmed open. The scalpel hit the floor.

She lunged for it, then changed her mind and charged me, snarling, with both hands raised in the air.

I kicked her still-tender stomach. Actually, she came at me so fast, I ended up kneeling her and belatedly extending my leg as she keeled over.

"Dr. Sze!" Dr. Callendar shouted.

Typical that he'd scream at me while a patient literally tried to stab me in the back and/or carve off my breasts.

"Code White," I thundered back at him as loudly as possible with a mashed throat. That was Callendar's cue to alert everyone that a patient was out of control. A Code White immediately summoned security, not to mention orderlies, nurses, and a doctor to pin this nutbar down (physical restraints) and start drugging the bejeezus out of her (chemical restraints).

Hell, with someone this insane, we needed the police. Preferably all of them.

Dr. Callendar stayed sprawled on the floor outside ambulatory room number 4, still hollering at me, but a nurse took up the call.

"CODE WHITE. CODE WHITE. AMBULATORY SIDE," she

shouted, and the nurses on both halves of the ER stared at us for a microsecond before one of them broke toward us, and the rest began to swarm.

Meanwhile, Lori Goody bent over her sore stomach, covering one eye, panting beside Dr. Callendar, but her good eye lasered in on me. "I'm gonna kill you." She started to run, so I ran, too, toward the opposite side of the ER.

There was a wide double door between the ambulatory (walk-in) and acute (ambulance) sides of the ER. That was how we wheeled patients out for X-rays or up to the floor. I could have swerved right beside the old X-ray light boxes and punched open that door, fleeing the emerg altogether. Only another short right would take me down the hall and straight out the ER exit, streaking past a startled security guard.

But what if Lori Goody chased me outside, into the night?

What if the security guard had left his post to scratch his balls?

I couldn't count on waiting patients to do anything except sit and stare as she eviscerated me with a scalpel.

Behind me, she swore, "I'm gonna fuckin' kill you. I'll cut your eyes out, I'll eat your nipples—"

I flinched, but I wouldn't freeze like Dr. Callendar.

I dashed for the nursing station on the acute side, a loose circle of counter space topped by Plexiglass, while the clerk with the punk rock haircut gaped at me, and more nurses and orderlies converged on Lori Goody.

"Code White! Code White!" I yelled at their backs, like a raspy jockey urging them to gallop toward the finish line.

Soon a blessedly flat woman's voice sounded over the loudspeakers. "Code White, Emergency Department. *Code Blanc, Salle D'urgence.*"

"It's okay, Hope, it's okay," said Julie, a female préposée, or orderly, as she shouldered past me, which almost made me laugh.

Anyone with eyes (and Lori Goody might only half fall into this category now) could tell that it wasn't rainbows and moonbeams outside exam room 4.

I had to escape from Lori Goody without putting everyone else in jeopardy.

"Call the police!" I snapped at Julie.

I needed a weapon.

I cast my eyes around the acute side, the side where the bedridden patients lay in stretchers around the perimeter of the room, plus anywhere else we could fit them around the nursing station.

I ignored the paperwork and clipboards strewn over the countertops—useless, unless I thought I could briefly blind her with a blizzard of faxes and reports.

I bypassed the three new computers for SARKET. Also worthless, unless I wanted to heave an LED screen at her.

I did once hear of a PCP patient who ripped out an old school TV embedded in the wall. Another PCP-er strapped to the bed in five-point restraints somehow managed to flip himself into standing position with the bed on his back, like the world's most menacing turtle.

PCP made you that strong and that crazy. Maybe I'd stumbled on Lori Goody's diagnosis. She'd run out of Dilaudid and switched to phencyclidine. PCP was before my time, but maybe drugs were like fashion and cycled in and out every few decades.

My kingdom for a metal urinal. Now, that would have made a decent shield. It was a shame both for safety and the environment that we'd moved on to disposable urinals and bed pans made out of cardboard.

Finally, I spotted someone's iPad on the counter, open to MDCalc. The owner would kill me, but at this point, I'd take a delayed death over one in the next five minutes. I seized the iPad as my shield. It had a case and a glass front. That would do.

I whipped around to check where Lori Goody had gone. Ouch. Pain pierced my neck, but I ignored it, scanning the room.

Dr. Callendar was so useless, he might have continued her history and physical exam and gotten stabbed in the *cojones* for his troubles.

Ah. If only one good thing would come out of tonight.

Kidding. But I permitted myself a small smile. It felt like Tucker

and I were under constant attack. Why not let the bad guys take a hit once in a while?

