

A Saviour for Christmas

D.K. Fynn



A Saviour for Christmas

A proud single mother.

A paediatrician with a traumatic past.

The boy who unites them.

Mary Jane

Meet Mary Jane, the mother of Albi, who is the love of her life. While Mary is Albi's proud mother, she knows someone is missing: a strong male role model who is good enough for her...and her son.

Albi

Lately, Albi has noticed that the other kids at school have fathers. Albi has begun to ask about his father...and Mary is not sure what to say. She doesn't know if Albi is mature enough to understand the truth about him and his mother.

Jeremy

Doctor Jeremy Rowan is a former delivery room doctor. In the opening pages of this story, we see what happened to one of his patients. It's this opening event that drives Doctor Rowan to help as many children and families as possible.

The Story

One day, something happens to Albi, and when Mary takes him to the hospital, the doctor is struck with sympathy. *Albi bears a striking facial resemblance to Doctor Rowan's patient.*

As Doctor Rowan gets to know Mary and Albi, a bond begins to form.

However, things take another turn.

Doctor Rowan's staff are beginning to think he's breaching the doctor-patient barrier, concerned that his judgement is clouded.

Doctor Rowan will have to make a decision. How much is he willing to risk for Mary's and Albi's well-being, while facing with the disapproval of his colleagues and medical director?

How far will the good doctor go to help the family he has grown so close to?

This is a heartwarming, inspiring Christmas love story that serves as a testimony to the power of love and the saving grace of faith.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are a product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

Quoted Bible verse in chapter twenty-five from [Luke 2:7](#) of the *King James Bible*. Cambridge Edition: 1769; *King James Bible Online*, 2018. www.kingjamesbibleonline.org.

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Dedication

I would like to dedicate this book to two people: *my parents*. Lately, the lengths you two went to has really dawned on me, and I want to honour you for that. I hope you can be proud of this.

Acknowledgements

Where does one begin to acknowledge the many people who have helped shape who he is?

So many people have either directly or indirectly shaped who I am as a writer. Though I would like to acknowledge each of them individually, I don't remember all of their names; and even if I did, to list all of them would make this quite an extensive list.

That said, I think I should narrow my focus to a handful of individuals who had the most direct impact on this work.

I should first thank God, or Source, or **whatever It is that was there before the beginning** that created this Universe.

I mentioned **my parents** in the dedication. Thanks again.

The earliest memory I have of me being a writer was in 8th grade, and it was validated by my teacher, **Mr. Blair Gullickson**, who commented on how much I liked to write. "Little" comments that we hear in our formative years are exactly that: formative.

[Geoff Shaw](#), thanks for convincing me that writing fiction is a worthy pursuit.

In July of 2017, I invested in a writing course titled "The Partridge Method," which is by [Britt Malka](#). It was then that I had the inspiration to write something. You're now reading it.

When you want the best, and the timer's ticking, who else does an aspiring author go to? How about a bestselling author? [Shashane Wallace](#), thanks for your time. You helped me take my outline and develop it into this novella.

Most recently, my friend **Maureen White** expressed a lot of interest and enthusiasm when I told her I was releasing this. She even offered to beta read it, which I gladly accepted. Thankfully, she liked this book, and was eager to share it with others. That's one of the best things that can happen for a new author, and of that, I'm immensely grateful.

And last, but certainly not least, is you, **my reader**. I respect your time. Although this ebook is free, I know there are two things money can never buy: time and energy. So, I've done my level best to make sure that your time and energy are not wasted. From this book's conception, to the writing, to the editing and formatting, I've taken the utmost care to ensure that this is a work of quality. I hope that's reflected in your reading experience.

Table of Contents

[A Saviour for Christmas](#)

[Dedication](#)

[Acknowledgements](#)

[Author's Note: My Idea for This Story](#)

[Prologue: 7 Years Ago](#)

[Chapter One: The Present Day With Mary Jane](#)

[Chapter Two: "And Pray Tell, Why Not?"](#)

[Chapter Three: "His Next Question Took Me by Surprise."](#)

[Chapter Four: A Little Talk](#)

[Chapter Five: Danny Keeps Teasing Me](#)

[Chapter Six: Albi Needs Me](#)

[Chapter Seven: "I'll Take a Pass on That."](#)

[Chapter Eight: "My First Opinion is A.L.L."](#)

[Chapter Nine: The Registry](#)

[Chapter Ten: An Impatient Mother](#)

[Chapter Eleven: This?](#)

[Chapter Twelve: "And...if This Doesn't Work?"](#)

[Chapter Thirteen: Mom and Dr. Rowan are Talking](#)

[Chapter Fourteen: Taking a Toll on Mary Jane](#)

[Chapter Fifteen: Mary Sleeps In](#)

[Chapter Sixteen: "If You're Not Able to Cope..."](#)

[Chapter Seventeen: A Request the Doctor Wasn't Ready For](#)

[Chapter Eighteen: "It's Not Our Place."](#)

[Chapter Nineteen: "I Had Promised Him He Wouldn't be Alone..."](#)

[Chapter Twenty: "You Have My Word."](#)

[Chapter Twenty-One: "Call Me Jeremy."](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Two: Maybe I'm Not in This Alone](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Three: That's All He Can Be](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Four: "...Tugged at My Heartstrings"](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Five: Nothing Seems to be Working](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Six: The Light of Possibility](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Seven: The Distance a Mother's Willing to Go](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Eight: Meeting With a Lawyer](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Nine: If Only Mary Had Listened](#)
[Chapter Thirty: Slipping Deeper](#)
[Chapter Thirty-One: “This is Hardly the Time for This.”](#)
[Chapter Thirty-Two: “I Never Knew Waiting Could Be So Hard.”](#)
[Chapter Thirty-Three: An Unexpected Surprise](#)
[Chapter Thirty-Four: “But That's Where You're Wrong!”](#)
[Chapter Thirty-Five: “I Know What it's Like”](#)
[Chapter Thirty-Six: “I Didn't Find it Funny at All”](#)
[Chapter Thirty-Seven: Accusation of Love](#)
[Chapter Thirty-Eight: An Unexpected Call](#)
[Chapter Thirty-Nine: A Warning Worth Risking](#)
[Chapter Forty: “Little Did I Know...”](#)
[Chapter Forty-One: Grace's Lingering Doubt](#)
[Chapter Forty-Two: An Overheard Conversation](#)
[Chapter Forty-Three: The Silence Spoke](#)
[Chapter Forty-Four: Something Very, Very Interesting](#)
[Chapter Forty-Five: No False Hope](#)
[Chapter Forty-Six: Where is He?](#)
[Chapter Forty-Seven: “Is it Over?”](#)
[Chapter Forty-Eight: Choosing His Words Carefully](#)
[Chapter Forty-Nine: Pondering](#)
[Chapter Fifty: “He Had Given Me Directions, But Why?”](#)
[Chapter Fifty-One: “None of us Could Have Predicted This. Not Even You.”](#)
[Chapter Fifty-Two: “Even Before I Found Out.”](#)
[Epilogue](#)
[About the Author](#)
[Now That You’ve Read This, Did You Know That...](#)
[Yours Free: An Interview With the Author \(in Exchange for Your Email Address\)](#)

[Why We Love Romance](#)

Author's Note: My Idea for This Story

Dear Reader,

The core message of Christmas, as taught in the Christian tradition, was part of the genesis that sparked this story. I don't wish to extrapolate on it here, but I will say that it's partially encompassed in the title, *A Saviour for Christmas*. As I hope you'll come to understand, when you finish this story, you'll find that the title has a double meaning: a meaning that's global, and a meaning that's specifically significant to this story.

I kindly ask a favor: will you read this novella to it's completion? If you do, then I believe the last lines will spark some intrigue, perhaps making you remark, "How interesting."

Happy Reading,

D.K. Fynn

December 2018

PS: This story deals with a sensitive subject. But, like all good romances, it has a happy ending, and the cover image alludes to that.

Prologue: 7 Years Ago

“Excellent work, team,” Dr. Billings announced, his words a bit muffled by the white polypropylene three-ply material which covered his nose, mouth, and chin. The greater portion of his face was concealed by a matching disposable surgical cap and mask. His smiling brown eyes swept over the members of his surgical team, who had been splendid and thorough from start to finish. “Now let’s get on with the sutures real quick and call it a day.”

Dr. Jeremy Rowan, observing the procedure, smiled at the patient on the operating table. Being related to the patient, he wasn’t allowed to operate directly on her, but being a staff member, he was allowed to view the operation. The patient on the operating table was his wife, Jacqueline, her blonde hair tucked beneath a cap. Behind closed eyelids lay her fascinating blue eyes. A floral Johnny gown covered her slender frame. He felt this was the most prolonged operation he had overseen in a long time.

It’s almost over, sweetie, he thought to himself.

Beep beep beep!

Dr. Rowan’s heart skipped a beat, then sped up with the sound reverberating from the heart monitor. It was displaying Jacqueline's electrocardiogram tracing. Being a doctor himself, he knew this wasn't expected. The frantic beeping, which invaded the peace of a quiet, rhythmic beat, rendered him immobile. His face went white, his mouth dry as he stared in confusion at the flurry of the staff rushing about him. The scene was familiar and surreal—familiar because he had seen a few operations go wrong, and yet, surreal because his own wife was the patient. He stared at Jacqueline's sleeping, peaceful face, his lips slightly parted to accommodate the strong gusts of breaths puffing from him.

He watched Dr. Billings work on controlling Jacqueline's heartbeat—or rather, *trying* to control it. *This man brings a comforting calm when he takes charge*, Dr. Rowan thought. His colleague was giving commands in soft, but urgent, tones.

Dr. Tate, her voice strained, remarked, “No change.” She glanced up to look at Dr. Billings, and then at Dr. Rowan in surprise, as though just realizing he was still in the room. Her thought was, *He's gonna try to interfere*. “Go!” she urged him. “Dr. Rowan, g-”

“No.” Dr. Rowan was certain he spoke the words, but the sound didn't escape his frozen lips.

Dr. Billings snapped, “Dr. Tate, the defibrillator,” and the woman promptly forgot about Dr. Rowan and focused on her job. The next few seconds might determine Jacqueline's fate.

Dr. Rowan clutched at his heart, wondering if his was failing too. A long, beeping sound filled his ears, and he had to lean on the gurney, which was now abandoned in an effort to resuscitate his wife's heart. He winced when her body jerked, but that insistent beeping of the heart monitor terrorized him.

Come on baby, not now. This is our time. Oh please, God, not now.

The words reverberated in his mind while he watched the doctors. His distraught emotions eclipsed his expertise in the medical field. The irony of the situation became painfully real for him: here he was—a doctor—trained to help people, and yet, here he was, technically not allowed to help his own wife.

Dr. Rowan was too swept up to realize it, but he was fighting the most intense, internal struggle of his life: *I can't just do nothing!*

He had to just stand there—or, perhaps just sit there—and watch. To try to interfere might only make things worse.

Helpless.

He understood the entire procedure taking place before him. It was, after all, quite routine. The electrodes were connected to her chest. Shocks were administered, and her body jerked. Someone moved forward to administer chest compressions, and his heart broke at the damage the procedure might be doing to her ribs. Still, the beeping was indicating that something wasn't right.

In his mind, he demanded, *Give her epinephrine*, but it was unnecessary. These were expert doctors, and she was administered the drug without his input. They repeated the process. Over and over, they worked on her, not giving up.

But then...they did.

Silence.

"Jeremy," Dr. Billings said, his voice heavy with regret. His eyes, which, only minutes earlier had been full of humor, were now red and glossy with unshed tears for his co-worker and friend. "I'm sor-"

"No!" Dr. Rowan, though his body was weighted down with grief, lunged forward. "No!" he cried again, reaching his wife, wrestling the defibrillator from Dr. Tate's hands. "You can't stop trying!"

The tears leaked from Dr. Billings' eyes, and he averted his eyes from his grief-stricken colleague. His team members had their heads bowed, and not a single dry eye remained in Operating Theater #23. The newly widowed husband leaned over his wife, defibrillator forgotten. "Jacki...Jacki...please," he pleaded, clutching her face in his palms.

For Dr. Billings, this was a failure, and although logic told him he did his best, he still felt that he had fallen short. It was almost too much to endure. *I badly need a smoke*, he thought, forgetting that he had quit several months ago. He just needed something, anything to get the heart-wrenching scene from his mind. Never had a death moved him such as this one.

It was a sad day indeed.

Jacqueline had, only hours earlier, just given birth.

Chapter One: The Present Day With Mary Jane

“Miss Tennant! Miss Tenant!”

I turned to smile at Tommy, who was running into the room as fast as his little legs could carry him. I expected to see my seven-year-old son, Albi, chasing after him, since they were on a play date, but he was nowhere to be seen.

“Yes, Tommy?”

“It’s Albi!” he cried, tears started spilling from his eyes, alarming me. “He’s bleeding and lying on the floor.”

Frightened, I ran for the playroom downstairs where the boys had been playing. The room was child-proof and shouldn’t have had any object that would cause serious injury. When it came to Albi's safety, some would say I was overprotective.

I noticed Albi looking pale and dazed from his position on the floor. He was pushing himself up on his wiry arms to a sitting position. I scanned him for any cuts or bruises, then knelt beside him.

“Albi, baby, are you hurt?” I asked, running my hands down his body, checking for anything abnormal.

He raised his head to me, and that was when I saw the blood running from his nostril. “Oooh...you’ve got a nosebleed. Come, let’s get that cleaned up.”

I lifted him in my arms and carried him to the kitchen, where I placed him on a stool and grabbed the roll of napkins from the top of the fridge. “Sit up straight, baby,” I encouraged him, my first-aid training kicking in. “I’m going to pinch your nostrils, and you breathe through your mouth, okay?”

He nodded, and as I said I would, I pinched his nostrils together. Checking on the timer of the microwave, I calculated ten minutes, then turned to Tommy, who was lingering just a few feet away, watching quietly...anxiously.

I snagged a second stool. "Come have a seat, Tommy," I motioned, then placed the stool so that he could sit beside Albi. I noticed that the colour was returning to his face, and realized how frightened he must have been.

"Is Albi going to be okay?" Tommy asked, climbing onto the stool.

"Yes, it's just a little nosebleed, dear," I told him. "Kids get them all the time."

"I never got one before," Tommy remarked, his eyes focused on my hands, on Albi's nose.

"Did he hit his nose or something?" I asked the little boy. His hazel eyes were wide with innocence.

"I don't know," he answered. "We were playing, and then he started bleeding. He lay on the floor, and I came to find you."

"You did a good job, Tommy. You're a brave little boy."

After ten minutes, I released my hold on Albi's nose and inspected him. The bleeding seemed to have stopped, which was a relief. He did look pale, though, which concerned me, so I thought it best to end the play date and have him lie down.

After tucking him in bed, I returned to the living room to call Tommy's dad, Kirk, to come and get him.

After the second ring, Kirk answered the phone in the deep baritone of his voice. "Hello."

"Kirk, it's Mary Jane," I began. "Would it be a problem to come and get Tommy?"

“Oh...is anything wrong?”

“Albi had a little accident, and I’ve put him to bed,” I replied.

“Oh, no! Tommy didn’t do anything, did he?” he asked in concern.

“No, no,” I reassured him. “Tommy's been very good," I said, turning to Tommy. "I just thought he might be more comfortable with you now that Albi's in bed. I understand if you won’t be able to pick him up for the next hour or so. I can watch-”

“No, it’s fine,” he said. “I’ll come get him. Just give me a few minutes and I’ll walk over.”

“Thanks.”

I hung up and turned to Tommy, who still seemed too somber after what had happened. To offer a distraction, I offered him a cherry ice pop, which seemed to cheer him up a bit. I sat with him for a few minutes until I heard a car driving up the driveway. I peered out of the kitchen window and saw Judy's blue Honda Civic.

“I’ll be right back, Tommy,” I told the child, who was content with his ice pop.

I was still barefooted because I loved the feel of the warm, plush carpet beneath my feet. By the time I arrived at the door and opened it, Judy was activating her car alarm. Dressed in the heights of fashion as she usually was, she looked a decade younger, wearing tight-fitting blue jeans and a sleeveless polka dot top that she wore well on her slender frame.

With quite a large portfolio clutched to her chest and her handbag over one shoulder, she tottered on impressive six-inch stilettos towards the porch.

“Wait till you see the pieces these new artists created!” she cried in awe.

“They’ll blow your mind.”

I'm a school teacher by day. It's my primary profession. The art gallery venture was something Judy started, and because I'm an artist and her best friend, she thought I'd be a good business partner. With Judy running the day-to-day operations of our art gallery, I helped her from time to time with events such as our Christmas showcase. Every year, we made a new artist's dream come true by featuring their pieces during our winter exhibition. While this had started out easy, word of our exhibition had spread, and increasingly, new talents showed more and more interest. It made selecting the showcase piece more demanding, but it was a good problem to have.

Before I could respond to her, a figure walking up the driveway caught my attention. I relaxed and smiled: it was Tommy's father. Kirk was in his late thirties with dirty blond hair and was easy on the eyes. Since our sons were best friends, our interactions always revolved around them. More often, Tommy stayed over at our place for play dates, which was fine by Kirk. Even though the little boys had been friends for three years, they rarely went back to Tommy's house, which was fine by me.

"Kirk, sorry for calling you over early," I apologized to him.

"It's okay," he said with a kind smile, waving his hand as though it were no big deal.

It then occurred to me that I should introduce Kirk and Judy to each other. "Oh...umm," I cleared my throat and waved at Judy. "This is my best friend, Judy." Then, turning to Judy, "Judy, Kirk is the father of Albi's best friend, Tommy. They had a play date."

I watched as the two shook hands and noticed my friend was sizing him up. I rolled my eyes and remarked that I would go and get Tommy. Judy would no doubt secure a date before Kirk left. She was always on the lookout for the next guy to break her heart, but she still bounced back quickly enough. We were the opposite in this regard, as I preferred taking my time to get to know someone.

I collected Tommy's toys and put them back in his bag before walking him to the door.

“You okay, son?” Kirk asked his son, ruffling his dark brown hair.

Tommy nodded. “I’m fine, *but I think Albi’s sick.*”

Kirk turned concerned eyes towards me. “Is he going to be okay?”

“It’s just a nosebleed,” I said, my lips stretching into a small smile. “I’m sure he’ll be back to himself in no time.”

He reached out to give me a reassuring squeeze on the shoulder. “Okay, well...if you ever need anything, give me call,” he said, then turned away.

“Oh, thanks,” I replied, looking down, “But I don’t want to be a bother.”

He turned so he was fully facing me. “It’s not a bother, Mary. You keep the boys more often than I do. You’ll have to let me buy you dinner sometime.”

The last thing I wanted was for him to feel like he owed me. Hosting Tommy was better for me because I didn’t like Albi being away from my presence for too long. At work, my classroom was merely down the corridor from his homeroom, and he rarely went to sleepovers. At times, when I allowed him the privilege to go to sleepovers, I would call the other parents so many times I think I became a hassle to them.

“Ah...dinner's not necessary,” I said, slightly dismissing his invitation. “The boys enjoy the time spent together, and Tommy is welcome over any time.”

“Umm...okay.” His face transformed into a bright shade of red, and he glanced down at his shoes. “Oh well, I guess we'd better get going.” He then raised his head, but could not quite meet my eyes. “Thanks for hosting the boys again, M.J.,” he said, then turned toward Judy, “It was nice to meet you, Judy.”

Of course, for Judy, it was nice to meet him: “Yes, for me too.”

As soon as he started down the driveway, Judy softly, but hurriedly set down her portfolio, closed the door, then grabbed my arm and dragged me further

into the house. “What was that all about?” she demanded, her eyes wide in disbelief.

Chapter Two: “And Pray Tell, Why Not?”

“What do you mean, 'What was that all about'?” I asked, puzzled by her crazy behaviour.

“A perfectly fine man asked you out to dinner, and you turned him down!”

“Oh, that...?” I asked, then shrugged. “I just don't want him to feel obligated to me. Yes, I watch his kid a lot, but it's as much a gain for me as it is for him.”

“You can be so daft at times!” she exclaimed, heaving a sigh and throwing her hands up in the air.

“What are you talking about?” I protested. She was was getting me worked up, and I had no idea why.

“That man wasn't asking you out just because of obligation,” she remarked. “I saw the way he looked at you. He's interested in you, Mary.”

I laughed dismissively. “Don't be absurd. He's not interested in me.”

“And pray tell, why not?”

And pray tell, why not, I thought. She always spoke in that tone when she felt she had a point to make. “Weeeell,” I dragged out the word, searching for a reason, then realized I couldn't find one. My facial expression must have gone from pondering to realization. I was surprised to realize it wasn't the first time he had asked me out on a date. I groaned. “Good grief, I never even realized. All along I thought we were just friends—or rather, the parents of very good friends.”

“You're always friend-zoning guys,” Judy said, her features softening. “Maybe you should give it a chance.”

I was shaking my head even before she finished that thought. “He’s not right for Albi and I.”

“Why?” she demanded. “What excuses do you have this time?” She started checking off on her fingers. “Last year, the artist who was interested in you was perfect. You had similar hobbies, so you thought you were too alike and it would never work. What about that history teacher from your school? You claimed you were too different. And the junior pastor from that church? You thought he wouldn’t have enough time for you and Albi. There’s always an excuse for you, Mary.”