Back on the ambulatory side, maybe fifty feet away—I wasn't good with distances—I peered at the scrum of white coats, green scrubs, hair, and twisting arms and legs, at the ambulatory side's mini nursing station, which was really a countertop with rolling stools. They'd turned it into an L shape with an extra computer because of SARKET, but that counter "arm" blocked my view and trapped them in a smaller area.

"Get her arm!" shouted Dr. Chia.

Lori Goody had twisted Dr. Chia's lab coat and, even from halfway across the bay, it looked like LG might break the doctor's wrist.

"I've got her arm. *Aughh!*" That was Dr. Callendar again. He'd started climbing to his feet before LG caught him under the chin. He tipped backward, his black hair headed straight for the ground again.

"Where are all the guards?" a nurse screamed. "Aren't we supposed to have a thousand of them after the OR?"

What happened in the operating room?

Meanwhile, Dr. Chia, Dr. Callendar, two nurses, and the small orderly all tried to pin Lori Goody to the floor. The problem was, with so little room, they bashed into rolling stools and even into each other while she bit and kicked and punched and spat, scaring them into loosening their grip.

I approached cautiously, holding the iPad in front of my chest.

As soon as Lori Goody caught sight of me, she gave a tonsil-rattling howl and struggled upright before the orderly, who was barely taller than my five foot two, somehow knocked her feet out from under her.

LG landed, keening, on her ass.

"Get out of here, Hope," called Dr. Chia.

"I can medicate her. Haldol and Ativan." What the hell. She'd been asking for drugs. We could give them to her, only not the refill she wanted.

"A nurse is on it. You get out. You're making her crazy."

*She was already there.* Still, I reluctantly backed away, iPad blocking my chest (and nipples) as the security guards rushed in. There's a security guard posted right by the ER entrance, maybe another 30 feet away if you cut through the small triage room, so you'd expect them to arrive immediately, but most of them look 200 years old. Speed is not their forte.

We got younger ones this time, a grey-haired, sixtyish white man and a tall, young white guy with glasses and an Adam's apple that seemed to jut from his throat.

"Slow and easy does it," the older guy was saying. He had a pair of handcuffs in his right hand, already open for business. "They've got her. We cuff her wrists, and then we can get her feet."

He was talking instead of moving.

*Go for it,* I silently urged him.

Instead, he gestured at the young guard to open his own set of cuffs. The young guy's hands trembled, and he said, "I don't want an incident."

Dear God. This was not a teachable moment.

"It's not an *incident*, Patrick. It's our job," said the old guard.

I backed further out of range and muttered, "Make them tight." Lori Goody was so skinny, I bet they could use child-sized cuffs on her.

The young security guard opened the cuffs, but he didn't place them over her wrists, even though she pummelled the air and nearly made contact with the orderly's shoulder.

The old guard gestured for Patrick to hurry up, waving his own handcuffs in the air instead of using them.

"Come on," I ground out between my teeth. If it took any longer, I'd have to knock her out with the iPad.

"I've got her, Patrick!" called Julie, who clamped Lori Goody's wrists, like a champ.

"We got her. Move in," the old guard said, but neither of them had managed to touch the patient. "Don't let New Year's get you down, Patrick. We got this. It's our job."

A new, young nurse yelped.

"She bit Amber," Dr. Chia called. "Amber, you get out and wash the bite. I'll write you some Clavulin afterward."

"I'll do it," I said. I hated hanging back helplessly. Writing a prescription was lame, but better than standing at the sidelines and calling, *Olé, olé!*

The mound of people on the floor started writhing in earnest as Lori Goody ululated once more, and Dr. Chia said, "Hope, *you* don't do anything except *get out of here.*"

I stood rooted. If this were my fault, I'd do what I could to get them out of it.

"*Out. Now!*" Dr. Chia roared, and I beat my way back through the growing crowd to the acute side and set the iPad on the counter where I'd found it. At least it had met a gentler fate than Amber, who blinked back tears as one of my favourite nurses, Roxanne, cleaned the bite with Chlorhexidine.

"Make sure you wash it with tons of soap and water," I told them. As we used to say in medical school, the solution to pollution is dilution. Amber needed fewer fancy cleansing products and more old-fashioned scrubbing. Human bites were dirty, and who knew what (or whom) Lori Goody had last eaten.

Roxanne, a petite, fine-boned RN who often joked about her Italian grandmother, had lost her usual grin. She gave me a quick nod, making her wavy brown bob bounce.