I turned to face her, head-on. I could imagine how I looked with my lips pursed in annoyance. “Kirk has the baggage of a recent divorce and a little boy he’s invested in,” I pointed out. “Albi deserves a father who can give him his full attention. He shouldn’t have to make that automatic transfer from being an only child to sharing.”

“For crying out, Mary, are you listening to yourself?” she exclaimed. “Look, I love Albi. You know I do, and if anything happened to you, I would treat him like my very own, but your life can’t revolve solely around that child! When he’s older and moves out, what are you going to do?”

“Oh, he’s only seven. I don’t have to think about that anytime soon.”

“And meanwhile, we’ve just hit forty.”

I stiffened instinctively before forcing myself to relax. “Judy, can we not talk about this anymore? I’ve made certain choices for Albi and I, and I’m happy with those choices. My son means the world to me and I’m content. I don’t want a man in my life now.”

Well...that last sentence wasn't 100% true. I didn't *need* a man, but it would have been nice to have one.

“Okay, fine,” she capitulated, picking up the portfolio, then heading toward the living room. “A man may not be needed, but they sure are nice to have around.”

“I’ll just check on Albi, then we can go through that portfolio,” I told her, ignoring her comment. As far as I was concerned, I already had a guy in my life, and that guy was my seven-year-old.

Later that night, before drifting to bed, I was thinking more about what Judy said. Yes, I wanted a man, but he had to be good enough for Albi and I. The only problem was, I didn't know exactly what I was looking for. That is, I didn't know what a man who was good enough for us would be like. How would he interact with Albi? *Would he accept him as his own?*

What would he think of me if I told him that I didn't know who Albi's father was? Then I'd have to tell him the whole story, and how I chose to be a single parent.

Chapter Three: “His Next Question Took Me by Surprise.”

I placed a bowl of Albi’s favorite cereal before him. “Here you go,” I said.

He seemed to be deep in thought, pondering something.

I was compelled to ask if he needed anything more. “Do you need anything else?”

He shook his head, and I responded with a warm smile. I then went to finish getting dressed. I was running late because I had overslept. The night before, I had been kept awake because I had pondered what Judy had said. Now my eyes were red from lack of sleep and I was high on the cups of coffee I had downed just to stay awake.

In my bedroom, I searched through the racks of the closet to find an outfit that wouldn’t require me to iron. I snagged a floral printed wraparound dress and made record time of changing my clothes. In less than ten minutes I was fully clothed, my long, blonde hair brushed and caught atop my head in a loose bun. I pushed my feet into low-heeled pumps and checked my handbag to ensure I had my car keys. I slipped my phone inside, along with my charger, and grabbed Albi’s knapsack on the way out to the car. I stashed our belongings in the front seat, then half-ran inside the house to have him brush his teeth.

“Al, are you finished?” I asked, entering the kitchen. I came up short, staring at my son who had his hands folded on the table. His head was on his folded hands. Beside him was his untouched bowl of cereal. “Albi, honey, are you okay?”

“I don’t feel so good,” he answered, lifting his head. His eyes looked tired and droopy. He had gone to bed at seven thirty last night, so I knew he

shouldn't have looked this exhausted.

"What's wrong?" I felt his forehead and he was warm, though not alarmingly so.

"My head hurts," he answered, sliding off the kitchen chair.

"Mmm, do you feel up to school today?" I pressed. He was a good student who didn't like to miss a day, so depending on his response, I would know just how badly he was feeling.

"I think so," he answered but I frowned at him. I didn't like the look of him at all.

"Maybe I should get the class started, leave a substitute teacher in charge and take you to the doctor," I mused aloud. (Although really, it wasn't his decision to make.)

"Okay, Mommy."

I had him brush his teeth, keeping watchful eye until he was through. I gave him a dose of the over-the-counter medication I had in the medicine cabinet, hoping that would be all he needed. My arm around his little shoulders, I walked him to the car and helped him inside, ensuring he was all buckled in. I felt his forehead again and was pleased that, whatever it was, it hadn't spiked.

On the drive to the school where he was a student and I a teacher, I kept glancing at him in the in rearview mirror. The traffic was heavy at this time of the morning, which was the reason I always preferred leaving home earlier. The drive, which usually lasted for ten minutes, stretched to almost twenty minutes. Luckily, though I felt I had slept in and was arriving ten minutes later, I would still be there on time to prepare for the day's classes.

"Mommy," Albi said softly when I drove through the big gates of the school.

"Yes, sweetie?" I checked behind me for any incoming vehicles as I backed

up to make a turn to slide into my usual parking spot.

His next question took me by surprise.

Chapter Four: A Little Talk

“How come I don’t have a daddy?”

I was so surprised by the question I almost forgot to apply the break. I barely missed hitting the wall. His question was so unexpected that I had to be sure I heard him correctly. “What’s that, Al?”

“It’s just that all the daddies are coming to class today,” he explained, his head bowed. His voice, which was usually vibrant and happy, was hesitant with hurt.

Why didn't any of the other staff tell me...? Oh...right...today was Daddy Day, and I had completely forgotten about it. Never thought twice about it. Way to go, M.J.

“Honey, why didn’t you tell me?” *Yeah, M.J. Blame it on the kid when you should've known better.* I unbuckled my seat belt so I could turn to face him. “You know I would have come prepared to be there in class with you.”

“But it’s not for mommies,” he answered. “Just daddies. Why don’t I have a daddy?”

“Albi, I-” I swallowed hard, feeling the panic cloying in my throat. I didn’t know how to answer him. Where does one begin explaining to a young boy the complicated intricacies of a relationship between a man and a woman?

Or, in this case, the lack thereof.

I knew this day would come, but I guess you can only put things off for so long. This wasn’t the first fathers’ function that the school was having, but, as far as I knew, he never thought twice about me representing him.

“Can I sit with Tommy’s dad?” he asked when I didn’t answer him.

“You sure you don’t want me to show up?” I volunteered.

He shook his head, without saying anything else to me. I wondered if this was the reason he was looking poorly today. Was it the effect of him thinking about not having his father with him for today’s class? As a parent and teacher, I knew that some kids "wouldn't feel well" when there was a school event they didn't want to face. I knew the school meant well in incorporating parents in classroom events, but it was difficult for kids who belonged to single-parent families.

Of course, when I was his age, there were forthcoming school events that I didn't want to face. Pageants and speech days come to mind. However, compared to what Albi was going through, those were trival.

I walked Albi to his class, and he greeted his teacher before taking his seat between Tommy and Danny. I could see there were already two fathers who were there in the room with their children.

“Hey, Suzie,” I greeted Albi’s teacher, a short brunette with a round face.

“Mary, what’s up?” she returned. “Isn’t this awesome? We got responses from most the dads that they would be here today to spend some time with their little ones.” I wasn't sure if her talking about dads was adding insult to injury, but I know she meant well. She had probably forgotten about my marital status.

“Yeah, seems fun,” I answered. “Umm, can you keep an eye on Albi for me? He’s not his best this morning and I’m thinking of leaving the substitute teacher in charge and taking him to the doctor.”

Suzie glanced to where Albi was chatting with Tommy. “He seems quite fine to me,” she said with a smile. “You don’t have to worry, Mary. I know that some kids have a hard time dealing with not having a parent, but the sooner they come to grips with it, the better. He’ll be fine. You’ll see.”

I nodded reassuringly, not wanting to respond to her commentary on my family’s structure. But then again, she didn't comment directly about me.

Maybe I was overly sensitive about that. “Albi has a slight fever,” I told her. “I gave him some medicine before we left the house. I’ll drop by during recess to give him another dose.”

“Mary, he’ll be fine,” she reassured, leaning in toward me, so as to make sure the kids were out of hearing range. “Kids come down with flu or fever all the time. I swear, each time Albi coughs you want to take him to the emergency room. You worry too much, and if you don’t cut back a little, you will end up spoiling him.”

I had to refrain from asking how much she was charging for her advice. I was no stranger to people offering their unsolicited advice about how to raise a child, the latest of which was that Albi needed a father. In my opinion, he didn’t *need* a father, although he could do with a positive male role model in his life. I wasn’t against the concept of marriage or Albi having a father. I just hadn’t found the right fit for him and me. Albi was special, the child I wasn’t even sure I would have, and I wouldn’t put a man in his life unless I was sure he’d make a positive impact on his life.

After a pause, Suzie conceded, “But if it makes you feel better, then sure.”

“Thanks, Suzie. I’ll be down the hall if anything,” I said, nodding towards her and waving at Albi before continuing to my own class.

Chapter Five: Danny Keeps Teasing Me

“So, where's your Dad?” Danny asked, poking me in the rib. “What did she say?”

I was mad that Danny was asking me this question. He already knew I didn't have a father. He kept asking me because he knew I would say the same thing when he asked me twice before.

“I don't know,” I grumbled, feeling hot. *I feel so hot.* My head hurt and Danny's questions were only making it worse.

“But you have to have a dad,” he continued.

We were sitting in the classroom, side by side, while Dahlia's dad read to us. We were supposed to be quiet, but Danny was speaking in my ear, so Miss Black didn't know that we weren't listening.

He doesn't have a mom. “You don't have a mom.”

“But I had one. She died. Your dad didn't die, did he?”

“I said I don't know!” I raised my voice, tears filling my eyes because I felt so bad. His questions were making my chest hurt. I had asked my mom this morning about my dad but I could tell by the look in her eyes that she didn't want to talk about it.

I looked all around me, seeing all the fathers who had arrived to have fun with their kids. Tommy's dad had to act like he was my dad. I didn't want a pretend dad. I wanted my own real dad.

Why do I feel so hot?

“Albi, you okay?” Tommy whispered, his eyes going as wide as saucers.

“Yes,” I started to say then changed my mind. I wanted my mom. “No, I’m not.” I clutched at the sleeve of his shirt, feeling a trickle of wetness slipping from my nostril. “You’re bleeding!” he cried in alarm. “You’re bleeding!”

His loud voice disturbed the class, and had Miss Black looking at us.

Miss Black asked, “Is everything okay, Tommy?”

“Albi!” he exclaimed and pointed at me.

“Tommy, stop!” I told him because he was loud and my head was really pounding now. I wanted to lie down, but most of all I wanted my mommy. She always knew what to do. I swiped at my nostril, looked at my hand, and saw the red streaks that made me feel queasy.

I want my mommy.

Chapter Six: Albi Needs Me

“Good job, Peter!” I high-fived the little boy for the painting he had done of a flower I had placed at the front of the class. In reality, his flower looked nothing like the one on display, but for a boy his age, he had a natural eye for picking the right colours and blending. “Make sure you show this to your mom when you go home.”

“Yes, Miss Tennant.” He beamed at me, his two missing front teeth and chubby cheeks giving him an adorable look.

It was almost recess. “Okay, class. We-”

Suddenly, the door burst open.

“Mary!”

The distraught look on Suzie’s face gripped me with fear. *Albi.*

“Class, start packing your art supplies,” I said, hearing the strain in my own voice. I hurried toward Suzie, weaving my way in between the desks. “I was just sending them out for recess so I could drop by and give Albi the next dose of his medicine,” I assured her. “Is his fever too high? Perhaps I should bring him to the doctor, after all.”

Her eyes filled with unshed tears and she wrung her hands. “I’m sorry, Mary, I didn’t know what to do. We called the ambulance. It was just then that I remembered you. We were just so concerned about getting him to the hospital.”

“Wh-what?” I stiffened in shock. “Suzie, what are you talking about?”

“The ambulance is on its way,” she explained. “I don’t know what happened. He was sitting beside Danny, then Tommy said Albi was bleeding, and then

he fainted. He was bleeding from his nostrils.”

“Oh God, no!” I cried and gripped her arm in fear. “Where is he?”

She didn’t need to answer. I heard the loud siren of an ambulance and acted. I grabbed my handbag from the table and ran out of the classroom, turning left.

I was going the wrong way.

“In the lobby!” Suzie shouted, after which I braked and made an about-face, going in the right direction.

My heart pounded in my chest. The almost-paralyzing fear threatened to overwhelm me.

Finally, after a few seconds that felt like minutes, I reached the lobby.

“Albi!” I cried, seeing him lying on a bench in the lobby. Before I could reach him, the double doors of the school opened and three EMTs calmly, but with purpose and urgency, walked in.

“Stand back, ma’am,” one cautioned as they blocked me from Albi's prone figure.

With a mixture of anticipation and helplessness, I watched as they checked his vitals.

They then lifted his little body and placed it on the gurney they had brought along with them.

“No, Albi!” I cried in panic. *He just has a fever. Why are they here? All I have to do is give him more medicine and he'll be fine.*

The lead paramedic must've seen my panic and hesitation. “Please, ma’am, we need to get him to the hospital ASAP.”

“I’m his mother!” I said desperately, running behind the gurney being

wielded toward the doors. “Please, somebody tell me what’s going on!”

The lead paramedic answered calmly, “Your son’s unresponsive ma’am, and we need to find out what’s going on with him. Can you follow us to the hospital in your car?”

“Can’t I ride with him in the ambulance?” I asked, keeping up with them as the gurney was wheeled through the lobby doors, down the wheelchair ramp and toward the ambulance.

The lead paramedic stopped and turned to me while the others loaded the gurney into the ambulance. “We’d don't normally allow for others to ride with us,” he advised me. “Please understand, we are doing everything we can for your son and we ask you to give us the space to let us do our job. At the hospital, they may need your permission for certain procedures. We’d appreciate it if you can just follow us in your car, or if you don’t think you can handle it, have someone escort you.”

I stared, my instincts telling me to protest and disagree until they allowed me to travel with them. That would only confirm him expecting me to act hysterical. Although fear filled my throat and a sob was trapped in my windpipe, I nodded. I couldn’t afford to lose control. Not now. Albi needed me.

Chapter Seven: “I’ll Take a Pass on That.”

Rotating his neck to work out the kinks, Dr. Jeremy Rowan signed off on his paperwork and got to his feet. He checked his wristwatch, not surprised that he had worked overtime again. This was a usual occurrence for him, one that he never seemed to mind, and in fact, had even come to expect. After all, what was he going home to, other than to an empty house? The very furniture that had been chosen for his house had been handpicked by an interior decorator with zero input from him. But regardless, no amount of furniture or material good would make his house full. A house without people is not a home. Was it little wonder that he spent most of his time at the hospital?

Although he had already worked over time, Dr. Rowan left the small office of the hospital wing and ambled down the corridor to the paediatric unit. As was his routine when he was about to go off duty, he patrolled the unit, ensuring his patients were no worse than the last time he had checked on them.

Making this round was not something he had to do, especially since the next paediatrician was already on watch. He did so anyway, not because he was expecting accolades or a pat on the shoulder of a job well done, but because his patients were the most important people in his world. He dedicated his time to the little ones placed in his care. His mantra wasn’t just about taking care of the body but also helping to maintain a good spirit. He knew many of his colleagues just did their job and went home, *but there was something driving him to help as many kids as he could.*

“And how is my favorite patient, Ana?” he asked with a smile, reaching the last child on his watch. Anastasia Leroy was a twelve-year-old with juvenile diabetes. Hers was at a stage that required heavy monitoring, and she had been admitted to the hospital three days ago when her insulin levels were not enough to naturally regulate her blood sugar.

“Dr. Singh said I can go home!” she exclaimed, her pearly white teeth

shining at her grin. Sitting beside her was her mother, a slender woman in her mid-thirties, who was smiling. What a change from when she had just brought an unconscious Ana to the emergency room, all hysterical. Dr. Rowan enjoyed the change.

Ana's mother stood up, extending her hand to him. "We cannot express our thanks enough. You've been so wonderful to her, Dr. Rowan. I'm so glad you're always here to look after us."

"Are you kidding me?" Dr. Rowan asked in mock horror. "Without Ana here, I'd never know what's happening on Dance Moms."

At that, Ana giggled. "That's true!"

Dr. Rowan had started to watch the program when he could, after the first time Ana had been admitted to the hospital. It had only been a few days since he started watching the program, but he got to see one episode. It gave them something to talk about and got the little girl's mind off of being hospitalized.

Ana had an announcement: "And guess what—I've got an audition to be on Dance Moms!"

He stared at the child in genuine surprise. "You did?"

The proud mother nodded. "I sent in a few videos of her dancing at her school with a story of her challenges. The producer would like to meet her, watch her perform for them, and then we'll know."

"Wow, then you'll be famous!" Dr. Rowan told Ana. "Don't forget to mention me when you're on camera."

"I will," she promised. Then, her expression turned more solemn. "You're my favourite doctor."

When she said that, it meant a lot to him. During her short lifetime, she had seen more doctors than she should have for a child her age. Her mother had

said that, of the many doctors Ana had been sent to, she never felt at ease—except with one: Dr. Rowan.

After seeing off his patient, Dr. Rowan was about to head back to his office when his pager went off. Checking the number, he saw that it was Grayson Scott, a friend and medical oncologist, who had paged him. He and Dr. Scott first started as interns at the hospital. He headed for the nearest phone to find out what Dr. Scott's request was.

Dr. Rowan approached the nurse's station and asked to use their phone. When they affirmed, he began dialing Dr. Scott's number. As he waited, he looked toward the waiting area, where there were three people. One was a woman with her elbows on her knees and her head held by her hands, whose face he couldn't make out. The other two were a couple, the woman's head rested on the man's chest. All three were quiet, and he figured maybe their children were in surgery and they were hoping for the best. He wanted to give them a reassuring word, but he didn't know their specific situations, and he felt it was not his place to step into another doctor's territory.

“Gray, it's Jeremy,” he said into the phone when his friend answered.
“What's up?”

“I had a feeling you hadn't left yet,” Grayson told him. “I have a patient here that I'd like you to meet. Can you come down to Examination Room 24?”

“Sure thing. I've got nothing better to do than watch Dance Moms.”

Grayson snickered. “Trying to impress some kid's mom, huh?”

Dr. Rowan chuckled. “More like trying to impress the kid. I'll be over in five.”

“Okay, I'll be waiting.”

After thanking the nurse for allowing him to use the phone, Dr. Rowan headed in the direction of the examination room. These rooms were several corridors down and he used up the five minutes before getting to the right

one. After a sharp rap to announce his presence, he entered.

Dr. Scott was a tall man, a couple of inches taller than Dr. Rowan. He sported his black hair long and usually tied it behind his head in a ponytail.

Dr. Scott always marveled at Dr. Rowan's tireless work ethic. "You're the only doctor I know who doesn't look frazzled at the end of a twelve-hour shift," he stated with a scowl as to prove his point. He then glanced at his watch, realizing his last statement was off by two hours. "Actually, a fourteen-hour shift. Weren't you supposed to be off two hours ago?"

Dr. Rowan shrugged. "I had paperwork to take care of."

"My friend, what you need is a woman in your life," he remarked. "It's been way too long."

"I'll take a pass on that."

Chapter Eight: “My First Opinion is A.L.L.”

Dr. Rowan walked over to the gurney where a child lay. “Is this the patient?”

“Yeah. Seven years old.”

Dr. Rowan frowned, assessing the little boy. *Seven years old. The same age that...*

He brought his thoughts back under control and studied the child. His eyes were closed and his long lashes swept the high cheekbones. Curly blond hair fell over a gently sloping forehead. The boy reminded him of someone.

Someone who called him Jeremy. Someone he would rather not think about.

Tearing his eyes away from the child, he took a deep breath and faced his friend once more. “What’s the situation with him?”

“His name is Albi Tennant,” Dr. Scott rattled off the information. “He was admitted with high fever, nosebleed and unconscious. He fainted at school. The mother said he’s had at least one other nosebleed that she’s aware of and that only started recently.”

“What’s your opinion?”

“The complete blood count shows leukemia cells.”

“Yipes,” Dr. Rowan uttered, glancing back at the child on the bed. Although he had been in the medical field for over fifteen years, there were still some diseases that made his blood run cold. These diseases were a race against time, and could be so sporadic that they were frustrating to deal with, not only for the patient, but for the family. These diseases were never fully predictable. It was this unpredictability that made staff feel helpless, since they were not able to confidently update the families. Such uncertainty left

paediatricians with few answers.

A diagnosis was still forthcoming, but Dr. Scott already had a tentative opinion: “My first opinion is A.L.L.,” he said, using the acronym for acute lymphoblastic leukemia. “Of course, we still need to conduct a bone marrow aspirate to collect a sample before we can confirm the diagnosis.”

Jeremy nodded, already familiar with the procedure. Although he wasn’t an oncologist like his friend, he usually worked with the team of cancer specialists treating a child. He provided the paediatric expertise, and his colleagues provided expertise in other areas. Leukemia, if this were the case, always wrecked emotional and financial havoc on families.

“Let me guess: you want me to break the news to the parents?”

“Let’s face it,” Dr. Scott said with a shrug. “You’re far better at this than I am. I still struggle to tell a parent their child has cancer.”

“It’s no fun for me either. In fact, it’s pretty much the worst part of the job.”

“I’ve got the forms here.” Dr. Scott passed him a manila folder, and Dr. Rowan flipped the cover open to find the standard form used for permissions for hospital surgical procedures.

“Who’s here for the patient?”

“His mother is in the waiting room.”

Dr. Rowan thought back to the three people he saw in the waiting room. The woman he saw, with elbows on her knees, must have been the boy's mother. He wondered how she would react to the news. He had dealt with his share of reactions, from parents who laughed because they couldn’t accept the fact to those who fainted. His worst was a mother who had a minor heart attack after finding out her daughter would lose both her legs.

“Right, I’ll just get to this then.”

Dr. Scott squeezed his shoulder for support, and Dr. Rowan appreciated the gesture.

Folder in hand and with heavy shoulders, Dr. Rowan left the examination room and began the five-minute trek to the waiting room. He would be required to gently break the news to the parent. It couldn't be avoided, since he would need to obtain the parent's signature to collect the bone marrow sample so they could do a proper diagnosis. The sooner they were able to confirm the child's diagnosis, the sooner they would be able to treat the child. The longer it took to treat the child, the less time the child had to fight the disease and survive.

His heart ached at the thought of the little boy lying in the hospital bed...just...thinning...away. He shuddered. He didn't like to think about death, but it was as much a part of his job as ensuring his patients escaped it, even to live another day.

Don't think about dying as though it's his only outcome, Jeremy. You don't even know the diagnosis. Have some faith.

Chapter Nine: The Registry

A young woman's voice called out: "Dr. Rowan."

Dr. Rowan was so deep in thought he didn't hear the voice at first.

"Dr. Rowan!"

He paused, then and spun around to see who was calling him. It was Christina and Grace, the two interns who were working in the lab.

"Hello, ladies," he greeted them with a smile. He was pleased to have them on the hospital team, as they were both hardworking young women. "What can I do for you?"

Christina, who was the brunette, nudged Grace, the one with the short red hair, her face pink. Grace cleared her throat, her eyes flitting around. "I know this is probably unusual," she remarked. "But we're working with the hospital's new stem cell registry, and we're asking for some assistance. Dr. Newman said we could ask you, since you're willing to work with interns. We're running an experiment where we're collecting samples from various donors."

"Sure thing," he told them with a smile. "I'd be glad to help. I'm off right now though, so if tomorrow isn't too late..."

"No, not at all. Tomorrow is fine."

"Great. I'll pop down at the lab during my break tomorrow."

The brunette finally found her voice. "Thanks so much, Dr. Rowan."

"No problem. Now, if you'd excuse me..."

The two interns went back along their way, and Dr. Rowan continued to the waiting room. As he approached, he heard the rising, panicked voice of a woman—possibly, the boy's mother.

“Please! I’ve been sitting here for two hours and nobody has said anything to me! I just want to see my son! Or speak to a doctor!”

Chapter Ten: An Impatient Mother

I could feel a panic attack coming on, and nothing could control it until I found out what was happening with Albi. They'd wheeled him into one of those hospital rooms hours ago, and left me to fret without mercy as to what was going on. I had approached the nurse's station twice to inquire about the condition of my son, but did not get a satisfactory response.

The receptionist had a professional coolness about her that bordered on cold. "Miss, if you would sit and be patient," the receptionist was saying, "a doctor will be with you as soon as they have information on your son."

"Be patient for another hour?!" I cried in disbelief. I felt my anger rising at her cruelty. It was cruel to leave a mother wondering for hours about her child's health. I was at the brink of requesting a supervisor—or whoever was usually in charge of these people.

"We have a doctor with him now," the woman said. I didn't care for her casual tone at all.

I had to try to reason with her. "Look, I understand that you've been through this probably one time too many!" I snapped. "But I haven't. This is my son, my only ch-child." My voice cracked on the last word and I blinked furiously to get rid of the angry and worried tears. "All I want is to see him and for someone to update me on his condition."

"Mary Tennant?"

Chapter Eleven: This?

“Yes, Albi Tennant's mother,” I replied with a tone of eagerness, turning to face the newcomer who had called my name. I was brought up short when I recognized the white lab coat over jeans and a dress shirt. I gave the man a once-over, taking in his black hair cropped short, the hazel eyes, neatly-trimmed short beard and broad shoulders. He looked more like a football player than a doctor.

“I'm sorry we kept you waiting.” He had an understanding, accomodating expression on his face. Unlike the receptionist, his expression was open and inviting. With effort, he formed a sincere, small smile. He outstretched his right hand to me. “I am Dr. Rowan.”

Finally...someone with information, I thought, reaching for his hand. I shook it briefly, noting the strength of his grip before I released his hand.

You could probably guess my next words: “Can I see my son?”

“Yes, you’ll be allowed to see him,” he answered. “But before you do, there are a few things we should discuss. Let’s talk somewhere more private.” He motioned down the hall, where we would be outside of earshot of anyone else.

I nodded, gripping my bag and following him. If he wanted to speak more privately, this couldn’t be good. But...how bad was it? *What* was it? I was afraid to ask.

While we walked, the doctor began some small chat. “I understand your son is seven years old, Miss Tennant?” he asked, filling the silence between us.

“Yes, he is.”

“And does he like playing sports? I assume most kids enjoy sports at that

age.”

“Most do,” I agreed.

We came to a closed door, and he pushed it open, indicating for me to precede him inside. I stepped cautiously into the room, noting it was looked almost like a lounge area. It must have been a staff room.

“You may have a seat.” He made a sweeping gesture of the several chairs and recliners in the room.

Instead, I turned to face him, deciding to stand my ground. “Dr. Rowan, I do appreciate you trying to make me at ease, but nothing will quite do the trick until I find out about my son.”

He pinched the bridge of his nose and I sucked in a deep breath. “Right, we’re here to talk about Albi.”

“He just had a fever,” I remarked. “That’s all, isn’t it?”

“Sometimes, a fever, or what may seem like a fever, indicates that things aren’t quite right with the body,” he said slowly, measuring his words.

“Based on the results of the blood test we did on your son, we’ve found leukemia cells.”

“Leukemia!?” I gasped, hand to mouth. I could feel the blood draining from my face.

“While the blood test can confirm leukemia cells, we need a bone marrow sample to give an exact diagnosis, and we need your permission to gather a sample of his bone marrow.”

I shook my head in disbelief and sank into the chair behind me. “No, no, no,” I denied. “Why are you telling me this? He just has a slight fever. Children get nose bleeds all the time. Doctor, why are you telling me this?”

I saw him swallow hard, and he lowered his eyes to the floor. “Miss

Tennant, we have a good team of doctors who will be working with your son to ensure that whatever treatment he needs, he gets the best of it, and is able to leave here with a clean bill of health.”

“But...leukemia!” I exclaimed, tears running down my face. I wrapped my hands around my body, which felt cold. “Oh my God, no. I can’t believe this, Doctor. Oh God, my baby.”

He dropped down to his haunches before me and clutched my shoulders in firm hands. He softened, taking on a very sincere tone: “Miss Tennant, I can’t begin to understand how you feel. I just know that, for your son's sake, we’ll need you to work with our team. Cry if you must, be upset if you must, but your son is going to need you and your strength so both of you can pull through this on the better side. Okay?”

My response was to do just as he said. I didn’t care that I’d never met the man before today. I clutched the front of his shirt because I needed something to hang on to. And I cried. Rivulets of tears streamed down my face, uncontrollably, sobs tearing from my throat. *Albi, my precious baby. I can't lose him. He's just seven. How am I supposed to get through this?*

I felt his awkward touch as he patted my back, but instead of comforting me, it only made me cry harder. While I was drained of energy, he never once even tried to move, seeming content to offer himself as sustenance. My voice was hoarse, my throat raw and hurting, but not as much as it hurt in my heart. I sniffed and blinked back the tears, releasing the shirt I had been clutching.

“I-I’m sorry,” I apologized, unzipping my bag and searching for a Kleenex. I found one, and fresh tears poured from my eyes. I buried my face into the material and let all the pain pour out.

“Oh, there's no need to apologize, Miss Tennant. It's a natural reaction to devastating news. We'll do our best to make sure he's okay.

“You...you,” I started, and continued to push further: “You don’t know that. He...has leukemia. That’s not okay.” I had to try to regain my composure.

“Well, he may not be okay now, but he can be,” Dr. Rowan said. “That starts with you signing these papers. We need your signed permission to conduct the test. That’ll help us to confirm his diagnosis, and then we can find out how acute it is.”

“Wha...what will you do?” I asked, sniffing and trying to wipe away the tears. I had to get my emotions under control so I could listen rationally about what's best for Albi. I knew that I would do everything in my power to ensure that my son came out a victor.

“It's called an aspirate, which is just a way of extracing cells. It’s all in this document,” he responded, standing up and passing me the file he had on him. “Take your time to read what the procedure will entail and the other information regarding it.”

The other information turned out to be the risks and complications that were associated with doing the bone marrow aspirate. My stomach turned when I read the specifics of the procedure. It would take ten to fifteen minutes, during which a needle would be inserted into the hip bone, and a small amount of bone marrow would be extracted. I was disturbed at what had to be done, but what more could I do? They were the experts.

I read through the information that dealt with complications of bleeding and infection after the procedure. It was a tough choice, but I knew if my son needed this procedure to receive the proper treatment, I didn’t have a choice.

“Who will conduct the procedure?” I asked, looking up at the doctor.

“More than likely, that would be Dr. Scott, a pediatric oncologist,” he answered.

“Will you be there in the room?”

He seemed to be taken aback. “If you want, that can be arranged.”

I swallowed hard at his kindness. “I’d like that, thank you.”

With that, I took in a deep breath and retrieved a pen from my bag. He was kind enough not to comment on my shaky hands which resulted in a crooked signature.

“Can I see him now, please?”

“Sure, you can,” he extended a hand to help me up from the chair. “But first, I’ll bring you back to the waiting room. I have to check to see if he has been moved from the examination room where he was situated. Give me no more than fifteen minutes, by which time I should come back and take you to him.”

“And I won’t have to wait for hours again?” I asked, doubt causing my voice to waver.

“I promise you, Miss Tennant. A few minutes is all I require.”

Staring up at his open face, my shoulders relaxed. I did not know this man, but now, for some reason, I began to feel a slight sense of ease that had escaped me since this whole ordeal started.

Chapter Twelve: “And...if This Doesn’t Work?”

“Mommy, do I get to go home today?”

“I’m not sure today, sweetie,” I told him, ruffling his hair. “But as soon as the doctor says you can, I’ll let you know.”

My heart broke at my son’s eager tone, and I had to look away to blink back the sudden rush of tears that gathered. For the past two days, I was like this. The most insignificant comment about his hospitalization drove me to tears. I tried talking myself into being strong.

He's gonna be fine, Mary. He was in the best place, a place where doctors would be able to treat him so he could be better.

Stop lying to yourself, Mary Jane Tennant! The best place for him is home, with you, not here, sick.

Yesterday, when I spoke to Dr. Rowan briefly, he had told me that, given his condition, Albi was where he needed to be—here, where he could be cared for.

Dr. Rowan was so gentle and caring that he had become my go-to doctor whenever I had a question. I knew of at least one other doctor in passing who was also working with Albi. That was Dr. Scott, the oncologist, who was an excellent doctor. Although my requests to do career checks on the staff was taken with surprise, I think the desk staff knew that I just wanted the best for Albi. I had been pleased to confirm that Dr. Rowan and Dr. Scott both turned out to be admirable members of their professions. Dr. Scott wasn’t very talkative though, and Dr. Rowan delivered most of the updates.

I was sitting on his bed, with his back to my chest, and I was playing with his soft hair. He was reading a book for me, and I corrected the errors he made, just like I did at home. I wanted to make his life as normal as possible, so I

brought some of his homework to him. It was my hope that the homework would distract him from being cooped up in the hospital all day. My efforts seemed to have worked. In the few days he had been there, I had made an attempt to make the room his own.

Dr. Rowan remarked that Albi might be staying a while. He didn't say how long, only that he'd be staying a while.

Albi sighed. "I miss school," he lamented. "And I miss Tommy, and even Danny. Can Tommy come over to spend some time with me?"

"I'll ask his dad," I promised him. "But I'm sure he won't say no."

"Cool! I can't wait to introduce him to everyone." In the short time since he had been there, he had met some of the other kids who were in the ward. At times, they would be allowed out of their rooms to watch television with the other kids. That was the little break the children had from their rooms.

"Is there anything else you'd like me to bring you?" I asked him.

He scrunched up his face, thinking hard before shaking his head.

I smiled at him, feeling blessed to have a child that didn't fuss unnecessarily. If he had wanted the moon, I would have felt obligated to ensure he got it. I was always being told by others that I spoiled him, but in this situation, I felt it was warranted.

"I'll be back in a bit, sweetie," I told him, getting off the bed.

"Okay, Mom."

He continued reading his book, and I was humbled at how he was accepting being in the hospital. I refused to tell him what was wrong with him, especially without the final diagnosis from his doctors. I gave him one last lingering look before leaving his room, closing the door behind me. Only then did I feel comfortable to let my shoulders droop in a slouch as I made my way to the bathroom.

I had listened to Dr. Rowan's advice that I had to keep it together for Albi. So, during the days, I smiled and spoke to him in reassuring tones, but...when I went to my otherwise empty home at night, I soaked my pillow with tears. Each time I thought the tears would finally stop, I was proven wrong when a fresh bout started.

In the ward washroom, I washed my hands and said a word of prayer, hoping that the test would turn out promising, or that whatever it was that Albi had, it would be less serious. My stomach growled in hunger, and with a grimace, I acknowledged that I had to get something into my body.

After using the bathroom, I walked to the nurse's station. Seated there was the same receptionist I was pleading with when Albi was first admitted. Since that first day, her tone with me was softer, and I figured that perhaps Dr. Rowan had spoken to her, given he had overheard our exchange that first day.

"Hello," I greeted with a small smile. "I was wondering whether I could speak with either of Albi's doctors?"

"Dr. Scott has already left," she told me. "But Dr. Rowan just stopped by. He's just doing his rounds."

"Okay, I guess I'll speak to him then. Thank you very much."

I hurried to Albi's room to wait for Dr. Rowan, but when I pushed the door open, he was already there, talking to Albi. At the sound of the door opening, he turned and smiled at me. For the first time, I noticed that he was a handsome man. His dark hair was neatly trimmed, and a lock fell over his forehead, almost to his eye.

"Miss. Tennant!" he greeted me and smiled. "I was just telling Albi here what a brave little boy he has been."

"I'm not so little," Albi disagreed.

"That's right. Before you know it, you'll be an all-star on the football team in

high school,” Dr. Rowan mentioned.

“I don’t like football. I’ll play hockey!” Albi corrected.

A strangled sound escaped my throat because they were talking about a future I wasn’t sure of.

But wait...since he's talking about Albi's future, does he have the outcome of the test they did?

“Dr. Rowan, can we talk outside for a few minutes?” I asked him.

“Sure.” He turned to Albi. “We’ll be right back. Try not to grow too much while we’re gone.”

Albi giggled, and the sound warmed my heart as I led the way just outside the room. I kept the door half-opened so if Albi needed me, I could hear him. I wrapped my arms around my body before asking the question that had been burning in my head.

“Please tell me you have some news for me,” I told him. “What is the official result? I have to know, or I’ll go crazy.”

He sighed a heavy sigh. “Yes, we have the official results,” he answered, his eyes steady on my face. “He’s diagnosed with acute lymphoblastic leukemia.”

The rush of tears sprang into my eyes and I blinked furiously to contain the tears. I gulped in deep breaths, trying to remain in control until I at least found out some more information. “What now?”

“At the moment he’s in the high-risk group,” he started to say, then when he heard my sob of distress, he hastened to add. “It’s not the worst, and his condition may be treatable. His treatment will begin with chemotherapy. This will be done in three stages, and at every stage, we will keep testing him to see how the leukemia cells react. Our aim is to kill the leukemia cells.”

I nodded in understanding. "And..." just thinking about the next question haunted me. "And...if this doesn't work?"

"Then, we'll speak to you about other options," he answered. "And there are other options. Just know this Miss Tennant: the team of doctors working with Albi is committed to ensuring he walks away from this and has a promising future."

I nodded, and despite his attempts to reassure me, I was crying. "I know. I know. It's just so hard. This was the last thing I expected when I took him to school that day. Now I don't know what to tell him. He's asking why he's here and when he'll go home and I don't know what to say."

Chapter Thirteen: Mom and Dr. Rowan are Talking

I keep asking Mom when I'm going home, and she keeps saying soon, but when will soon come?

As I look up from the book on my lap, I can see Mom and Dr. Rowan talking. I know she doesn't want me to hear what they're talking about. I guess it has to do with why I'm here.

Mom's upset. Maybe she's crying, and it makes me want to cry too. She seems so gloomy all the time now, and it scares me. Before they brought me here, she was always laughing and happy, but now she only smiles when she thinks I'm watching. She tries to hide her face a lot. Maybe she cries a lot.

It's all my fault she's sad. If I didn't get sick, she would be painting. If I didn't get sick, I would be going to school and seeing all my friends. I miss Tommy the most, and I hope Mom brings him here soon. I want one of my friends to come and visit me so I can talk to them about this. Tommy would understand.

I think she's crying now. I know she's not happy. I can't tell because the door is partially closed. I see that Dr. Rowan has an arm on her shoulder, so he must be trying to make her happy. He's saying something, but I don't know what. Maybe he's saying, "Don't cry. Things will be okay."

I like Dr. Rowan best. He's kind and always asks me if I need anything. Yesterday, he even played a game with me on my tablet. He let me win like Mom would normally do.

The other doctor, Dr. Scott, is okay, but he doesn't stop to talk to me like Dr. Rowan does. Dr. Rowan is a nice man, and he's just the kind of dad I would want. Tommy's dad is cool, but if Dr. Rowan was my dad, he would be way

cooler than Tommy's. Tommy's dad isn't a cool doctor who works in a hospital.

I don't know what this means, but watching Mom and Dr. Rowan, I kind of want him to be my dad.

Chapter Fourteen: Taking a Toll on Mary Jane

On my way home, I kept saying, “I’m not going to cry. I’m not going to cry.” I repeated the words like a mantra under my breath, opening the front door and taking a deep breath before entering the house. I closed the door behind me and placed one foot in front of the other, moving further into my home. My...quiet home. Albi wasn’t necessarily a noisy child, but when he was home, I could usually hear him playing or watching his cartoons.

The silence pronounced the lack of his presence.

I was too tired to stop the tears from falling and just gave up. Vision blurred by the wetness, I climbed the stairs, pausing at my son’s bedroom door. I tried to talk myself out of entering his room. Not while I felt this raw. He had started his first bout of chemotherapy, and the image of his changing features stabbed at my heart. This was only the first stage of chemotherapy, and the changes were already showing. How could I last through another two more? How long would they be?

Days like this became something I had to get used to. The restless nights, where I alternated between tears and staring at the ceiling, were beginning to take a toll on me. In addition to the physical exhaustion, I was sure that my emotions were also taking a toll. Probably a mixture of both, but I had a feeling that it was the emotional burden that was really wearing me down. I couldn’t wait for each morning to get back to him at the hospital.

I had cleaned up his room over the weekend, putting away all his stuff and making his room ready for his return. That little action had made me feel better. Now, as I stared at the neatly-arranged bookshelves, and straightened bed, I felt the overwhelming urge to mess up everything.

Dropping my handbag to his bed, I stalked over to his bookshelf and pulled out a few of the books. I shoved them back in the wrong way like Albi

usually had them. I dropped a few onto the carpeted floor. I overturned his toy bin and toys scattered onto the floor, disturbing the weighty silence. The sound of the toys hitting the carpeted floor broke a dam in me that I thought had already emptied. Huge sobs racked my body, and I stumbled over to his bed and collapsed on it.

“Oh God, please save my baby,” I sobbed, clutching his bed covers in my fists and burying my face in his pillow on which his scent still clung. I sobbed until my eyes hurt and my throat was hoarse. And then I fell asleep.

Chapter Fifteen: Mary Sleeps In

The muffled vibrating of my phone dragged me out of my sleepy state. I blinked several times, wondering at the sunlight I encountered. When I realized I had fallen asleep on Albi's bed, I jackknifed into a sitting position, wondering how long I had been out. Pain slammed into my head, causing me to groan at the intensity of it. I'd apparently cried myself into a headache.

Reaching for my handbag, I pulled it to me and searched through it for my phone. By the time I had found my phone, it had stopped vibrating. Four missed calls from the hospital. *Dr. Rowan*. I closed my eyes in fright, my body trembling in dismay. I sighed. What did he want? I followed an urge to phone the hospital and ask for Dr. Rowan.

"H-hello," I croaked for my voice, which was still hoarse from my meltdown the night before.

"Miss Tennant...?"

"Uh yes," I confirmed, clearing my throat. "Is something wrong? Is it Albi?" I could hear the panic in my own voice.

"No, Albi is fine," he responded. "The same as when you left the hospital."

"But you called me...?"

The silence between us lasted for several seconds before he cleared his throat and responded. "I couldn't help noticing you weren't at the hospital. I know you would usually be here hours ago, and Albi asked for you. I was checking up on you, just to see that you were okay."

The tension in my shoulders eased. I removed the phone from my ear to glance at the time and saw it was almost 10:30. I was shocked that I had been sleeping for over seven hours.

“I’m so sorry, Dr. Rowan. I...fell asleep. I’ll be at the hospital in a few minutes. Can you let him know for me? Please?”

“That I will do.”

“Thank you so much.” I hesitated a bit before adding, “It was nice of you to call and check up on me. I know that goes beyond the usual call of duty.”

“Albi is my patient, Miss Tennant,” he replied. “It’s my responsibility to get him well and he needs you for that to happen. So, for now, you’re a bit of my responsibility as well.”

I didn't know how to respond to that. “I’ll be there soon.” He really was a caring man. I wondered if he gave this much individual attention to each patient, or if, for some reason, it was only Albi and I whom he gave this attention to.

“Take care of yourself, Miss Tennant.”

“I’ll try. I’ll see you at the ward, Dr. Rowan.”