Take home lesson: do not mess with nurses. They will stick together and mess you up.

Take home lesson number two: if you're a doctor, even if someone tries to strangle you, keep on truckin'. No one will kiss it better.

Sad. I shook off the melancholy. My phone buzzed in the pocket over my right bum cheek. I'd missed a few texts during the madness, and now someone was calling me.

I reached for my phone, but someone grabbed my elbow.

I jerked back, ready to wallop him.

A surprised Tucker stared down at me. "You okay, Hope? You weren't answering my texts, so I—what happened to your neck?"

I gasped.

My hands jerked toward my neck.

Now that Tucker had mentioned it, and my adrenaline was dying down, just plain breathing scoured my throat. My scalene muscles had seized up. I could hardly speak.

And forget how I must look. I probably sported wild horse eyes and a red-purple necklace of bruises as wide as my stethoscope.

Talking would hurt more, so I did a pantomime for him, pretending to tighten a cord around my own neck.

"You tried to...hang yourself?" he said, eyes widening.

That almost made me laugh. Tucker called us soul mates, and I'd agree 80 percent, but sometimes he got things hilariously wrong. I shook my head and, to save my voice, opened up the Notes app and wrote it down for him on my phone: *Patient tried to strangle me.*

"Are you serious? I mean, of course you're serious, but—"

I rolled my eyes to convey my thoughts, namely, *Why would I joke about this?*

Tucker's fists tightened. "Where is he? Please tell me he's out of here so I don't have to kill him."

I shook my head and pointed at the tangle of people, led by the

security guards. It looked like Patrick had finally, finally managed to handcuff her, and now they were working on her ankles.

"That's—it looks like a woman."

I nodded.

"And are the police even here? Is she sedated?"

I shook my head no and no.

"And you're going to do this night shift, even though someone tried to kill you? Again?"

I held my hands palms up at shoulder level in a joint move that meant both "Back off" and possibly "I surrender." If the night doc excused me, I'd probably leave. But if the doc wanted all hands on deck, I'd stay. That was my job. Although how much good I'd do working mute, I couldn't say.

My phone buzzed and buzzed in my hand. Someone really wanted to talk to me. I almost never answered my cell in the emergency room, but what if something had happened to my parents or my little brother, Kevin?

"You're going down, bitch!" Lori Goody hollered as they rolled her past me, strapped onto a stretcher, into our psychiatry room. Unfortunately, that placed her in the acute side's room 14, almost directly across from me and Tucker. "You think you can get away with it?"

Get away with what? A night shift?

"I'm gonna tell Guillaume about you! He'll squish you like a—like a Chinese cockroach!"

Ugh. I doubted she'd wrestle her racist butt out of her five point restraints and make a phone call. Why hadn't they placed a face mask over her nose and mouth? It wasn't for every Code White, but when they started trying to stab you, surely we had to break out every defence available. Not only would a mask prevent her from spitting on them and discourage biting, but it might muffle some of her braying, too.

I was more worried about my persistent phone caller. The 613 area code number looked familiar enough that I answered the next call, even though it wasn't my parents, and I was trying to save my vocal cords.

A woman said, her voice taut with fear, "Hope. Is Ryan with you?"

My hand tightened on the phone. Tucker's my man now, but I'll love Ryan Wu forever, even after I'm dead and I'm nothing but sun-bleached bones. I forced my vocal cords to adduct. "Hi, Mrs. Wu. No, I'm working. He's not here."

"He's not—but where—Rick, he's not there!" She hung up.

I stared at my phone's flat, black screen in shock. I'd never heard Ryan's mother so panicked. She was a peaceful piano and voice teacher who volunteered at church and made better dumplings than my own grandmother. Ten days after Ryan and I broke up, I ran into her in the grocery store. She hugged me and said into my hair, "I'll always want the best for you, Hope," while her husband nodded awkwardly and stood three feet away.

She shouldn't have spoken to me at all. Ryan had cut me off. He'd blocked my number and my barely-used social media accounts. His friends Terry and Malcolm had immediately unfriended me on Facebook, and I'm sure everyone else did, too. So Cheryl Wu wouldn't call me in the middle of the night unless it was urgent.

And she had told me why.

Ryan was missing. The other half of my heart had vanished.

I knew that anyone who jumped in here on a TV series of my life would wonder what in the blue blazes was going on and why I couldn't pick one team, Tucker or Ryan.