I hung up the phone and offered a quick prayer of thanks that such an understanding doctor had been placed in our path. Scrambling from the bed, I hurried to my bedroom and through the adjoining door to the bathroom.

After the shower, I felt more refreshed. I pulled on a pair of jeans and a T-shirt before snapping a rubber band over my hair to form a ponytail. I slipped on a pair of flats and grabbed my bag to go again. I felt better after the nap, but I never meant to stay away from the hospital that long.

There wasn’t much in the refrigerator to eat, but I grabbed a handful of wilted grapes and an apple. One of these days, I would have to prepare a nutritious meal for myself, but for now I didn’t want to spend an extra minute away from Albi.

I munched on the fruits on the way to the hospital and wiped my hands by the time I parked. At the back of my mind, I was aware my hunger was not fully

satisfied, but I had bigger concerns.

Chapter Sixteen: “If You're Not Able to Cope...”

When I reached Albi's room, I wasn't sure whether to be disappointed or relieved. He had already fallen asleep. I didn't know if he was feeling pain from his chemo treatment. He never indicated such, and I was afraid to ask Dr. Rowan. If Albi was in pain, Dr. Rowan would be completely honest with me, and I wasn't sure I could handle knowing that.

Walking over to Albi's bed, I kissed his forehead. He stirred, his eyelids fluttering open, and he smiled. “Mom.”

“I'm here baby,” I whispered. “I'm here.”

He promptly fell asleep again, and I occupied what was now considered my seat by his bedside. I watched over him, and although I couldn't physically change the circumstance, my mind told me that if I were close by, I could save him somehow. Yet, watching him sleep in the hospital bed, I had never before felt as helpless as I did.

The door opened, and I glanced up to see Dr. Rowan as he entered the room. He smiled, and it struck me that he was a pleasant man who always smiled. I found myself wondering what it was about him that made him so at ease dealing with such hard cases—like ours.

“Miss Tenant,” he spoke softly. “How's our little one doing?”

The way he said *our* little one, instead of *your* little one, touched me. The inclusive words he used made me feel like I wasn't in this alone, and in all objectivity, I probably wasn't. He cared about the well-being of my son, and had a dedication beyond what would be expected of most doctors. I knew he did. But I knew of people who spoke about doctors having to “keep their distance” from patients, so as to not get too close to their patients.

“He was asleep when I came in,” I replied just as softly. “Has there been any

change?”

“Come, let’s speak outside.” He motioned for me to walk ahead of him, always the gentleman. Outside the door, I leaned against the wall in case I needed support.

“How are you?” he asked, surprising me.

I frowned at him. “How am *I*?”

“Yes, how are *you*?” he repeated. “When was the last time you had a decent meal or got a full 8 hours' sleep?”

I glanced away from him. “I don’t have time to think about that.” I returned my gaze to him. “I’m more concerned about Albi and how his treatment is working.”

“We’re just in week one,” he answered. “We’ll be able to tell more about his progress as we continue his dosage.”

“Okay.” *I guess I won't always get all the answers all the time.*

“And now, back to you,” he said, his voice steady. “Miss Tennant, we already have your son in our care. The last thing we need is to have a mother who's made herself sick by not taking care of herself.”

“I am taking care of myself,” I answered, my tone frosty.

“What did you have for dinner?” he pressed.

“Umm...” I wanted to lie just so he would stop prying, but I couldn’t. My tongue was stuck to the roof of my tongue.

“Exactly.” The man really knew how such trying situations affected not just the patients, but apparently, the parents as well.

I looked away, exhausted. I reflected on the morning, and how drained I was the night before...or, was that...early this morning? “It's just so hard,” I

revealed. "I don't want to leave him too long. I didn't mean to sleep in today."

"Albi is under intense watch," he responded. "A nurse checks on him very often and there is a camera in his room. He also has a buzzer should he need anything. Miss Tennant, when your son gets out of here, he'll need a healthy mother to keep up with him. I understand you want to be here with him all the time, twenty-four seven, but to meet Albi's needs, you need to be functioning. Your body won't be able to take this pressure for long."

I slumped against the wall behind me, finally letting him see just how exhausted I felt. My stomach was knotted in hunger, and even though I had slept for over seven hours, there was nothing greater I wanted to do than to sleep for a whole night.

"Alright, well..." he continued, supposedly not sure how to say what he wanted, "I just wanted you to be aware that we have a counselling team, if you feel you need it."

I felt the indignation rising. "I don't need a counseling team. I'll be fine. I can take care of myself. I'm forty years old for crying out loud!"

He nodded, and there was that smile again...totally disarming. "I know you can. You're a strong woman. Now, Albi is sleeping and you need to go and get yourself something to eat. When you get back, I'll have a cot set up for you in his room so you can sleep the night right beside him and have a decent night's rest."

I nodded, with my head bowed so he didn't see the grateful tears in my eyes. For my entire adult life, I lived independently, not relying on anyone else but myself. Somehow, humbling myself enough to accept help from another person was not easy, but I did it for Albi.

Chapter Seventeen: A Request the Doctor Wasn't Ready For

The next day, Dr. Rowan was doing his rounds on his patients. *I'm getting too attached*, he thought after he walked through the doors of the ward and headed straight for Albi's room. He knew he shouldn't have favourites. He wasn't even sure that the little boy was a favourite of his, but there was something about the child and mother that drew him toward the two. The little boy was a fighter who had more guts than even his mother gave him credit for. A boy at seven shouldn't have to worry about diseases like leukemia, and Tara, three doors down, shouldn't have to worry about being disfigured after being trapped in a burning house. But, sickness was impartial to the young and old alike.

"Good afternoon, Dr. Rowan." Nurses he passed greeted him, and he nodded at them. He complimented Nurse Daley on her new hair cut, asked Jenna how her pregnancy was going, and made Nurse Wilson blush when he teased her about her honeymoon. With patients and co-workers alike, his suave demeanor and easy interaction set him apart.

He walked along two corridors before he came to a stop at Albi's room. He tried to walk past, but it was useless to resist, so he turned the doorknob. When he noticed Mary's absence, he was surprised he felt a longing, somehow wishing that she were there.

He had not felt like that in a long time—certainly not due to the absence of someone he'd likely see that day.

"Good morning, Albi," he greeted, injecting cheer into his voice. His professional eye was running over the child's frame, assessing his facial expression and the movement of his body.

Albi didn't sound as cheerful. "Good morning," he answered.

Dr. Rowan, who was checking his medical chart to ensure everything had gone smoothly throughout the night, glanced up at the response. Albi was always a vibrant and laughing child, but today he was glum.

“Where’s your mother?” Dr. Rowan asked him, thinking that may be the reason why the child was lackluster.

Albi only shrugged, the first time Dr. Rowan had seen the child answering an adult with a gesture rather than with words. “Do you want me to call her?”

He shook his head. “No, please don’t.”

The doctor's concern turned into a frown. Replacing his chart on the gurney in the room, he gave the child his full attention. “Albi, is something wrong?”

“I’m just thinking.”

Dr. Rowan was curious as to what the child was pondering. “Do you mind sharing—about what?”

“God.”

His answer seemed safe enough for Dr. Rowan, who had been worried he would be asked some questions he wouldn’t be able to answer.

“Do you believe in God, Dr. Rowan?”

“Yes,” he answered, feeling a bit guilty because lately, he hadn’t given much thought to his faith.

Albi enquired further, “Do you believe God answers prayers?”

Having raised no children of his own, Dr. Rowan had forgotten that rarely did a child ask one question without a follow-up. “Yes, I believe He or She does.” *Although there was a time when He or She answered no.*

Albi frowned, and Dr. Rowan's eyes widened. For a second, the little boy reminded him of his late wife, the same blonde hair and blue eyes. Was that

the reason he was getting so attached to the little boy? Did Albi have a subconscious effect on him, sparking memories of her?

“My mom believes in God,” Albi remarked. “A lot. And she’s been praying a lot since I got here. She prays all the time. How come God doesn’t listen and make me go home?”

Jeremy’s thoughts scrambled as he tried to come up with a response that would be adequate and wouldn’t prompt a barrage of other questions. “God answers prayers in different ways.”

“Like what?”

Dr. Rowan had to tread carefully here. To talk about spiritual or religious beliefs was outside his professional boundaries. In an ultra-sensitive, politically-correct environment such as this hospital, he was always on guard to not offend anyone. But, since the boy had brought it up, and no one else was within earshot, Dr. Rowan felt it safe to continue.

Dr. Rowan came up with a question that would help serve as an answer: “Hmm. Do you remember a time when you really wanted something but your mom told you that you have to wait?”

He nodded and scowled. “She always tells me I can’t eat the cookies until after I eat dinner.”

“Aha! Well, your mother doesn’t allow you to eat the cookies beforehand because it’ll ruin your appetite for dinner. In the same way, the best place for you to be right now is in the hospital, and God only wants the best for you. Understand?” Dr. Rowan held his breath, waiting for a response.

“Okay, I understand that.”

Glad that the conversation was over, Doctor Rowan checked the little boy’s stats. “How are you feeling, Albi?” he asked the child. “Are you very tired? Did you throw up again?”

He nodded. "Yes, a little. My mommy was here when I did."

"Okay." Doctor Rowan wasn't too worried, as nausea and vomiting were possible side effects of chemotherapy. As the child's dosage increased, the effects could get worse.

"Do you like my mom, Dr. Rowan?"

The doctor's mouth fell open, and he stared at the seven-year-old boy. He had to be sure he heard him correct. "Sorry, what was that, Albi?"

"I asked if you like my mom."

Dr. Rowan cleared his throat and scratched his head. He'd noticed Mary, and it wasn't just because he had an interest in her ill son. She was an attractive woman with blonde hair and soulful eyes. She had a nice figure as well, not too thin, but gently proportioned. Maybe under different circumstances, he would have asked her out, but not while they were trying to get her son well.

The doctor finally replied: "She's a good mother."

"Yes, she is!" the child agreed with a grin. "Even though she says I can't have the cookie before dinner, she always gives me one anyway."

"Lucky you!" Dr. Rowan cheered. "Your mother is the coolest. What about your grandparents?"

"They're dead."

"Oh, how sad." Dr. Rowan wasn't sure if Albi meant his grandparents on his maternal side, or was inclusive of the ones on his paternal side, but he thought best not to inquire further.

Albi's grin faded into fretfulness. "I like you, Dr. Rowan," he stated with an expression that was too serious for a seven-year-old. "I don't want to make my mom unhappy if I die. Do you think you could make her happy again if I die?"

Whoa! Dr. Rowan wasn't ready for that. He thought the child had already shocked him enough with his questions, but this request really gutted him. "You won't die," he rasped, his throat clogged by tears.

"Danny's mother was in the hospital and she died."

Jacqueline was a mother too, and she was in the hospital, and...

Catching himself caught in memories of times past, Dr. Rowan refocused his attention on the current situation. "But you won't die," he affirmed, with strong emotion. *I shouldn't be having this talk with a seven-year-old. No child should have to ponder this.*

"I'm not afraid to die," Albi said, and the colour drained from Dr. Rowan's face. The doctor stared at the little boy, but despite the boy's words, there was fear in his eyes. "I just don't want my mom to be sad. Will you promise to make her laugh?"

Dr. Rowan was too overwhelmed with emotion. He stepped toward the door. *Maybe this is why doctors are advised not to become emotionally involved with their patients.* He had to back away. "You'll be here to make your mother laugh," he said, and then bid the child later. He quickly stepped out of the room, never stopping until he reached his office. Then he let the tears slip from his eyes.

Chapter Eighteen: “It's Not Our Place.”

In the registry lab, Grace was happy they had won the confidence of their supervisor, who allowed them to work while he was taking a break. “Wasn't it nice for Dr. Newman to allow us to work?” Grace asked her friend, Christina.

“Yes, he’s a very accomodating man,” Christina agreed. “Most of the doctors here are pretty nice.”

“Yes, especially Dr. Newman and Dr. Rowan.”

“Dr. Rowan is kind of cute,” Christina said unexpectedly with a giggle.

Grace chuckled. “I noticed. He takes his work very seriously. Do you think he has a girlfriend?”

Christina turned away from her screen, and faced her friend in surprise. “He’s too old for you!”

Grace shrugged. “Just asking. He works a lot of hours. I don’t think he has anyone.”

Playfully, Christina admonished, “Well, that’s none of your business. Get back to work.”

Christina stuck out her tongue at her friend, glad that she had found a friend and partner so fun to be around. Their job could get stressful, and having someone to make fun of at times helped her to unwind and relax.

For a few minutes, they worked in silence before Christina stated, “He seems very dedicated to that one kid.”

Grace, who had immersed herself in her work, frowned at the computer

screen before her. “Who?”

“Dr. Rowan!”

“Look who just said 'that's none of your business'!" Grace loved to one-up her friend. She continued, “Is it the kid he actually wants to help, or is he just interested in the mother?”

“You think so?” Christina asked.

“I don’t know. He seems so professional. I doubt he would cross that line.”

“Still,” Christina started to say before she left it alone. She had to remind herself that it wasn’t any of her business and she was just an intern. The last thing she needed was for someone to overhear them gossiping. From what she had seen, the staff at the hospital was a close-knit family, and she hoped to be a part of that family one day.

Grace noticed something on her screen. “Oh my,” she exclaimed, and glanced over at her friend.

“Everything okay?”

“Come look at this!”

At the excitement in Grace’s voice, Christina left her workstation and hurried over to her friend. Her eyes bugged wide at the green light flashing on the computer system.

Grace gasped: “This is unbelievable!” She clicked on the two variants before her, and almost choked when the data was revealed. “Good Lord! Is that what I think it is?”

Christina nodded. “Yes. Remarkable isn’t it? And it was discovered by us.”

“Do you think we should mention it to Dr. Rowan?” Grace asked.

Christina shook her head and pressed the escape key to exit the screen they

had just seen. “No, I don’t think it’s our place. We’re just interns, remember? And, we're technically not supposed to be doing this.”

Grace nodded in agreement, but at the back of her mind was a nagging doubt about what they should do. She wasn't sure they should keep silent about this.

Chapter Nineteen: “I Had Promised Him He Wouldn’t be Alone...”

I stared at the clump of Albi’s hair that came off in the brush and slapped a hand over my mouth to stifle the sob. Dr. Rowan had warned me that, as a result of the chemotherapy, Albi's hair might fall out, but I had been keeping my fingers crossed that he’d be one of the lucky ones.

Apparently, he wasn’t.

“Mom, why did you stop?” he asked, his voice sounding weak.

The chemotherapy was wearing on his little body. With his body leaning against me, I knew he was thinner. He had lost weight due to his inability to digest most solid foods. He was prone to nausea and fatigue.

“I think your hair is fine now,” I told him. I sneakily shoved the clump of hair into the pocket of my jeans, so that he wouldn't notice, but now I had some thinking to do. If his hair was falling out, how could I help him to cope with it? He had been so strong, and he never protested when he had to do his chemo treatment. But as I sat there, having just held a clump of his hair, trying desperately to look like I was okay, this whole ordeal only took a darker turn for me.

“Mom.”

I wrapped my arms around him at the hesitancy in his voice. While he now slept most of the time due to fatigue, I was constantly awake. I couldn’t sleep a wink. I had bags under my red-rimmed eyes and I was barely able to keep on my feet.

“Yes, Albi?”

“I’m scared.” His words broke my heart then left me numb. “I don’t want to be alone when I wake up.”

I couldn’t stop the tears then. I pulled him even closer to me, surrounding him with my love. “I love you so much, Albi,” I told him. “You won’t be alone when you wake up.”

“Pinkie promise?”

I linked my pinkie with his. “Pinkie promise.”

Silent tears coursed down my face, and I held his frail form in my arms until he fell asleep. I slipped out of the bed and carefully positioned him with his head on the pillow. Time passed as I stood there at his bedside, watching him sleep, the tears still falling. I felt hurt and angry at the same time. They had said the chemo would help, but was it really? He was more frail than I’d ever seen him before.

I got out of the chair and lay on the cot that the staff had so kindly set up for me. I was so tired. I just wanted to go home and take a nap, but I had promised him he wouldn’t be alone when he woke up, and I intended to keep that promise.

Chapter Twenty: “You Have My Word.”

“Mary,” a voice called to me. “Mary.”

“Hmm,” I mumbled and fanned away the hands shaking me gently. I just wanted to sleep.

“Mary, wake up.”

As Dr. Rowan’s voice penetrated my consciousness, I jerked awake, and the first thing I did was raise myself from the cot so I could see Albi. My racing heartbeat calmed when I saw he was still lying on the bed. I could see the sheet moving with his breathing and let out a sigh of relief. With a yawn, I inclined my head to Dr. Rowan, who was frowning down at me.

“You told me you would take care of yourself,” he said, his face pinched tight and his lips pursed in a line of disapproval.

I was reaching the end of my rope. “I’m not the one who needs taking care of,” I snapped. “You said...you said this would work. It’s not working, Dr. Rowan—look at him!” My voice broke and shook, and I was struggling to breathe. I was surprised that I raised my voice in the presence of my son. Albi was asleep, but he could have woken up and heard how upset I was.

Dr. Rowan glanced in the direction of Albi and indicated the door. “Let’s speak outside.”

Following him, I realized I shouldn't have snapped at him. *He's only trying to help.* “I’m sorry,” I muttered, exhaustion in my voice. “I didn’t mean to snap at you like that.”

“I know, but you can’t help it because you're wearing yourself thin,” he remarked. “Mary...may I call you Mary?”

“Sure,” I nodded. Then, thinking of the other variations, added, “Or Mary Jane or M.J.”

“I’m worried about you,” he remarked. “You’ve lost weight, you have bags under your eyes, and if you’re not careful, you’re going to have a meltdown.”

I neither had the energy to argue with him, nor did I want to entertain any discussion about myself. “It’s not working, is it, Dr. Rowan?” I asked, with a tone that demanded a straight answer.

He sighed quietly, validating my concern. “We’re trying to do everything w-”

“But is it enough?” I interrupted. “Tell me the truth. Will I...will I lose my son to this?”

“I promise I’ll do everything that I can to ensure that doesn’t happen.”

I nodded, but still felt like it wasn’t enough. *These medical staff sure know how to sugar-coat their words.* He placed both his hands on my shoulders and gave me a reassuring squeeze. “Go home. Get some rest.”

I suddenly felt the fatigue of the last few weeks crashing down on me. “I can’t.”

“Yes, you can. I know it’s hard, but you can.”

“No, you don’t understand.”

“No, you listen to me, Mary.” He looked at me firmly. “If you don’t take care of yourself, Albi won’t have you to lean on. You’re all that little boy has. Don’t take that away from him. Yes, I know you’re concerned, but if this continues, you won’t be of much use to him.”

“But I promised him he wouldn’t wake up alone,” I explained. “He said he was scared to wake up alone.”

Compassion filled his eyes and softened his features. His face took on a look of resolution, and then...I almost knew what he was going to say next: "I'll stay with him."

I knew it, but for some reason, had to be sure. I searched the expression on his face, and he was sincere. "I couldn't ask you to do that," I whispered, staring into his azure eyes.

"You're not asking. I'm volunteering. And to be quite honest, I'll be here anyway."

I trembled a little, for the first time realizing that I was attracted to him. With all the worry about Albi, I never once looked at him as a man, but standing so close to him, with his hands on my arms, I couldn't deny the interest. The look in his eyes seemed to reflect that interest.

Suddenly, a man's voiced called, "Dr. Rowan."

I didn't hear the passerby until he was already upon us. I shrugged out of Dr. Rowan's grip and stepped back from him, trying to make sure my features reflected nothing of what I felt.

Dr. Rowan greeted the older gentleman who walked by us, but not after a second cursory glance. "Dr. Newman."

Once the older gentleman had passed by, I had to speak up. "I'm sorry, I can't have you abandon your job to keep an eye on my son," I told him, picking up where we had left off.

"Nice try." He opened the door to Albi's room. "Go get your handbag and I'll walk you to your car. I'll be off duty in the next hour so I'll be on my own time, watching Albi."

I opened my mouth to argue but he shook his head and continued. "Let someone else do something nice for you for a change, Mary. There's nothing that says you have to do this on your own."

And because I was always accused of trying to be an island, I conceded.
“You’ll ensure he doesn’t wake up alone?”

“Well, if I can be excused for short washroom breaks, yes. You have my word.”

Chapter Twenty-One: “Call Me Jeremy.”

Since we agreed that Dr. Rowan would watch Albi, I gave in and got my bag from Albi’s room. I kissed Albi’s forehead, whispering a short prayer and telling him I loved him before I left the room. As promised, Dr. Rowan walked me to the upper deck of the hospital where my car was parked. He explained that, at night, if a staff member wanted security personnel to escort them to their vehicle, it was provided. He said it casually, as though his doing this wasn’t personal, but I wasn’t buying it, not after the connection we shared outside Albi’s door.

“I’m parked over there,” I told him, pointing in the direction of my car. I was walking faster when, suddenly, a light feeling swept through me, and I felt myself falling. Dr. Rowan caught me before I could hit the concrete, and I clutched his arm, staring up at him in confusion.

“Mary, are you okay?” His face was creased in concern. I clutched at his shoulders as he righted me.

“I-I’m fine,” I answered. “I don’t know what came over me.”

He was holding me even closer than when we were outside of Albi’s room. I could see the deepness of his eyes punctuated by his pupil. His head was so close to mine, his nearness stealing what little air I was already struggling into my lungs.

“Mary.” He murmured my name and I licked nervously at my lips, my eyes going wide. So much time had passed since a man held me like this. It felt good, but at the same time my nerves were unsettled.

“I can stand,” I croaked and pushed away from his arms.

He released me and pushed his hands into his front pockets. “I’m not allowing you to drive home.”

“What...?” *Now what?*

“Mary, you’re exhausted,” he pointed out. “Don’t argue.”

“Then how am I supposed to get home?” I asked, even more frustrated because I never expected this attraction between him and I.

“I’d take you if I weren’t on shift for the next hour,” he answered. “Plus, I promised you I’d keep an eye on Albi while you’re at home resting. So, I’ll call you a cab.”

“I’ll be charged an arm and a leg for parking if I leave my car overnight!”

“Don’t worry. I’ll take care of it.”

“Dr. Rowan-”

“Jeremy. Call me Jeremy.”

Heat flooded my cheeks and I glanced away from him as he started punching numbers into his phone. I stood silently beside him and allowed him to call the cab. I tuned out his conversation with whatever cab company he had called, then he hung up and tried to take my arm, but I shuffled away from him.

“It should be here in five to ten minutes. Just to be sure, that’s your car—the white two-door?”

“Yes.”

“Okay. Give me your parking pass, and I’ll add more time to it.”

I reached into my purse and handed it to him.

Standing there, I was desperate to go because the longer I spent with him, the more confusing these feelings became. I walked silently beside him, feeling the energy radiating from his form. He was tall and powerful, yet easy-going. I watched him call to other staff members as they walked by, all the while my

face was probably a bright red.

After the longest five- or ten-minute wait of my life, the cab finally arrived.

“Don’t go to bed hungry,” he advised, and marched forward to open the passenger-side door for me.

I hesitated a few seconds before I approached the vehicle. I stopped beside him and said under my breath, “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome. Take care of yourself, Mary.”

When I was seated, he closed the door firmly. As the cab drove away, I tried to resist the urge to look back. But, for some reason, I did look back through the rear window, and was disappointed when I didn’t see his frame.

With a sigh, I leaned my head back against the headrest and shared my address with the driver. I wrapped my arms around my body, and was startled to hear Christmas carols on the radio. For the first time in weeks, I glanced around me, then realized Christmas was fast approaching. Had it been that long since Albi was in the hospital? How had I missed the Christmas lights and the decorations? It's sad how trying events can blind you to the good around you.

Even before all this happened, Christmas was not my favourite time of the year. I only started celebrating Christmas when Albi was old enough to appreciate it. Before that, I treated Christmas as any other day.

But it hadn’t always been like that.

I'll never forget the day when Christmas was lost on me. It was December 23rd, and I was nineteen. I was at college when I got a call that no one wants to receive: my parents had been in a terrible car accident. The car they were driving slipped on some ice. Even now, I hate recalling the details. They both died at the same time.

Needless to say, since then I hadn't quite looked at Christmas with the same

cheer that most people do.

Because of Albi, I had been slowly coming around. Every year, we went caroling with his other classmates and we picked out our tree just before Thanksgiving. Together, we decorated, I made eggnog, and we exchanged gifts. We also volunteered at the soup kitchen, providing meals to the less fortunate.

How am I supposed to face another tragic Christmas? My son should be home. We should be decorating our tree and baking gingerbread cookies. We should be watching Christmas cartoons and kids shows.

Instead, I was going home alone and he was left alone in the hospital.

No, not alone. He had Jeremy—no, Dr. Rowan—to keep an eye on him. As much as I tried rejecting the name in my head, I was afraid it would be stuck. Tonight we had crossed a boundary from parent-doctor, to Mary and Jeremy, which added even more uncertainty.

Chapter Twenty-Two: Maybe I'm Not in This Alone

“Hmm,” I felt almost normal waking up the next morning. My stomach growled because I had not taken Jeremy’s advice and eaten before going to bed. The result was that I woke up, feeling as though I had not eaten in days, which was actually true if referring to foods of substance. Instead of eating last night, as soon as I arrived at home, I instead trudged to my bed and fell asleep.

Stretching, I opened my eyes and reached across to the nightstand to check my phone. No missed call. I sighed with relief. My worst fear was being away from Albi when he needed me.

“Ten o’ five!” I screeched. I jumped up from the bed, kicking off the covers. I was rested, but at what expense? Did Albi wake up alone, thinking I had gone back on my word?

With a groan, I remembered that I had no ride to the hospital. I thought of calling a taxi, but I had to really watch my funds. I decided to call Judy, hoping she would be able to assist me with a ride. Since Albi's crisis began, I had been negligent of our friendship. I’d pushed her away a little so I could focus on my son, but I knew Judy would be understanding.

“Mary?” Her voice was hesitant over the phone.

“Judy, I’m so sorry to call you without notice,” I said. “I’ve got to get to the hospital, but I don’t have a ride. Do you think you can pick me up in the next half an hour and drop me off? As I said, I know it’s short notice.”

“Oh, yeah...for sure.” I could hear her morning voice. Judy sometimes liked to sleep in. I hoped my waking her up didn't cause too great an inconvenience. “I'll be there in twenty.”

I noticed that I had actually asked someone for help. Instead of feeling less independent, it felt reassuring to know that I had others I could rely on.
Maybe I'm not in this alone.

About twenty minutes later, I was showered and dressed in a charcoal dress that ended just above my knees and a pair of thick black cotton tights. Then, the doorbell rang.

“Coming!” I yelled, grabbing my bag from the dresser and running down the stairs. I shoved my feet into my boots and swung the front door open.

“I brought you coffee and Danish,” Judy announced. “It’s in the car.”

I was so used to tears now that I didn’t bother to hide them. I flung my arms around my friend and hugged her. “I’m so sorry for pushing you away.”

“It’s okay, I didn’t take it personally,” she said with a smile, patting my back. “I know what you're going through.”

Actually, she didn't know what I was going through. People used that same phrase when I lost my parents: *I know what you're going through*. They try to be sympathetic, which of course is appreciated, but unless you actually experience something of this magnitude, you don't really know what it's like.

But I knew she meant well, as most people often do. “Thanks.”

“Well, let’s get you to the hospital.”

Chapter Twenty-Three: That's All He Can Be

I locked the front door and followed Judy to her car. Once seated, I noticed a coffee cup sitting in the passenger-side cup holder. I thanked her again and got started on the coffee. I couldn't remember the last time I had coffee this good. These days, I drank coffee from the machine at the hospital.

"Have you been eating?" she asked as she drove toward the hospital.

"A little," I answered truthfully.

"It's starting to show, Mary," she remarked. "I'm so sorry Albi is sick. I pray for him every night. And you know what else I do?"

"What?"

"I pray for you."

I glanced at her in surprise. "For me?"

"Yes, that you will have the strength to get through this. Are you at the hospital every day?"

"Usually. From the crack of dawn until he goes to sleep at nights."

"Oh, Mary, I wish you'd allow me to help."

"It's not much of a burden to share with anyone else."

"Oh, that's not true! Don't say that!" she admonished, whipping her head toward me with a look of disapproval, then, just as quickly, returning her focus to the road. She seemed almost angry. "You're always so closed off, Mary, and not allowing anyone to help you. There's nothing wrong with asking for help. I would be happy to sit with Albi a few hours in the day so

you can get yourself a meal and some decent hours of sleep.”

I sighed because she spoke the truth. Jeremy had pretty much said the same thing yesterday, and he knew me for far less time than Judy did.

“You’re absolutely right, Judy. It’s been hard.”

“I know, honey. I know.”

I drank the coffee and bit into the pastry she brought me, feeling refreshed afterward. I wondered if Albi was up and if Jeremy kept his word and stayed with him. He should be off, and I thought I couldn’t even blame him if he left when I didn’t show up on time this morning.

“By the way, what happened to your car?” Judy asked.

“Jeremy insisted I take a cab.”

“Jeremy?”

I blushed and averted my eyes from her to stare out the window. “I mean Dr. Rowan.”

“Albi’s doctor?”

“Yes. He’s been really good to us.” I didn’t succeed in keeping the admiration out of my voice.

“You like him, don’t you?” *Judy the ever-hopeful romantic.*

“He’s Albi’s doctor,” I protested, as though that answered the question.

“I know. But is that all he is?”

Sadness came over me. “That’s all he can be. He’s Albi’s doctor. I’m pretty sure it would be against the rules for him to...well...”

“But, do you like him?”

I sighed and turned to face her. “It really shouldn't matter how I feel. This is not the time to have inappropriate feelings for my son’s doctor. Albi's my priority. He’s the only one who matters right now.”

She didn’t say anything for the rest of the drive. When we arrived, she parked on the same deck where my car was. I gave her a grateful smile. “Thanks for the lift.”

“Hold up, I’m coming with you,” she commented, starting to open her car door before she checked with me. “Is that alright?”

I almost told her no, but then I nodded. This was my best friend, the woman who would be Albi’s guardian should anything happen to me. She should be able to see him. And, I needed to be more accepting of others’ offers to help.

I led the way through the parking lot, through the entrance, and down the corridor that I was all too familiar with.

I felt I had to warn her that Albi would look a bit...different. “I must warn you though: he’s not entirely like his usual self,” I fretted as we walked into the hospital and down the seemingly-endless corridor. “I mean, he's the same Albi, but he’s lost a lot of weight and his hair's falling out.”

Chapter Twenty-Four: “...Tugged at My Heartstrings”

Judy smiled at me. “I’m sure he’s still the wonderful little boy I remember.”

I smiled at her gratefully, and we headed for Albi’s room. “He may be grumpy,” I told her. “I told him he wouldn’t be alone when he woke up and I slept into the late morning.”

“Ah well, you deserved the rest.”

Standing just outside the door to Albi's room, I cautiously spun the lock, not wanting to disturb him if he was asleep. Slowly and without a creak, I pushed the door open, and paused at the deep masculine voice.

“...and laid him in a manger; because there was no room for them in the inn.”

I pushed the door open wider so we could peer into the room. The deep masculine voice was from Jeremy, who was sitting in my chair, and Albi was in bed but had moved closer to him. Jeremy was reading what sounded like the Nativity story from his phone, and Albi was peering at the screen so their heads were close. Seeing them together like that tugged at my heartstrings.

“Is that the doctor?” Judy whispered before I could send her a silent look. “He’s cute.”

Jeremy glanced up at us then. From the way he was looking at us, I could almost tell that he had to have heard Judy’s comment.

Pushing the door open, I entered the room, allowing Judy to follow me, although I wanted to punish her by sending her back to the car. Now the doctor would think I liked him!

“Dr. Rowan, good morning,” I greeted him, walking over to the bed to view Albi. “Hey, Albi. Sorry I had to leave.”

He smiled at me, seeming chirpy this morning. “It’s okay. When I woke up last night, Dr. Rowan was here, and he was also here this morning.”

That he’d kept his word—not only once, but twice—touched me more than he’ll ever know. “That’s very nice of him,” I acknowledged, before remembering that Judy was with me. I beckoned her forward. “Albi, look who’s here!”

“Aunt Jude!”

“Hey chump, how you doing?” Judy asked, walking over to him and embracing him in a hug. “You giving the nurses trouble?”

Albi giggled. “No, I’ve been good. Ask Dr. Rowan!”

This was my cue, so I introduced the two of them. Judy had a gleam in her eyes, and I wondered what she might ask him if they were alone. But that wouldn’t happen now. With Albi’s attention focused on Judy, I followed Jeremy to the door where we could talk in hushed tones.

“He seems much better today,” I commented.

“And *you* seem much better today,” he replied. “I take it you got a decent night’s sleep?”

“Yes, as soon as I got home, I was out like a light.” I felt rested, and seeing Albi better made me more at ease. “Thank you for staying with him.”

“It was my pleasure. He really is a remarkable little boy, and he reasons well for his age.”

“Yes, sometimes he seems to be dealing with this better than I,” I admitted. My enthusiasm was growing. “His demeanor today—it’s happier than I’ve seen in a while. Do you think this means he’s getting better? Is the treatment

working?”

His voice had a reserved tone to it: “Unfortunately, we cannot use mood to judge the status of his treatment.” He looked almost apologetic as he said it. “But, we’ll be able to update you tomorrow on our findings. He’s been on chemo now for a month. We’ll evaluate the leukemia cells still present in his body, and then we’ll talk.”

“Oh God, I hope it’s good news!” I said, my tone a mix of hope and dread. “I’m not sure how much more of this I can take. Did you know I forgot that Christmas is coming?” I laughed, and it occurred to me that I couldn’t remember the last time I laughed.

“You’re stronger than you look. Although, that’s no excuse for you to do everything alone. When you need it, ask for help.”

I nodded at his words. Second reminder of the morning. “Okay. I’ll try.”

His smile reached his eyes. “I’ll be going home to shower and change. I’ll be back later to check up on Albi.”

"You're on shift again today, too?" Geez, these doctors seemingly worked supernaturally-long hours.

"Oh, no. I have the rest of the day off."

He'll check on Albi today, on his day off? I shook my head at him. “Oh, no! We couldn’t ask you to do that on your day off.”

“Again, I’m volunteering. I’ll let Albi know I’ll be back.”

I watched him walk to Albi, and observed the way they reacted to each other. He ruffled my son’s thin hair, which was turning white from the chemo. Albi grinned at whatever Jeremy told him, and I knew then that Jeremy saw us as more than just a patient and his mother. He genuinely cared.

He would make a good dad too. I would've guessed him to be in his forties

and still without a child. For a man who loved kids so much, he should have had a few for himself. Perhaps, had circumstances been different, the idea of the two of us would not have been so far-fetched, and actually have some merit. Otherwise, he was a suitable match for Albi...and I.

Chapter Twenty-Five: Nothing Seems to be Working

Albi's sleeping face was relaxed, void of the pain he had been feeling earlier. While he cried, complaining of abdominal pain, I cried too, helpless in what to do. He had been administered medication to help him sleep, and for that, I was grateful, because it had hurt seeing him like that.

I sat there at his bedside for a long time, just watching him breathe, the gentle rise and fall of his chest, the soft sounds he made when he exhaled. Each breath he dragged into his lungs was reassurance that he was alive. As long as breath remained in his body, I had hope.

I couldn't believe that just a week ago, when Judy had visited, he had felt better. Now he was the worst he had been since being admitted. Not only were his initial flu-like symptoms worse, but his energy levels had plummeted. Dr. Scott had told me this was common when a patient was undergoing chemotherapy.

So, did that mean that once the chemotherapy was done, his symptoms would reverse? Regardless, I think his words were meant to be comforting, but they weren't. Nothing seemed to be working the way it should.

Climbing to my feet, I placed a tired hand on Albi's exposed arm before pulling the sheet higher over his shoulders. I patted his arm affectionately before leaving the room.

As I left, I saw a nurse walk by, and decided to ask her something. "Excuse me," I called out. "Does this hospital have a chapel?"

The nurse turned and gave me a compassionate look. I had been at the hospital with Albi so often that they now knew me, if not by name, certainly by face. She gave me directions I wasn't sure I could follow, but I nodded to

her, told her thanks, and tried my best to remember how to get to the chapel.

Chapter Twenty-Six: The Light of Possibility

I walked along the corridors, making several wrong turns and having to ask two other people for directions. Finally, I came upon the small chapel. The door was open, so I walked inside, my footsteps muffled by the carpet that ran to the front. I stopped in the center, staring at the Nativity scene that had been set up in all its splendor. It even had animals surrounding the baby and what might have been real straw to represent the setting of a manger.

Somber, I slid into one of the pews and sat down. I closed my eyes and bowed my head, resting forward on the pew in front of me. I started whispering a prayer for Abi's health to be restored. When words failed me, I sat with my eyes closed, feeling the tears leaving tracks on my cheeks but unable to stop them. Albi was slipping away from me and I didn't know what to do.

My phone vibrated and I wiped the tears from my eyes to see who was calling. Jeremy—I mean...Dr. Rowan. I had to answer, and not wanting to be rude, I scurried out of the chapel.

“Hello.”

“Mary, where are you?” he asked. “I passed by Albi's room and saw that you weren't there. A nurse said you had gone to the chapel, so I wanted to check on you.”

“Yes, I'm just outside the chapel.” My voice was shaky. “I just don't know what else to do.”

“I'll be right there,” he stated. “We need to talk.”

I nodded. “Okay, sure.”

“Okay, umm... Mary?”

“Yes?”

An uncomfortable silence filled the other end of the line before he gave a long sigh. “Never mind. I’ll be there shortly.”

“Alright.” *Why that long silence? Was there some more bad news he was hesitating to tell me?*

Returning to the pew, I resumed my praying, my heart more troubled than ever. Jeremy would want to speak about Albi’s worsening condition, and I didn’t want to hear it, not here at the chapel, where there was supposed to be something called *hope*. I felt that whatever Jeremy would want to discuss with me was anything but hope.

As thoughts of panic seized me, my mind was too crowded to pray. I needed my baby to live. He just had to live. *God, why would You give him to me just to take him back from me already? It’s not his time. It can’t be.*

When a presence slipped into the pew beside me, I didn’t need to look up to know it was Jeremy. We sat there for a while before he took my hand in his. I gripped his hand tightly, tears slipping faster. I couldn’t hear what he was saying but he mumbled words I assumed was a prayer. It was concise.

“I’m sorry. I forgot how to do this right,” he said softly. “I haven’t prayed in a long time.”

“I do,” I replied in a tired voice, worn and defeated. “I pray a lot. Will it make a difference, Jeremy? I don’t see it making a difference for Albi. Why won’t God listen?”

“I don’t know, Mary,” he answered, his truth refreshing. If I had asked that same question to many of my friends from church, they would have used some sentimental, feel-good answer, which wouldn’t help.

At least Jeremy’s answer confirmed the grave uncertainty of this situation.

I had to ask him the truth. “How bad is it?” I asked him. “Please don’t hide

the truth to spare me.”

Jeremy sighed, his hanging low. “I don’t like to see you suffer like this.”

“Tell me!” I gripped his hand tighter. “Is he going to—” I trailed off on a sob, not able to say the word.

“We still found too many leukemia cells in the bone marrow samples,” he answered. “Those nasty cells keep coming back.”

I sucked in a deep breath that shuddered my body. I shook my head in disbelief. “I can’t lose him, Jeremy. I can’t.”

Though a bit hesitant at first, he slipped an arm around my shoulders. I turned into him, seeking comfort. He clutched me tighter, my tears soaking his shirt.

“We’ll start him on a new treatment plan,” he explained. We’re not giving up, Mary. Not by a long shot. Still, it would be good if—”

I pulled away from him when he trailed off his sentence. *If what...?* I frowned at him through my tears. If he knew of an alternative way to help my son, I wanted to know what it was.

“If what...?” I asked.

“If the leukemia cells recur, which is apparently the case here, we usually consider a stem cell transplant.”

“Explain it to me, please.” I recalled hearing about the stem cell controversy some years earlier, but never paid much attention to it.

“If we have a donor available,” he began, “we could increase the dosage of Albi’s chemotherapy to kill the leukemia cells. Afterward, we would conduct a transplant of blood-forming stem cells to restore his bone marrow. It’s one of the most effective ways of treating this.”

“Then we’ll do it!” I cried, slightly dismayed that I was never made privy to this option before. “What do I need to do? Do I need to sign some papers or

something?”

He took both my hands in his to calm me down. “A donor with matching HLA might not be available,” he said softly. “Our registry is very small and still in its experimental stages, so I don't think we have one on our records.”

I felt like a deflated balloon. “How can we get a donor?”

“It's not the easiest thing in the world to find someone with HLA as close to the patient as possible,” he admitted. “Does Albi by chance have any siblings by his father's side? A sibling is usually the most likely match.”

My face crumpled in defeat. “I don't know. I really don't know if he has siblings.”

For a quick second, he was confused, but just as quickly continued pondering. “What about the father?” he asked. “You two may not be on speaking terms, but this is crucial. If he has other kids, then one of them could possibly be a match and become a donor for Albi.”

I shook my head and sniffed. “No, you don't understand. Albi isn't mine.”

He frowned at me. “What?”

“I mean he's mine, and I love him more than my own life,” I exclaimed, “but I'm not his biological mother. I adopted him when he was merely days old.”

Jeremy's mouth fell open in surprise. “I...I had no idea.”

“No one knows about it except Judy,” I conveyed. “I haven't decided if I'll tell him now or when he's older. The fewer people there are who know about it, the easier it is to keep secret if I choose not to tell him.”

“And there's no way of finding out who his biological parents are?”

I shook my head. “It was a private adoption, and the parents wished to be anonymous. The paperwork was handled by my lawyer.”

Jeremy sighed and leaned back in the pew, shoulders slumped. He wasn't expecting to hear that Albi's adopted and that there was no way to find out who the biological parents are. Just minutes earlier, he probably expected to have a solid idea of what to do next. But now, he didn't. I think he felt defeated. He passed a hand over his face, and for the first time, I saw a tired look on his face, with creases and worry lines. The light of possibility had dimmed.

“Then we’re almost at a stalemate,” he mumbled. “I’ll try to get in touch with other stem cell registry units to see what they come up with.” He hesitated before adding, “But it’s going to cost, Mary.”

I sat up, buoyed by a new purpose. “I don’t care how much it costs. I’ll get the money if I have to sell my house, all my art, the car, the gallery—I don’t care. I just need my son well.”

“Then I’ll get in touch with the other registry units,” he stated, his expression somber. “It’s a long shot though, Mary. Not many people donate to this procedure.”