It's complicated. I love both Ryan Wu and John Tucker more than my own soul. Ryan was my first boyfriend, and I will go to my grave loving him. But Tucker and I have been through absolute hell together, including 14/11, a hostage taking on November 14th so excruciating that I can only refer to it by a number. Even flying home from Los Angeles nearly killed us—and Tucker and I ended up sort of engaged.

Which means I'm monogamous with Tucker now. I know it doesn't compute, but neither does anything else I touch.

In response, Ryan slashed me out of his life. Totally understandable.

He's the perfect man. Well, perfect except that I'm agnostic and

he used to be the World's #1 Christian. That meant he wanted to marry me and have two to four kids. He already had a loving foster dog, Roxy. So he was mega-trustworthy and he was so hot that it hurt to look at him. It doesn't get any better than that.

I still ached for Ryan every day, every minute. Tucker took me out for Indian food one night, and all I could do was cry because the pakoras reminded me of Ryan.

I'd assumed Ryan would be okay. Destroyed like I was, yes. But fuelled by righteous fury and surrounded by dozens of pure and lovely church girls, he'd mend faster than I would.

Instead, he'd now disappeared so thoroughly that he'd panicked his own parents.

I called Mrs. Wu back, ignoring the nurse printing an electrocardiogram on one side of us, the clerk paging ICU on the other, Lori Goody threatening to report us all to the College, and Tucker's eyes drilling a hole into my profile.

My call went to voice mail. "Mrs. Wu. You know I haven't heard from Ryan in two weeks—" And three days and twelve hours. My throat spasmed. I missed him so much that I could hardly speak, even before Lori Goody tried to take me down. "He, uh, blocked my number." He wouldn't even pick up when I called from my friend Tori's phone, or a pay phone. He probably refused to respond to all numbers from Montreal's area code, 514. "But if he shows up, I'll call you right away. Let me know how long he's been missing, and if you have any leads, and..."

Most people wouldn't rocket into 911 mode when their ex-boyfriends melted away. But if you were Dr. Hope Sze and had barely survived a gun to your temple, you'd go nuclear.

"...tell him I love him."

My voice broke again. Why did I say that?

Because it was true.

I could delete that message, but fuck it. It was true. If nothing else, I told the truth.

I hung up instead, my heart banging like a rabbit trying to kick its way out of my chest.

I couldn't look at Tucker.

He swore until he ran out of breath.

What could I say? *I love you, too. Insanely, insatiably, but not exclusively.* All of it was true, but it wouldn't help.

Tucker threw back his stool and started pacing. I wouldn't blame him if he ditched me, too.

I felt like a toxic waste dump.

I poisoned everything and everyone I loved. Tucker would be better off without me.

Bebe Rexha's "I'm a Mess" rang in my ears. I had it on my phone on replay during my crying jags.

Unfortunately, I needed to get back to work.

"I love you. I'm sorry," I whispered, and turned to the rack of charts. At night, they consolidated the patients' charts, both ambulatory and acute, on the acute side.

Tucker watched me, simmering with rage.

I said over my shoulder, "I'm sorry. I love you."

The rack of clipboards blurred before my eyes. Because St. Joe's SARKET computerized record system was so new, they had a hybrid system where they printed out a sheet with each patient's ID, health card number, and chief complaint, but you had to type up the complete history and physical and enter orders on either a desktop computer or a WOW ("workstation on wheels"). It was originally called a COW, or computer on wheels, until they decided that was insulting to our bovine friends.

I made my way toward the ambulatory exam rooms. They were so small that you couldn't wheel in a WOW. You had to use the computer within the room or write or dictate later at the desktops. The nursing station counter was so miniature, only two people could fit comfortably on the main part of the L.

If Dr. Chia returned to work on these desktops, Tucker would have to move, or slide over to a third stool. And if the big male nurse, Bill, happened to work ambulatory, the rest of us would end up crammed on the other end. Maybe that was why he never came over here.

I stared at my next chart, a 24-year-old male with a sore throat. My eyes blurred. *Dude, I know all about sore throats.*

I tapped on the escape key, waking up the desktop computer to register myself as the MD looking after this patient. Because of the computerized system, I now had to wait until Amber was triaged and registered as a patient before I could prescribe her Clavulin.

When I walked to exam room 1 for the sore throat, Tucker reappeared by my side.

"Hope," he said.

I turned to him, blushing already.

"It's not okay," he said, struggling to control his face and his voice. His brown eyes burned with hostility. "But I know something's up. What happened to Ryan?"