“I’ll find out who his biological parents are, or at least who his biological mother is,” I said with conviction in my voice. At the time of the adoption, I had the idea that Albi's biological mother perhaps didn't have the support of his father, or any real support at all. It was beyond my comprehension to imagine what could drive a mother to put up her child for adoption. Whatever the case, she wanted the best for her child, and felt that she wasn't in a position to offer that.

She always wanted the best for her child—especially now, if she knew his life was at stake. My new resolve was to find her. She'd definitely be willing to help.

Any mother would.

“You might be met with a lot of legal resistance and administrative red tape.”

“I'll find her,” I restated, my voice strong with conviction. “I will. One of his parents may be the answer. My son’s life is at stake, Jeremy, and I intend to do everything in my power to see him healthy again.”

Chapter Twenty-Seven: The Distance a Mother's Willing to Go

As we pulled up to the airport's entrance, I turned to the man who had once again come to my rescue by agreeing to drop me off at the airport. My whole body was taut and wound tighter than a guitar string. This whole trip could either turn out to be Albi's salvation or a big disappointment if we were unable to find a match for Albi's stem cell transplant.

"Are you sure you want to go alone?" Jeremy asked, his face a mask of worry. "I would gladly go with you."

I shook my head, refusing his offer. "I have to do this alone," I responded. "Plus, I need you here to keep an eye on Albi." I chewed fretfully on my bottom lip and turned questioning eyes to him. "You will keep an eye on him for me, won't you, Jeremy? You'll let him know I love him and that I'll be back?"

"You know I will," he answered softly, and without warning he pressed his forehead to mine. As our eyes met and clung, his filled with regret. "I'm sorry I let you down."

I smiled at him sadly. "You didn't let me down. You did all you could."

And it was true. For the past three weeks, Jeremy and I exhausted all options of getting a donor for Albi. I came to the conclusion that I was going to have to travel, and asked him to drop me off at the airport. I would have asked Judy, but she was gone on a trip to Italy to meet with a budding artist. It was almost ironic how everyone else's life was going on, while mine had come to a complete standstill.

"Then why do I feel like I've failed you?" Jeremy sighed.

I glanced down at the ticket in my hand. Because I wanted to be one of the first off the plane, I had paid for premium seating at the front of the plane with extra legroom. I wanted nothing to hinder me from reaching the lawyer's office as soon as possible.

"I have to go, Jeremy," I said, pulling away from him. "Are you sure you can pick me up tomorrow morning?" My flight back was at eight in the morning.

"I've exchanged shifts with someone, so yes, I'll be here."

"Thank you." I got out of the car, took my luggage, and proceeded toward the entrance. I had a sad smile on my face because Jeremy was such a dear, but I wasn't able to think of him deeply when I was so concerned about Albi. I didn't have the luxury of thinking about why such a great guy remained single at forty.

I had no carry-on because I didn't intend to stay longer than necessary. I meant to gather the information I needed, then catch my flight back. I prayed I wouldn't have to stay more than one night.

I thought I would be anxious on the two-hour flight, but sometime during the flight, I fell into a deep sleep. It was a sleep that left me feeling more exhausted. I knew I had been talking and crying in my sleep. My face was wet with my tears.

The passenger beside me was concerned. "Ma'am, are you okay?" she asked.

No, I'm not okay. I have a son in the hospital who's fighting for his life, and I feel there's nothing I can do about it.

"Yes, I'm fine," I answered, then stared through the window, effectively cutting off the conversation. I instantly wished I hadn't. How great a relief it would have been to unburden myself on a stranger I wouldn't see again. I sighed and accepted that the moment had passed.

When the plane landed, and as soon as we were advised we could deboard the

plane, I slid past the passenger beside me who was looking to remove her bag from the overhead compartment. Within seconds, I was one of the first passengers to leave the plane. I headed to the car rental agency to pick up my rental.

From the airport, I headed downtown. I should have checked in at my hotel first, but I was too impatient. The drive lasted some thirty minutes and then it took me another ten minutes to locate parking close to the building where Roland Peart worked.

I found the building easily enough. It was a hub for lawyers. I crossed the street at the stop sign and hurried through the glass doors of the office building. Glancing around me at the people walking through the lobby, I approached the young woman at the front desk to ask for directions.

“Hello. I’m trying to find Roland Peart’s office,” I announced, pulling my small suitcase behind me.

“One moment, please.” She answered the ringing phone on her desk and entertained a five-minute call before hanging up and turning to me once more. “You were saying?”

“Roland Peart’s office,” I repeated, feeling like a second-class client.

“May I have your name please, and purpose of your visit?”

“It’s Mary Jane Tennant,” I answered, then struggled with how to answer the second question. “He handled a confidential case for me some years ago, and I’d like to speak to him about this.”

“Okay, have a seat for me, please.” She gestured toward the waiting area. “I’ll let you know when Mr. Peart's available.”

I wanted to speak to Roland right now, but given the fact that I had just shown up with little warning, I nodded and took a seat. I waited for twenty minutes before the receptionist announced for me to approach her table once more. She handed me a visitor’s pass and directed me to Mr. Roland Peart’s

office.

“Thank you,” I said gratefully, and walked briskly toward the elevator. I rode it to the tenth floor, then followed the corridor to the left. I counted the doors and finally arrived at the door with Roland’s name. I knocked once.

“Come in.”

Chapter Twenty-Eight: Meeting With a Lawyer

I pushed the door open and entered the office, closing the door behind me. I didn't expect him to remember me, but his eyes lit up and he stood from behind his desk. Only then did I remember that he had asked me out once and that I had turned him down.

"Mary Jane!" he announced, his face smiling. "How are you doing?"

I glimpsed the gold band on his left hand and felt genuinely happy for him. He was a great man, just not someone I had felt any connection with more than in a professional capacity.

"Roland, how are you?" I enquired, shaking his hand. "It's been a long time."

"Yes, it has been," he remarked and laughed. "My wife is from here, so we moved four years ago."

"Oh, wow. That's good to hear. I'm sure you're doing well."

"Yes, thank you. Nicole is wonderful. We also have twins."

"Twins! Wow."

"And what about you? How has life been for you? What are you doing here?" He asked the questions and walked around to his chair to sit once more.

"I've been okay," I started to say before changing my answer. "Scratch that. The truth, Roland, is that as of late, life has been rough and thrown me a curve."

"What do you mean?"

“My son, the little boy you assisted me with adopting—” I broke off as I felt my throat begin to close up.

“Okay...” he wasn't sure where I was going. “I know there were no issues with the adoption itself. Would you mind telling me more?”

I shook my head. “The adoption went well. The problem is that my son has..” I had just realized how hard it was to say that word: “...leukemia.”

Roland's eyes widened in shock. “Oh, no! That's so sad. How is he?”

“Hanging in there,” I answered, approaching his desk. I placed my palms at the edge of the desk, clutching at the same time I observed him. “This is the reason I'm here, Roland. He's done chemo and now he needs a stem cell transplant.”

The quizzical furrow of his eyebrows revealed his question. “I'm not sure I follow. What does this have to do with me?”

“We can't find a donor for Albi,” I answered. “The best chance of a match would be a sibling who shares both biological parents, and as such, I need to know who Albi's parents are. A father or a mother...anyone.”

“Oh, of course. I believe the term they use is *familial*, right? He needs a familial donor?”

“Yes. A sibling may be best, but if not, I think a parent—a biological parent—is the second-best chance.”

“And that's what led me here. Since you handled the adoption, I believe you would have the names of his parents.”

“I see,” he said. He paused in his chair for a thoughtful moment, no doubt to think about any privacy concerns and lawyer-client confidentiality. He sighed. “Mary, you know I'd love to help, but—”

“Please, Roland,” I said, interrupting him. “You may have the answer to cure

my son. I know about privacy and how you have to keep secrecy between you and your clients. It was a private adoption, but given the circumstance, I'm sure we can bend the rules."

He shook his head, the look on his face tortured. "I can't, Mary. I just can't. You're asking me to risk my career and to go against everything I stand for. Confidentiality means everything between a lawyer and a client. If a client can't trust me, I'd never be hired to work on a case anymore. I hope you can see it from that perspective. I don't know if I can just give you that information. But wh-."

"But you can," I pleaded, already realizing that this was a wasted trip. "How can you have the information that can save my child's life and not give it to me? He's seven, Roland! Put your own kids in my position. Wouldn't you want me to help them if our positions were reversed?"

He let out a sigh. "I would, but I can't. I'm sorry. But what I c-"

I interjected. "No, I'm sorry that procedure trumps a little boy's life."

"Mary, you know that's not fair. What if-"

"What's not fair is a little boy who has to be fighting for his life!" I almost shouted now that my anxiety was full-fledged. "I have to go."

"What if there's something else I-"

I didn't wait to hear the rest of what he had to say. I left his office, slamming the door behind me. I wanted to break something, to release the pent-up energy flowing through me. I'd flown two hours and was still nowhere close to finding a solution.

I hurried from the building, tears making it difficult to see as I headed for my car. I made a wrong turn and had to double back to find the rental. Once inside, I locked the doors and fumbled in my bag for my phone. I brought up my call log and punched in the most recent number that had called me.

Jeremy answered on the first ring. “Hey Mary. How's everything?”

“He won't help me,” I said impatiently, sobbing on the phone. “I don't understand why.”

I could hear Jeremy's sigh of disappointment. “I'm so sorry. We'll continue searching for a donor. We'll find one.”

“I don't know what else to do now,” I said with a groan. “Where do I go from here?”

“You go to your hotel room and relax,” he responded.

“I can't. I just want to come home.”

“Your flight isn't until tomorrow,” he reminded me. “Go to the hotel and get some rest, Mary. Albi is fine with me. I just checked on him. We played a game and now he's sleeping again.”

I sighed. “Thank you, Jeremy, for everything you're doing.”

“You don't have to thank me. Just take care of yourself until you get back.”

“Okay. I'll head out to the hotel now.”

“Good. I'll be at the airport to pick you up.”

“See you then.”

I hung up the phone and dropped it into my bag. With a heavy heart and stiff hands, I inserted the key into the ignition, gripped the steering wheel, and put the car in reverse.

Chapter Twenty-Nine: If Only Mary Had Listened

Sitting at his desk, Roland was facing a bit of a dilemma. He did have another option, *but Mary wouldn't listen*. She kept interrupting him when he attempted to offer a workaround.

Mary did have a point. Her son's life was on the line. Roland joined this profession to help people, and where the law was a hindrance to people, it was his job to find loopholes in the legal system that would serve the very people it was meant to.

But now, he had just enforced a condition that may, directly or indirectly, bring a child's life to an end.

He knew that he couldn't live with himself if he let that happen.

But...what now? He had just told Mary otherwise. He knew where to find her if he needed to. That wouldn't be hard.

And...he didn't *have* to give her the details of Albi's biological parents. That could remain private.

Or...was it that single parent?

If only Mary had listened.

He sat and pondered, and confirmed that what he was thinking would be the right course of action.

How many years ago was it? Between five and ten.

Seven. Mary had said seven.

Alright. *Where would that case file be?*

Chapter Thirty: Slipping Deeper

Poking his head into Albi's room, Jeremy watched the little boy's mother. He had never seen a mother as resilient as this one. Even knowing she could do nothing for the child, she still spent most of her days at the hospital. At times, she would even sleep over. He had given the go-ahead for a cot to be brought to the room, so she could rest when she was too tired to drive home during the night. It was either that or watch her fall apart, which he wasn't going to allow.

He hated seeing her so distressed, and shared the same concern. He was just as concerned about Albi and the rejuvenation of the leukemia cells in his blood. They should be on the consolidation stage of his cancer, ensuring that the remaining leukemia cells in his body didn't develop resistance. Had the consolidation stage been successful, the next stage of his treatment would have been the maintenance of his new status, void of leukemia cells. Unfortunately, they had to change the treatment used in the first two months of his chemotherapy, as the leukemia cells had resisted and returned.

He had intervened in contacting the national stem cell registry to offer assistance in Albi's case, but he knew the process was slow, and Albi may not have much time. He had a feeling that Mary's trip last week would yield some resistance—if not fail altogether—but he had still hoped he was wrong.

Ever since her failed trip last week, Mary seemed to be slipping deeper into depression. Even as he watched her now, she was biting her nails, a habit she had recently picked up. She had lost weight, and it was starting to show in the clothes she wore. Her face was thinner and pale, and she barely took enough time to brush her hair before racing back to the hospital each day.

Sometimes, she would portray a behaviour on the other extreme: she was jumpy and anxious.

And Albi was picking up on it.

Jeremy pushed the door wider to enter, which produced a creak. Glancing up, eyes surrounded by dark circles turned in his direction. Her body slumped when she saw him and he saw the tears in her eyes. Geez...he hated those tears. He wished he had the right to take charge of her and ensure she was eating and sleeping properly, but other staff had shown concern that he was, perhaps, crossing the professional distance boundary.

He'd even briefly thought of removing himself from this role so he could play a more active role in consoling her, but he didn't think it was necessary. She was comfortable with him, and he had become the spokesperson of the team of doctors working on Albi's case. He didn't think she would be as receptive to receiving information from someone else. Also, he had to accept that some of his team members were not very tactful. The last thing he needed was for one of them to blatantly tell her that, without the stem cell transplant, Albi would die.

"Hey," he greeted her, ambling over to the bed to check Albi's chart. "Did he wake up?"

"Briefly," she answered. "Dr. Scott gave him something for the pain. I think it's making him sleep longer than usual."

He nodded in agreement. "If he's not awake, he can't be conscious of the pain."

After he was satisfied with the current stats on Albi's chart, he turned to Mary. His heart lurched in his stomach at her defeated expression. And that was when he heard it, the growling of her stomach.

"Sorry," she apologized, looking away. "I've not had the time to eat anything yet."

"When was the last time you ate?" Jeremy asked her. When she hesitated to reply, he added, "Tell me, Mary."

She shrugged. “Maybe yesterday morning.” She lowered her voice and continued, “Or the day before that. I don’t know.”

His heart moved with compassion, and as much as he had seen these severe cases in children before, he fought to keep the tears at bay. “Oh Mary...”

“I can’t eat. Not alone. I can’t eat knowing he’s here. I’ll sit down and try but it’s so lonely without him at home.”

“I’ll eat with you,” he volunteered. “You have to eat something, Mary.”

She pushed her hands into the shirt she wore, which usually fit well to her frame, but now it was noticeably more loose. “I’ve bothered you enough already,” she explained. “Plus, you’re on duty, aren’t you?”

“My break is in the next half hour,” he told her, dismissing her concern. “I’ll drop by to pick you up. We don’t have to go far, but I’m making it my responsibility to ensure you eat before leaving the hospital tonight.”

Chapter Thirty-One: “This is Hardly the Time for This.”

I watched Jeremy leave the room, frowning hard at his broad back. I didn't want to leave the hospital to get something to eat. I didn't think I could swallow a morsel of food. For the past week, I had been surviving mostly on coffee, water and munching on energy bars. Now that he had brought up the topic of food though, my stomach was twisting in hunger.

It seemed an injustice for me to eat when my son could barely keep down his meal.

A text came in on my phone, and I was surprised to see it was from Judy. I didn't expect her back from Italy so soon.

“I'm out in the waiting room. Can you come get me?”

Because she had no relation to Albi, she was not allowed to just come and go as she pleased. I left my son's side for just a few minutes, hurrying to the waiting room to greet my friend. I shifted my gaze from her, avoiding the shock in her eyes when she saw me. Because of the concern in her eyes, I wasn't surprised at her next words.

“Oh Mary, what are you doing to yourself?”

Feeling the nurse's eyes on us, I looped my arm through Judy's and pulled her in the direction of Albi's room. At the door of his room, I paused and released her arm. I was stunned to see tears were running down her face.

“Judy, don't start,” I said, choked up and trying not to cry again. I had cried way too much of late.

She nodded and dug into her bag for a handkerchief to wipe her eyes. “How

is he?"

I shrugged. "As well as can be expected, considering."

"And you...? How are you? Not eating well, not sleeping well, I bet."

"It's been rough, Judy."

"When last did you eat?" she asked.

"I eat," was my vague response. "I don't like leaving Albi alone for long."

"Then I'll stay with him right now so you can go get something to eat," she proposed. "In fact, I won't hear any argument about this. You will go get something to eat right now, Mary."

First Jeremy, now her. I couldn't argue anymore. "Jeremy will stop by so we can go for dinner," I told her in low tones.

She smiled at that, a gleam entering her eyes. "Good."

I shook my head. "No, not good. He's off limits, Jude."

"Well, I didn't mean it that way. I was simply thinking that since you don't want Albi to be alone, I could stay with Albi while you two go out to eat. But...since you assumed I was talking relationship, may I ask why you say he's 'off limits'?"

"You know."

"What do you mean, 'You know'?" she provoked, staring me down. "I don't think this has anything to do with Jeremy being Albi's doctor. I think this is you, and the way you've been avoiding anything that smells like a relationship. You've been doing this for such a long time, using the excuse that you're trying to find the right father figure for Albi. You've met plenty, and Jeremy is one, probably the best of the lot. From the little I saw of him when we were introduced, he is very much interested in you and Albi. Don't push him away."

“Judy,” I could feel the indignation building, “This is hardly the time to for this.”

Deep down, I knew she spoke the truth, but this was the worst time ever for me to start changing. Everything around me was already changing so much that I was clinging to whatever remained constant. And that constant was Albi and I. Just the two of us.

Chapter Thirty-Two: “I Never Knew Waiting Could Be So Hard.”

Walking with Jeremy, each corridor we passed seemed to extend into another, each seemingly with curious nurses and doctors checking us out.

“Come on, this way.” Jeremy’s hand curved around my upper arm and steered me to the right once we exited the hospital building. I sighed with relief because I thought the corridors would never end.

By now, almost everyone knew who I was, and I imagined there might be some gossip about the attention Jeremy was giving to my son...or to me. Not that he short-changed anyone else. He lived up to his obligations on the pediatric ward, but whatever free time he was allotted, he was by Albi’s side.

“Is it far?” I asked him. I was relieved when he indicated the restaurant we would be dining at was a few blocks away.

“Just ten minutes or so,” he replied, then halted there on the sidewalk to look at me. “I thought the walking would do you some good, put back the colour on your cheeks, but if you'd rather not, I can drive us.”

I shook my head. “That would be a waste of gas. Walking is fine.” I wasn't too cold, either.

We walked in companionable silence, observing the Christmas lights and decorations that had seemed to pop up overnight. Decorative reindeer and Santas adorned the streets, and everything was more lit than usual. From the stores, which now had extended opening hours, voices sang Christmas carols. Families walked together, laughing, eyes merry with the season, and I smiled sadly. Albi and I would have been like these families if he hadn't fallen ill.

At that moment, another thought rushed to my mind, but it was too

frightening to dwell on. I shook it off almost as quickly as it came.

“The restaurant is right here,” Jeremy announced, his hand returning to my arm to turn me left. We hurried across the street and made our way to a restaurant I’d never eaten at before. I got the feeling it was a Mediterranean bistro, and it had a warm and inviting feel to it.

Holding the door open for me, he asked, “Have you ever eaten here before?”

“No, I’m sure I haven’t,” I answered, walking ahead of him. “It seems nice.”

“The food is amazing.”

We were greeted by a girl who didn’t look a day over eighteen and had teeth lined with braces. She brought us over to a table and gave us menus as we seated ourselves.

“Anything to drink?” she asked.

Liquid was probably the only thing I was going to get down tonight. “A glass of pink lemonade for me.”

Jeremy ordered a coconut lemonade, which sounded like a unique combination. When the waitress left, we went through the menu. Everything I looked at wanted to make me hurl. I couldn’t make up my mind, and was grateful when he decided to order for both of us.

“Because if I leave the choice to you,” he started, “you won’t get anything to eat.”

He was getting to know me.

The waitress returned with our drinks and a basket of bread with apple butter. Jeremy plucked one from the basket and tore a piece off. He slathered it with apple butter and into his mouth it went.

“It’s good,” he remarked after swallowing. “Go ahead and give it a try.”

I didn't want to, but at the same time, I also didn't want to make a fuss of eating when he had been kind enough to take me out for dinner. I was also aware he was watching me intently. With a sigh of resignation, I retrieved one of the bread rolls, but declined the butter. I slipped a small piece into my mouth, and my taste buds exploded.

"Admit it," Jeremy said with a grin. "It's really good."

I nodded and stuck another piece into my mouth. Even without the butter, the bread was moist and went down easier than I would have thought. I demolished the bread in a few seconds and plucked another from the basket.

"I guess I really am hungry," I said sheepishly, biting down into the bread. "And you're right," the bread had a really chewy texture. "This is very good."

His shoulders relaxed, along with the smile on his face. He had been worrying about me. The truth was there right in front of me. I glanced down onto the table top, remembering Judy's words. *Don't push him away.*

The waitress appeared, and for the next few minutes, brought in a steady stream of food. By the time she left, I stared at the food laid out before us.

"Are you planning to feed an army?" I asked him.

He chuckled. "No, just a very hungry woman. Don't be shy now. You've got two days to make up for."

"As if I'm going to eat even half of this," I remarked, but reached for the plate of veggie kabobs.

Dinner fared better than I would have thought. I managed to eat way more than intended, and even had a small laugh or two. However, as we dug into our desserts, thoughts of Albi were never far from my mind.

And that brought up a question, one I needed an answer to. "Jeremy, I want you to be honest with me."

He gave me his undivided attention. “It’s about Albi, isn’t it?”

I nodded. “Will we find a donor for him?”

He reached across the table for my hands and squeezed them. “I wish I could answer that, Mary Jane. I wish it were as easy as a yes or a no, but the truth is that I don’t know. The only thing we can do is wait.”

I appreciated his honesty. “I never knew waiting could be so hard,” I admitted, returning the squeeze.

“Yeah, nobody-”

“Dr. Rowan!”

Chapter Thirty-Three: An Unexpected Surprise

Hearing Jeremy's name, we both swung our heads in the direction of the voice. As soon as I noticed it was a senior member of the hospital staff, I gasped, and instinctively tried to pull my hands out of Jeremy's grasp, but Jeremy refused to let my hands go. I didn't recall the senior member's name, but remembered him because he had visited Albi once while I was there. If I was not mistaken, he was senior to Jeremy, maybe a supervisor or medical director.

In a sense, I understood why Jeremy didn't want to let my hands go, since the other doctor was already staring from our touching hands to both our faces. It didn't make the situation any better when my cheeks flamed in embarrassment at being caught with my son's doctor. I tried consoling myself with the thought that we were both adults.

Jeremy nodded to the man. "Dr. Mattis," he acknowledged. After a rather uncomfortable silence, he continued, "How are you?"

"Good, good," the other man stated. "Just stopped by for dinner." He then turned his gaze to me, and didn't hide his frown. "Miss. Tennant."

"Dr. Mattis," I returned, uncomfortable.

"Well, I best be going," Dr. Mattis announced, nodded to us once more, then went off.

As soon as he left, I felt that we should leave, too. "I think we should go back to the hospital."

"We still have twenty minutes," Jeremy remarked. "We don't have to go just yet."

I stared at him in disbelief. "Your supervisor just caught us, Jeremy!"

He shrugged. “We’ve got nothing to hide. We both needed to get something to eat. Why shouldn’t we be allowed to share a table?”

“You know why,” I said softly, then looked away. It was the first time any of us alluded to the feelings raging between us.

“Okay, if you want to go, then we’ll go.”

He signaled for the check and paid the bill. The evening, which had started off so relaxing, now seemed fraught with worry on my part. I didn’t want him to be reprimanded because of this dinner.

Because of me.

“Come on, let’s go.”

Chapter Thirty-Four: “But That's Where You're Wrong!”

He took my arm and ignored my attempt to step away from his touch. The air was cooler now, and I shivered. He removed his coat and offered it to me.

“No, I can’t,” I said.

“Take it, Mary. You’re cold.”

“And you’ll be cold if I take it,” I reasoned, and tried to walk on ahead of him. “The faster we go, the quicker we will reach the hospital.”

“Don’t be stubborn.” He continued to hand his coat to me. “How do you think I would feel walking around tasty warm while you’re freezing beside me?”

Arguing would only prolong our time in the biting cold air, so I stopped walking, and allowed him to drape the coat over my shoulders. Reluctantly, I slipped my arms through the sleeves. He pulled the belt together and cinched it around my waist. I watched his hands adjusting the belt, and when he was done, I lifted my head to find that his eyes were just a few inches away from me. I froze, my heart skipping a beat at our closeness. The urge to lean into him and burrow myself into his chest was strong...too strong.

He lowered his head toward mine, and our lips brushed. The cold air had already sucked the moisture from our lips, and the slight friction caused me to jerk back from him.

“Mary...” He reached for me.

I shook my head, my eyes wild with fright. “Jeremy, no,” I denied him. “I’m so sorry, but I can’t.”

He stepped back, regret filling his eyes. “No, I’m the one who is sorry. I shouldn’t have tried to kiss you. It’s too soon.”

I shivered at him vocalizing what had almost happened. “No, it’s not that,” I said, plunging my hands into the pockets of his coat. “I can’t do this with you, not right now. Tonight was a mistake.”

“No, it wasn’t a mistake,” he objected.

“It was!” I cried. “I have Albi to think about and-”

“And you think I don’t think about him too?” he demanded.

“You have no clue,” I tossed at him. “It’s one thing to be concerned about him but another to live with the anguish I have to go through every single day.”

“Yes, you’re his mother, and I can’t imagine what you go through. But I’m telling you this, Mary: I’ve been in this field long enough and I’ve met families in similar situations. I’ve never felt as strongly about them as I do about you and Albi.”

Sincerity coated his words, but I couldn’t accept them. I just shook my head. “No, I can’t deal with this right now. I can’t hear this. I can’t think about this, Jeremy. I’m dealing with my son who is fighting for his life. Do you have any idea how hard that is? To feel like you’re losing someone and watching that person slip away right before your very eyes...and being helpless to do anything about it. I just feel useless watching my son suffer like that.”

“But that’s where you’re wrong!” he exclaimed. “I understand, Mary. I understand more than you know.” He maintained his gaze at me, and I got the sense that he was going to tell me something I didn’t know. “I lost my wife and I was there, watching while it happened.”

Chapter Thirty-Five: “I Know What it's Like”

I gasped in surprise. “You were married?”

He nodded, his face somber. He looked over my head, a faraway look on his face, as though seeing a ghost. “My wife died on an operating table. Everything was supposed to be the way we dreamed it. Instead, I had to watch her slip away from me, and even though I’m a doctor, there was nothing I could do about it. Nothing!” He looked back at me then. “So to answer your question, yes. Yes, I know what it's like. I literally had to stand and watch Jacki die.”

“Oh,” was all I could say. Until that moment, I was so personally absorbed, so sucked in, that I felt I was the only person in the world going through this. Objectively, I knew that people went through hardship. But subjectively, when you’re in the thick of it, it can be lonely when a situation seemingly affects you exclusively. At that moment, it suddenly occurred to me that *here's someone I know who also knows. He knows what it's like to helplessly watch a loved one slip away.*

“Yeah...” He dashed a tear away from his eye. “I’ve never felt as strongly about anyone since my wife died. I’d like to think that was real, Mary, but of course, I understand Albi's the priority.” He recomposed himself as best as he could. “Let’s go.”

We walked back to the hospital in complete silence. For the first time since I found out about Albi’s sickness, I was thinking of something else: Jeremy losing his wife, and feeling helpless. I couldn’t imagine the pain he must have felt.

On second thought, I could.

Chapter Thirty-Six: “I Didn't Find it Funny at All”

As soon as we got to the hospital, I loosened and slipped out of Jeremy's jacket and handed it back to him. He folded it over his arm and led me inside the building.

“Jeremy, what are you doing back so soon?” I recognized the voice of Dr. Scott from my position behind Jeremy. I hung back, somewhat pretending that he wouldn't see me with Jeremy. It was already bad enough that Dr. Mattis had seen us together.

“It was just dinner,” Jeremy said, his voice sounding strange.

“You could have called me to cover for you while you take some extra time,” Dr. Scott remarked and winked at Jeremy. “I thought this was supposed to be a hot date.”

I didn't know exactly what transpired between both men, as I couldn't see Jeremy's face, but his co-worker glanced at me, then froze. If I hadn't been involved in the situation, it would have almost been comical the way his face paled, then went red.

I didn't find it funny at all that Jeremy had discussed this dinner with his friend. I was a private person, and having my business out with a third party like that did not sit well with me.

“I...I'm sorry,” Dr. Scott apologized, his voice squeaky.

“I should get back to Albi,” I announced and bypassed both men.

“Mary,” Jeremy called to me. “Wait up, please.”

I didn't wait, but instead hurried along the corridor so fast I was almost running. I couldn't decide if I was relieved he didn't come after me or just

disappointed.

Chapter Thirty-Seven: Accusation of Love

After watching Mary scurry away, Jeremy had ordered Dr. Scott to follow him to the staff lounge. With just the two of them in the area, he felt he had enough privacy to rip into his friend for his careless comment.

Glaring at his best friend, Jeremy demanded, “How could you say something so stupid!” He had seen the hurt and lack of trust in Mary’s eyes, and it unraveled something in him—a feeling that he had disappointed her. He always knew Mary was a private person; it didn’t take much to realize that. He had confided in Grayson about going to dinner with someone because he hadn’t been out with anyone since his wife died seven years ago. He hadn’t mentioned Mary, or any other name, for that matter. He had left that information blank, as that hadn’t been important to the conversation.

“I’m sorry, man. I wasn’t thinking,” Grayson Scott apologized. “Maybe if you had told me who you were going out with, I’d have known not to make that comment.”

“Do you know how much it took out of her just to go to dinner with me?” Jeremy asked incredulously. “She was finally coming around to opening up to me, and now look at what just happened.” He began pacing back and forth.

“In all fairness, Jeremy, you know this kind of thing is frowned upon here. She’s the mother of your patient.”

“I’m well aware of that fact,” Jeremy snapped. He was tired of hearing the other staff bring this up. “But she’s not the patient, is she? I think the exact rule is not to get involved with a patient.”

“This is kind of cheating the rule,” Grayson pointed out. “She might as well be the patient. Is it not a turbulent time for her? You know that. Personally, I know you’re extending kindness to her. My concern is that some might

perceive this as a professional taking advantage of an emotionally-vulnerable family member."

"You know I'm not taking advantage of her! I care about her."

Grayson dropped down into a chair. "You're in love with her? You have feelings for her?"

Jeremy came to an abrupt halt. He knew he had feelings for both Mary and her son, but he hadn't scrutinized how far it ran. In fact, he was scared to think about it too much. He had loved only one woman in his life, and that woman had died, leaving him with more heartache than he knew how to deal with. Perhaps, as a coping mechanism, he dedicated obsessive amounts of time to his profession.

And, maybe deep down, that was why he switched to paediatrics. If he was helpless to save his wife and maintain the dream of starting a family, he'd atone for that by helping other families.

Then, Mary and Albi arrived in his life, and since then, he went from hole-hearted, to nearly whole-hearted.

"I don't know," he answered.

Grayson warned him: "Be careful. Be sure you know what you're doing." Grayson then rose to his feet to further confront his friend. "Is this you really feeling for the son and his mother, or you projecting your emotions from another time and another place? Or are you hoping to save her son to make up for not being able to save your wife?"

Instead of responding with a knee-jerk emotional retort, Jeremy kept silent, which indicated that, perhaps, he had pondered that very question before. He concluded that if he was projecting, he could have approached so many single mothers with sick children who had been in his care over the past six or seven years. He hadn't. Not once. This time, however, a special woman had come along with a son who needed special attention, and he saw them for who they were.

With a sense of resolution, Jeremy replied, “No, I’m not projecting. She’s an amazing woman, Gray. The way she cares for that little boy. I’m not saying anything will ever come from these feelings I have. Too much is happening right now with her son and I won’t push it. I just know I want to be there for her. I want to ensure she’s eating properly and resting. I want so much for her mind to be at ease that I’ll keep an eye on her son while she’s sleeping. I want to hold her and make everything better when she cries.”

“Dude, you have it bad,” Grayson fretted, turning to face him. “I hope everything works out okay, because there are just so many ways this can all go south. The last thing you or the hospital needs is for someone to sue you for overstepping your boundaries or taking advantage of her vulnerability.”

“She’s not like that.”

Grayson, who had a few unpleasant surprises with dishonest women, felt he did his best to warn his friend. He then took his leave. He could only hope his friend wasn’t too devastated if this woman was just using him as an emotional blanket.

But on the other hand, his friend Jeremy could be right. Other than her friend Judy, Mary didn't seem to have anyone else she could turn to, or want to turn to.

Chapter Thirty-Eight: An Unexpected Call

Jeremy returned to work, and, given the night's turn of events, tried as best as he could to avoid popping into Albi's room. A few times, he stopped by, just to poke his head in the room to check on Mary. She looked exhausted. He felt that she would need to rest in a real bed, and decided that after his shift ended, he would offer to watch Albi while she went home.

He was making one final round when his pager went off. He checked the number and groaned when he saw the number of the medical director, Dr. Mattis. *Is he calling about tonight?*

He stopped at his final patient for the evening, a little girl who had been brought in earlier. She had fallen one floor down and broken her arm. The child was to remain in the hospital until Child Protection Services investigated the circumstances behind her fall. He had seen how devastated and hysterical the mother had been. For their sake, he hoped she wouldn't lose the child due to negligence.

After he checked the child's vitals, he made his way to Dr. Mattis' office, which was on the same floor. Walking down the long corridor, he remembered how easily he had gotten lost when he first started working at the hospital. Now he could walk the floors blindfolded. He had been up and down them so many times over the years.

At his supervisor's office, he knocked on the door.

"Come in."

Chapter Thirty-Nine: A Warning Worth Risking

At the command, Jeremy turned the knob and pushed the door open. He walked into the office, closing the door behind him. Dr. Mattis sat behind his desk, on which stacks of files were piling.

“Ah, Dr. Rowan, just the person I wanted to see,” he announced. “Come, have a seat.”

Jeremy did as he was instructed, relaxing against the back of the chair as though he had no clue what this meeting was for.

“I got your page,” he said.

“Yes. I want you to read this.” He handed Jeremy a paper, which Jeremy frowned at before he realized what it was. It was a printout of the hospital rules that governed relationships.

“I already know what this document says, Dr. Mattis,” Jeremy pointed out, without attempting to read the paper.

“Then why were you at dinner with a patient's mother?” Dr. Mattis demanded. “You and I both know that this is not ethical, and it's not a practice we uphold here at the hospital.”

“With all due respect, Miss Tennant and I went for dinner because I realized she was not eating properly,” Jeremy replied. “She's running herself into the ground because of her concern for her son, and the last thing we need is to have this child on our hands without a guardian or a parent around.”

“Miss Tennant is not your patient, the child is. You have no obligation to her, which includes taking her to dinner. Your focus should be on that child.”

“If she is not my patient, then why are we having this conversation?” Jeremy

asked. “As far as I'm aware, this document you've given me speaks to relationships between the patient and the doctor. You yourself just mentioned that Miss Tennant is not my patient. Hence, there should be no issue with me taking her to dinner.”

Dr. Mattis opened his mouth to argue, but no words came. He paused, his face crinkling as he thought of Jeremy's argument. He had to concede that the younger man had a point. Still, he didn't like it one bit. Patient or not, Mary Tennant was smack in the gray zone of ethics and professional behaviour.

“Dr. Rowan, I cannot approve of where this is going,” he warned. “I don't question your integrity, but as the medical director, I have the reputation of this department and hospital to consider. I understand I can't stop you from expressing your concern for this lady. At the same time, you've got years of experience working with the hospital. I know you do not want to lose this position, and so I urge you to think twice about what you're doing. It's not worth it.”

Jeremy listened to the man's words but already knew he would be going against them because of one thing: Mary and her son *were* worth it.

Chapter Forty: “Little Did I Know...”

Gentle hands shook me awake, and reminded me of a déjà vu moment. By the time I blinked my eyes open, I already knew who would be standing over me: Jeremy. We hadn't spoken in private since our night out for dinner, and although I convinced myself this was for the best, I missed talking to him. I missed him playing with my little boy when he was awake. I missed the way he would ask me if I had eaten and if I needed to sleep so he could keep an eye on Albi.

I rubbed the sleep away from my eyes and stretched in my chair, glancing over at Albi before finally acknowledging Jeremy.

“I'm going to take you home,” he declared. “We can talk on the way.”

I found I was too tired to argue with him. The hospital chair was not meant for sleeping, and although I appreciated the the cot, it was narrow and offered limited comfort. I wanted to stretch out in my own king-sized bed and sleep until mid-morning.

“You're off?” I asked him.

He nodded. “Don't worry. I'll take you home, then come back and stay with him.”

I shook my head, grateful he would do this for me, but I couldn't allow him to stay up all night when he had work tomorrow as well. “He'll be fine until morning. He hardly ever wakes at night anymore. I just need to get back to the hospital on time.”

“Good. Then come along.”

I kissed Albi and said a little prayer for him. While I prayed, Jeremy held my hand. He released it when we walked out the room, and I was grateful. I was

no longer mad at him, especially since his friend had approached me to apologize.

We walked to the top deck of the parking lot and toward his black Jaguar.

“Nice ride,” I complimented.

“Thanks. Cars are a bit of a hobby of mine. Do you have a hobby?”

He opened the passenger door for me, and I slid into the seat. He closed the door and walked around to the driver’s side.

“I paint,” I told him as he settled in.

“Paint? Like painting houses?” He began to drive us away.

A surprise laugh erupted from me. “No, I paint still life objects and portraits.”

“Wow, that’s great. You’re a teacher, aren’t you?”

“Yes, kindergarten.” I yawned then and the questions stopped. I gave him my directions and laid my head against the headrest. The next thing I knew, I was being nudged awake.

“Hmm?” I rolled my head toward Jeremy.

“Sorry I had to wake you,” he said, “but we’re on your street. I need to know where to go from here.”

“Oh, right.” I cleared my throat and sat up in the seat to get a feel for our location. Having identified my house down the street, it was a few more seconds before we were at my driveway. He drove up to the two-storey house, which looked plain against the other festively decorated houses on the block.

“This is it,” I told him, releasing my seat belt. “Thanks for the lift.”

“I’ll walk you to your door.”

The doors of the car closed, punctuating the otherwise quiet night. It was late. We came to a halt at the front door. I dipped my hand into my bag and removed the key, inserting it into the lock and cracking the door open.

“Mary, I want to say sorry again for what happened with Dr. Scott,” he apologized.

“It’s fine. The incident just reminded me that it was a bad idea.”

His face fell and he looked away from me. “I understand. The last thing I want to do is to pose any more problems for you right now.”

“I do have a favor to ask,” I told him. “I was wondering whether it would be okay for me to place a Christmas tree in Albi’s room.”

“Well...it would depend on a few things, such as whether it's natural or artificial, and we'd have to be sure it didn't block the door. But otherwise, yes, you can.”

“And do you think the hospital would object to me gifting them a painting?”

“Of course not. In fact, I'm sure they'd be grateful.”

I nodded then, feeling as though there was something else I should be saying, but not knowing what. It was a little awkward.

“Good night, Mary,” he said and stepped back.

“Good night, Jeremy.”

I slipped inside the house, but refrained from closing the door until he had driven off. Instead of going to bed, I found my easel and paint supplies and got set up. After staring at the canvas for ten minutes, my brush strokes started painting the Nativity.

Little did I know how much the Nativity would come to resemble the next

few weeks of my life.

Of *our* lives.

Chapter Forty-One: Grace's Lingering Doubt

While eating lunch, Christina looked across at Grace. “You’re still thinking about it, aren’t you?”

“I can’t get it out of my head,” Grace admitted, drumming her nails on the top of the table they were sitting at.

“It’s actually quite easy. It’s none of our business.”

“But we could help that boy.”

“It was a very small sample,” Grace replied, “almost too small for what we saw. Technically, we had to breach privacy to run it, and we could get in a lot of trouble.”

Still not convinced they were doing the right thing, Grace climbed to her feet. Sure, they had run unauthorized data, but they had made a discovery that may save a life. How could keeping that a secret be the right thing to do?

“I’m going to head down to the lab,” Grace said. “You coming?” *I hope she says no.*

“I still have half this sub to eat. I’ll be there in the next twenty minutes.”

“Okay.” *That should be enough time.*

Chapter Forty-Two: An Overheard Conversation

Troubled, Grace walked from the lunch room. She was so deep in her thoughts that she nearly bumped into two doctors. Luckily, she heard them talking and halted before going any further. She looked for a place to disappear to, but, because the two doctors were engaged in a heated conversation, they walked by without noticing her.

Dr. Rowan was talking: "If we don't get that donor for the stem cell transplant," he said, "then there's little hope he will survive this."

"But what can we do?" Dr. Scott replied, sounding just as resigned as his co-worker. "We haven't been able to find a match. You know how these things are."

"Maybe we're not looking hard enough. Someone has to be a match."

Dr. Scott took the other doctor by his arm, and they halted in the middle of the corridor, oblivious that the young intern was listening to their conversation. "Jeremy, you're too attached! You need to step back. I mean it. If y-" Dr. Scott noticed he had raised his voice, and subsequently lowered it to a near whisper. Grace couldn't hear what he said.

Grace heard Dr. Rowan's gasp. "You wouldn't dare."

"I would if it means doing what's best," Dr. Scott confirmed. "Maybe it wouldn't be such a bad idea, Jeremy. Think about it: if you're not his doctor, then you could offer consolation on a more personal level, but as his doctor that's not a luxury you can afford!"

Grace watched Dr. Scott walk away, leaving Dr. Rowan baffled...just standing there. Dr. Rowan pinched the bridge of his nose, and his shoulders slumped in a posture of defeat. The notion that Dr. Rowan, whom everyone admired, could be helpless to save the boy was a bit much for Grace.

Things were really heating up, and much of it could be addressed if she just let someone know what was on her mind.

Before she could change her mind, she came out of hiding.

“Dr. Rowan.”

Chapter Forty-Three: The Silence Spoke

Dr. Rowan lifted his head, suddenly piqued at the young voice that had called his name. Recognizing the intern, he straightened. “Grace, isn’t it?” he asked.

She nodded, touched that he remembered her name. For her, it was a sign that he cared, and if he cared enough to remember that detail, he would care enough to know the information she had uncovered.

“Yes, it is,” she answered, a bit hesitant.

“Is there something I can assist you with, Grace?”

What if Christina's right, and we get in trouble? “Umm, there’s something I would like to show you in the lab,” she reported, rushing the words. “I think you’d be interested.”

He shook his head. “Can I take a raincheck on that? It’s been a difficult day, and I think I would rather be alone at the moment.”