I closed my eyes, trying not to let the tears out. *Tucker still loves me.*

He immediately reached for my hair, sweeping my bangs off my forehead. We didn't even brush hands at work, because all he had to do was look at me, and Roxanne would hoot, "Get a room!" But we both craved that brief touch.

"I don't know," I whispered. My throat felt like Lori Goody had taken a cheese grater to it.

"Hope, we said no more secrets."

I exhaled. Transparency. That's what Tucker had said, actually. *One hundred percent transparency.* And I'd told him that was unrealistic. Everyone needed some privacy, a bit of mystery, for heaven's sake.

He'd gazed at me with those brown eyes—such a marked contrast from his wheat blond hair—and he'd said, "I don't."

Maybe that was true because he truly wanted to mind-meld with me. Maybe it wasn't. Either way, tonight I was stuck in the emergency department until at least 8 a.m. If I told Tucker what was going down, maybe he could start searching for Ryan.

Which Ryan would hate. He was proud. He was the opposite of Tucker, more like a panther.

Quiet. Private. Stalking his prey. A beast in bed.

Tucker was a party in your face. *Woo hoo! I brought the beer! Not*

*Molson's, but a microbrew called Minot, made in tiny batches in my new friend's basement! Best beer of your life!*

I said, "Ryan's missing."

Tucker's body turned rigid.

"His mom called me. Shows you how desperate they are." I leaned into him and pressed my eyes into his scrub top, letting the tears soak in, even though I'd probably get conjunctivitis from his work clothes. I felt like I deserved it.

He wrapped his arms around my shoulders, kissing my forehead. Although he'd been working for the past 16 hours, he still smelled like soap and deodorant, along with the faint note of his sweat. I inhaled his scent, which gave me the courage to say, "I'm working. Could you—"

Tucker exhaled. He and Ryan had been fighting over me since, mmm, August. So less than six months. Not that long, but very, very intense.

"Unless you want my emerg shift?" I joked into his chest. Both of us had missed too much work since we were taken hostage November 14th. The faculty was working with us to make sure we graduated on time, but Tucker was out of action for two months after two surgeries. He wrote a paper and made one month a research block, but neither of us could miss any more clinical time without Serious Consequences.

Tucker didn't reply for an agonizingly long moment, making me hold my breath.

At last, when he exhaled again, his core muscles contracted so much that his abdomen no longer made contact with mine. He was withdrawing from me.

My eyes spewed some more tears, but I didn't dare wipe them on him. I pulled away and let them fall down my face.

Tucker's rough voice cut through the air, stopping me. "Do you have any more details about him? When was the last time they had contact with him, what was he doing, did he leave a note—"

"Nothing," I whispered, and I was crying in earnest. Ryan had sliced me out of his life. It was like an exorcism.

Tucker placed his fingers on my back with excessive care. He loathed my longing for Ryan, but he knew he couldn't excise it. At long last, he said, "Don't worry."

I leaned back to stare into his eyes and examine the lines of his face.

His brow furrowed, his eyes staring into mine. "I'll take care of it."

Ryan was a him, not an it. I opened my mouth.

"He's not allowed to become a martyr." Tucker stepped away from me.

"Thank you," said the clerk, who made a show of squeezing around us to scoop up a paper on the counter behind us.

We walked away from the desk, not speaking, but he'd picked up on my fears exactly. What if Ryan was so destroyed by me/us that he'd killed himself?

Not that I considered myself so crucial, but Tucker and I weren't the only ones damaged by 14/11. Ryan lost his faith. In a way, it worked for me, because it meant he gave up abstinence and fell into bed (and into the car, and into the shower) with me.

But now that I'd chosen Tucker again, it had left Ryan with nothing. No woman, and no faith to hold him back from the abyss.

I knew I had to get back to that sore throat patient. I knew that tonight's evaluation was already in the toilet, and that I could fail my year or even my entire residency.

But Ryan was more important. He was one of the human beings I loved the most in the world, even if I could never have him again.

If I had to, I would leave medicine to search for him right here and right now.

So Tucker stepped into the breach. After working for 16 hours, he'd jump into a car to track down his rival in another city, with almost no clue where he was going.

For me. Because he knew that was what I wanted. More than escaping this night shift. More than saving my own skin. I needed Ryan.

I turned to Tucker. "You'll find Ryan."

He gave a curt nod.

"Alive. And sane."

His lips twisted. After a pause, he said, "Well. He's in love with you, isn't he?"

I punched his shoulder. It bounced off in a comical, girly way. For once, I didn't care.

He kissed me and left without saying another word.