He started to walk off, and she ran in front of him, waking backward. “You don’t understand. It’s to help the boy, your patient, Albie Tennant.” She was surprised that she remembered his patient's name. She cared, as well.

“I appreciate your enthusiasm, Grace but the only thing that can help Albie Tennant right now is a stem cell donor.”

Grace nodded without speaking, her eyes sparkling with excitement.

The silence spoke.

Only then, after an affirmative pause, did Dr. Rowan seem to realize what she was implying. “Are you saying...?”

Grace nodded again. “Yes. Can you come see for yourself, please?”

“Yes!”

Chapter Forty-Four: Something Very, Very Interesting

Dr. Rowan's face paled at the data that he was staring at. A match? He had to sit down to contain his bubbling excitement. If this were correct, they had found a match, right here in their stem cell registry. They didn't think to query the hospital's registry, as it was rather new, and sample sizes were small. While they had been combing other databases for a matching HLA donor, the answer had been right there in front of them the whole time...in their own database.

Dr. Rowan pondered deeply. *But...this means something very, very interesting.* The conclusion, if the data were correct, would have a startling implication.

“Dr. Rowan, are you okay?” the intern asked him in concern.

Dr. Rowan realized then that he was blowing hard, practically hyperventilating. He sat with his head down, quietly dragging in deep breaths until he had his breathing under control.

“I’m fine now,” he gasped. “When did you know?”

The girl looked sheepish and glanced away. “For a few weeks, but since we ran the data without asking permission, we were afraid of getting into trouble. We understand that there are privacy concerns here, especially since we ran patients' samples without permission. I understand the consequences of this.”

“Grace,” he said sternly, “there is little in terms of red tape when it comes to saving a life. Remember that.” His tone softened. “And this that you discovered—it’s about to save a child’s life. Thank you.”

Grace beamed, her smile wide and lighting up her face. “I was glad to be of

help. What now?”

“Now I inform the worried mother, and we schedule the surgical procedures,” he explained, already on his way to the door.

But there was one thing Grace wasn't sure of. “But...sir..?”

“Yes?”

“What about the donor?”

“Oh...yes, of course. I don't want to jump to conclusions and promise something we can't deliver. I'll see what can be done.” *I need to compose myself. I can't afford to let my enthusiasm cloud my judgement.*

He paused and turned back to Grace. “How many of you know this information?”

“Just myself and Christina, the other intern.”

“Please, keep this information confidential. Can you do that?”

Grace nodded, “We will.” Then, a snorky, wise-crack smile formed on her face. “We have been for weeks.”

Dr. Rowan chuckled. “Thank you.”

Chapter Forty-Five: No False Hope

Dr. Rowan didn't just walk from the stem cell registry unit. He started with long, powerful strides, his heart beating with excitement. Then, he began to run, because the sooner he could tell Mary the good news, the better, even if only a minute sooner.

He pushed Albi's room door open and was surprised that Mary wasn't there. He approached the bed where the little boy lay, his heart calming and taking on a different feeling entirely. He stared at the sleeping boy and whispered a prayer of thanks that the child would get a second chance at life.

Mary would be ecstatic that they had found a match, and he now realized the bigger role he had to play in this after all. He couldn't wait to break the news to her.

He arrived at the door and gently opened it. Mary looked up, her eyes meeting his. She smiled at him.

"Hey," she greeted.

"Hey," he replied, trying to contain the excitement in his voice.

"What do you think of the tree Albi and I are working on? We stopped for him to have a nap. He was feeling tired."

"Tree?"

Only then did Jeremy notice the half-decorated tree. It was small enough to not take up a lot of space. He looked over the decorations once, then did a double take when he saw a stocking hanging from the tree. He walked over to the tree and, noticing that there was a stocking with his name stiched onto it, he held it. It looked new, but otherwise identical to the other two with Albi's and Mary's names.

“You did this?” he asked, looking at her over his shoulder.

A tint of colour showed on her cheeks. “It was Albi’s idea.”

“Wow. I love it.”

“You do?”

He turned to her and smiled. “Yes, I do.”

Mary frowned at him. “You’re acting strangely. Did something happen?”

Jeremy laughed then, because he finally could. “Yes. Yes something wonderful happened, Mary. We found Albi a donor.”

Mary braced her hand onto the bed. “Wha..?”

A match, Jeremy, a match. Not necessarily a donor yet. Don't put her through any false hope. "Sorry...I'm so excited I'm not speaking properly. I meant to say we may have found a match."

Upon hearing those words, Mary promptly burst into silent tears. Jeremy, no longer caring to keep the distance between them, pulled her into his arms, providing a shoulder to cry on.

“It’s going to be okay,” he whispered in reassurance to her. “It’s going to be okay. We’re going to get him well, Mary. You’ll see.”

Jeremy certainly hoped he wasn't misleading Mary. The match, whoever it was, would still have to be contacted, and agree to be the donor. They still didn't know exactly *who* this person was.

But, at least for now, Mary had some hope, and more than anything else, that was what she needed most.

Chapter Forty-Six: Where is He?

It had been about 10 days since Jeremy told me they found a match. The fact that things progressed from a possible match, to where we were now, was quite a turnaround. Hopefully, our current course of action would lead to a recovery.

Now, here I was, pacing. I almost forgot that Judy was in the room.

“Please, Mary, have a seat. You’re only making me nervous!”

I spun around at Judy’s outburst and allowed my tense shoulders to slump. I dropped down into a chair beside her, my legs shaking. “I’m sorry. I just can’t stop thinking about the transplant.”

“It’ll all be fine. You’ll see.”

“I hope,” I said with a sigh. “I thought it would be easy at first, but it turns out I knew nothing about this.”

It was true. I had this idea that having a donor would be the answer to all our problems. While, in a way, that was the case, there were potential complications and side effects that I never knew about. I had to watch Albi undergo an intense chemotherapy in a failed attempt to kill all the leukemia cells in his body. That had been hard for me, because he had become quite ill at this time. For the past few days, in order to prepare for the stem cell transplant, he had been off the chemotherapy.

Jeremy told me what to expect from the transplant, and he had a counselor talk to me as well. Between the two of them, I believed I was adequately prepared for the transplant. The side effects could prove problematic, and the maintenance of the transplant would be costly and take time, but the team of doctors were positive about the procedure.

“Have you spoken to Jeremy?” Judy asked me.

I glared at her for bringing him up right now. “No, I haven’t.”

For the past two days, Jeremy had disappeared on me. I basically knew his schedule, so he should have been at work, but he wasn’t. The last time I saw him, he texted me, saying that he hoped everything went well. I hadn’t responded because I sensed that he was withdrawing from me.

But why now, Jeremy?

I was hurt by his withdrawal. All this time, he had been pursuing me—or, at least that's what I thought. He led me to believe he was interested in being a part of our lives, *but now...he's nowhere to be seen*. Oh well...it seemed all too familiar; just a recurring theme that described my love life: once again, I tried to put myself out there, and it backfired. At least I wasn't as bad as Judy.

His withdrawal was also odd to her. “Sounds weird. This is where he works. Surely someone would have seen him.”

Maybe someone did see him. That is, there was also the possibility that his supervisor asked him to stay away from us. He could have been re-assigned to another part of the hospital. The only problem with that theory, though, was that he was primarily a paediatrician, and there were only two children's wings. Even though Albi had been moved elsewhere, with the amount of time Jeremy and I spent at the hospital, we still would’ve ran into each other. Or at least, he could’ve stopped by.

I wasn’t sure what to think.

Finally, I just had to admit it: “If he wanted me to find him, he would be here right now, Jude,” I stated. “Plus, they have a Dr. Jacob filling in for Dr. Rowan, so, who knows.”

Judy shook her head. “No, I don’t believe it. I’m sure something went wrong.”

“I’m sure something went wrong alright,” I muttered.

She nudged me. “What is that supposed to mean?”

“It’s just that Albi was sick, very sick, and Jeremy had an interest in us, or at least that’s what he showed. Now that Albi has a solution, he’s missing. It’s obvious he just wanted a challenge.”

Judy scowled at me. “So you’re saying that he no longer comes around because Albi’s getting better? That is the most absurd thing I’ve ever heard!”

“Well, what else am I supposed to think? He was here with us through the intense chemo treatment. Then he disappears right when Albi's scheduled for the transplant.”

“Maybe there's something going on that we don't know about,” she concluded.

I shrugged and didn’t respond.

However, she was right. There *was* something going on that I didn't know about, and I was soon to be surprised beyond my wildest dreams.

Chapter Forty-Seven: “Is it Over?”

“Miss Tennant.”

I glanced up, and, recognizing Dr. Scott, climbed to my feet. Was the transplant over already? At first, I thought it was more like a surgical procedure. Then they informed me that it was similar to a blood transfusion. Due to the requirements of the procedure, and since his immune system would be compromised, Albi had been removed from his room, and sent to the surgical wing.

“Dr. Scott, is it over?” I asked, anxiously.

“We’ve been successful in the first transfusion,” he remarked with a smile. “Of course, as we discussed, this is done under several sessions and will last a few days.”

I nodded. “I remember, thank you.”

“Once the new stem cells have integrated themselves into his body,” he said, “And all his tests come back okay, you’ll be able to take him home. However, his treatment will continue, and he’ll have to come back for regular checkups.”

“I understand.”

He probably felt that I was eager to see Albi. “I think you want to see him,” he stated, then glanced at Judy, who was beside me. “Unfortunately, we can only allow the mother to see him while he’s in isolation.”

I turned an apologetic smile to Judy. “I’m sorry.”

“Oh, don't worry. I'm totally okay just staying here.”

“And just to prepare you,” Dr. Scott cautioned, “there are tubes that won't be removed until he's finished the transfusions.”

“Okay.”

Chapter Forty-Eight: Choosing His Words Carefully

I waved at Judy as I began to walk with Dr. Scott.

As I walked beside him, I couldn't stop thinking about Jeremy. "Dr. Scott," I hesitated, "is Jer-umm...Dr. Rowan here? I'd like to thank him again for finding the donor."

"Umm..." He scratched his head, scrambling for a response. "Dr. Rowan *is* here..." he was choosing his words carefully, "but only staff can see him at the moment."

In other words, he's here, but doesn't want to see me.

Hurt, I felt the urge to ask why, but I just nodded and thanked him again.

Chapter Forty-Nine: Pondering

“How are you feeling, honey?” I asked Albi.

“I'm okay,” he answered. “Will I be able to go home for Christmas?”

“Only a week away,” I nodded, noticing the anticipation in my voice. “Yes, I think Dr. Scott will let us get out of his hair soon.”

Dr. Scott had been a beacon for the transplant. Without Jeremy to rely on for information, I found that Dr. Scott was always around when I had doubts or questions about the procedure. Albi's operation was now complete, and soon, if all went well and there were no complications, he'd be able to go home. I still had a few remaining questions. Naturally, I was concerned that I would do something wrong at home, but Dr. Scott assured me that if I simply took a few precautions, things would be okay.

Albi ran his hand across the top of his head, as if pretending to run his fingers through a full head of hair. “Will my hair grow back?”

“I think so, but it might take a while,” I told him in all honesty. Actually, I wasn't sure if his hair would grow back. I had a feeling it would, because I always thought that hair loss was accompanied by chemo, and since his operation went well, I didn't think he'd have any more chemo. I'd have to ask about that, but for now, a simple *I think so* would suffice. He probably asked because he was thinking about going back to school. “Are you worried what the other kids at school will think?”

He shook his head and grinned. “I was, but Tommy thinks it's cool.”

I laughed. Of course, if his friend thought it was cool, he would be okay with it too.

He turned serious and plucked at the bed sheet with his thin fingers. “Mom, where's Dr. Rowan?”

My heart skipped a beat at this question. “I'm not sure,” I answered.

If what Dr. Scott had said was true, Jeremy was somewhere in the hospital, but he was avoiding us. It hurt every time I thought about it, because he helped us so much. He had insisted on doing for us what no other doctor had. He had gone the extra mile, and now...perhaps he was cautioned to stay away. I tried not to think about it much, chasing away thoughts of him with happier ones of Albi's recovery.

Albi had a longing in his voice, “I miss playing games with him. None of the other doctors play games with me.”

“Well, I'll play with you,” I told him.

“Dr. Rowan plays it better, and he doesn't always let me win.”

Despite his claim that Jeremy played his games better, we engaged in a car racing game. Playing the game with him was a interesting, as he kept saying what Dr. Rowan would have done and what Dr. Rowan showed him. By the time he was worn out and took a nap, I was beginning to wonder about this man who had left such an impression on my son.

But right now, I had other things on my mind...like the presentation. I glanced at the covered painting and checked my watch. In ten minutes, I would make my presentation to the hospital staff. I knew that most of the staff were busy, so I promised it would only take a few moments. And I asked for a small number of people to be there—namely, Medical Director Dr. Mattis, Dr. Grayson Scott, and Physician's Assistant Emily Rae. I also heard a rumour about an intern called Grace, who had supposedly worked behind the scenes to make this all happen. I didn't know exactly what she did, but since she had a part in this, I was sure to invite her too.

I wondered if Jeremy would show up for the presentation. He ought to be there for everything he did. I think he was the first doctor who spoke to me

when Albi was first admitted. How could he not show up? Maybe then I could ask him about his decision to step back. Had he done what he had only to ease a mother's troubled heart? Had I merely imagined that something stronger existed between us? He was the first man I'd seen in this light for a long time, and I found it hard to accept that I'd read the signals wrong.

I made my way to the lobby area and smiled at the nurses and doctors who were already there. Only a few people, really, and I preferred it that way. I didn't plan on making a grandiose gesture, just a small one to let them know that I appreciated everything they had done.

But Jeremy wasn't there.

Chapter Fifty: “He Had Given Me Directions, But Why?”

With everyone gathered, I had an idea: I quickly handed my phone to Grace, and asked her if she could record this. Maybe...just maybe...I could show the recording to Jeremy.

“Hello everyone,” I greeted them tentatively, placing the wrapped canvas at my feet. I felt inexplicable gratitude for each person who had played a part in Albi’s care. “I know that each of you were just doing your job, but I still want to let you know how grateful I am for all you've done for my son. I've seen you work to no end to find a solution, even when you didn't see any.”

I paused, because now I was thinking of Jeremy and his absence. I blinked away the tears and focused on Dr. Scott. “This is just my little way of saying thanks. It might not be enough, but I think it's fitting. Whenever you pass by this lobby, I hope you'll look at it and be reminded of this deed you partook in to save a little boy’s life.”

I removed the covering from the canvas, revealing the painting I had been working on for the past two weeks. Because of everything, I had poured so much emotion into it, and that's why it was possibly my best piece yet: the Nativity.

“You painted this?!” Dr. Scott asked in amazement.

“Yes, it was a pleasure creating this for the hospital.”

“It looks amazing,” Dr. Mattis announced. “Fine craftsmanship. Thank you, Miss Tennant.”

Dr. Mattis insisted on getting the painting hung right away. I was pleased with their response, and they picked the perfect spot to hang it.

As nurses and doctors came and went, admiring the painting, I carefully slipped away. It seemed everyone had heard about the painting and had come to take a look. Except for Jeremy. I blinked rapidly to diffuse the waterworks I sensed coming on.

“Miss Tennant.”

I turned to see Dr. Scott, who was hurrying toward me.

“Yes?”

He came to a halt before me. “The painting is really amazing.”

I smiled at him. “Thank you.” When he remained there without another word, I asked, “Was there something else?”

He closed his eyes in dread. “Jeremy is going to be angry about this,” he mumbled to himself, then opened his eyes. “Room 304. Down the corridor, take the stairs and then left.”

“What...?”

He walked away without clarifying what he meant. I turned over the information in my head. He had given me directions, but why? I hesitated, wondering if I should check out what he wanted me to see.

Chapter Fifty-One: “None of us Could Have Predicted This. Not Even You.”

Lying on the hospital bed, Jeremy gripped his phone in his hand, pondering what she should do. Should he call her, or wait until he was released? If he had known the procedure would have kept him under for so long, he would have never scheduled it so close to Albi’s operation. Thankfully, he had Dr. Scott to rely on for Albi's daily reports.

Mary was going to be upset. Of that, he was sure. Hopefully, she would understand the reason why he had to do things this way. He was sure she would, *if* he told her everything.

Which he would.

Suddenly, he was pulled out of his thoughts by a slight knock on the door. The door opened, and Dr. Mattis entered the room.

Dr. Mattis asked, “How are you doing?”

Jeremy had to force a response: “Quite well, actually.”

“Well, I'm glad we were able to support you in this, Dr. Rowan.” Dr. Mattis paused to think of all that had happened over the past few weeks.

“Thanks.”

Dr. Mattis searched for what to say next. “Listen, I know a few of us, particularly Dr. Scott and I, were a bit hard on you. For that, I wish to apologize. But, please understand that it wasn't personal. We just wanted to be professional, and hold the hospital's reputation in high esteem.”

“Oh...I understand that, sir. It was never my intention to cross that line.”

“Well, sorry if we questioned your judgement. The final analysis reveals that we were wrong about you; but of course, none of us could have predicted that. Not even you.”

Jeremy only nodded, perhaps too overcome with emotion.

“I'll take my leave now and let you recover. I'm really glad that things turned out quite miraculously.”

Jeremy's throat clenched with suppressed tears, and he could only nod to the medical director.

Chapter Fifty-Two: “Even Before I Found Out.”

After Dr. Scott left me wondering what was going on, I was understandably curious. I followed his directions, going down the corridor. I took the stairs, and then turned left. I checked the door numbers as I walked. At room 304, I paused, wondering if I really wanted to know what was on the other side of the door.

Well, I'm here.

I pushed the door open and paused, staring in shock at Jeremy sitting up in the hospital bed. He had been staring up at the ceiling, but at the sound of the door opening, he lowered his gaze.

“Mary!” he exclaimed. “What are you doing here?”

I could've asked him the same question. I disregarded it, rushing closer to him. If he was in a hospital bed, then he hadn't abandoned us. He was ill, or so I thought. *But why not just tell us?*

“You're admitted to the hospital?” I asked, my eyes running over his frame to check for injuries. “Are you sick?”

“No, not at all,” he answered. “But what are you doing here?” He groaned then surmised aloud, “Let me guess: Dr. Scott told you I was here. Lately, he's been butting into other people's business. How's Albi?”

I snapped back, “Do you really want to know?” I caught my slightly angry tone. “I thought you were staying away because you wanted nothing to do with us.”

“That's the farthest thing from the truth,” he answered. “Mary, Albi is a part of me—literally.”

I was yet to find out exactly what he meant by *literally*. It was quite a pleasant shock.

He continued, “You and Albi mean the world to me.”

I needed an explanation. “Then why were you trying to keep this a secret?” He looked uncomfortable as he shifted on the bed, but remained close-mouthed. “Jeremy, if you can’t talk to me and be honest about this, we can’t have anything going on between us.”

He sighed. “It’s complicated.” He was quiet for a few seconds, obviously considering something he wanted to say. “Mary, I have something to tell you.”

“Go ahead,” I said, almost sure he was about to tell me he had a change of mind about us.

“But first, I want to know how you truly feel about me.”

I blushed and looked away from him. “I don't know what you mean.”

“It’s important, Mary. Please. Just be honest with me.”

I recalled how I had missed him these past few days. “I care about you,” I stated. “It’s been a long time since I've felt this connection with someone.”

“Would you consider being with me?”

I tried not to wring my hands like a nervous school girl. “Yes, I think you'd make a good father figure for Albi.”

“And what about you? Would I make a good partner for you?”

With a tone of endearment in my voice, all I could say was, “Ohhhh, yes.” I didn't even have to think about that one. That was straight from the heart.

He smiled and relaxed, “Good. I think the most important thing I can tell you is that that's the way I feel about you and Albi. Even before I found out.”

“Found out what?”

“Mary, have a seat. There are a couple of things I have to tell you.”

I pulled up a chair and sat, curious and eager for what he had to say. “Okay, so...?”

“I was the match for Albi,” he said, watching my reaction. “Mary, I was the donor for Albi.”

I stared at him, perplexed. I heard the words he was saying, but couldn't put together what they meant. “What are you saying, Jeremy?”

“I was the match I told you about,” he explained. “The interns working with the stem cell unit ran some unauthorized queries. They took samples from some of us, and...” his tone was a bit uncomfortable now, “we didn't ask you for permission to add Albi's DNA stats to the database. They didn't think much of it, as they were just practicing, but then, they thought they came across a match. They didn't think anything would come of it, but they found that Albi was a close match to someone else in the hospital's database.”

“But how is that possible?” I inquired. “And why didn't you tell me instead of doing it in secret?”

“I didn't want my action to influence how you felt about me. I thought it was safer this way, until we knew how we really felt about each other. All this time, the staff around here have been questioning us, warning me to keep my professional distance, and not to get too close to a patient—or, in our case, a patient's parent. But now, with Albi going home soon, I think things have cleared up.”

“You did this for my son?” I asked, tears filling my eyes.

“There's very little I wouldn't do for that boy, Mary.” He reached out a hand and gripped mine, lacing our fingers. Tears were in his eyes. “He's my boy, Mary. Albi's my little boy. I can't believe I have a second chance in his life.”

I didn't fully grasp exactly what he meant when he said that Albi was his little boy. I thought he was just being sentimental. "Yes, he is your little boy."

"You don't understand," he smirked.

"Yes, I do. You love him as though he were your own." I was about to find out how precise I was.

"I'm Albi's biological father," he declared.

"What!?" I gasped. We tightly held onto each other.

"I can explain. My wife Jacqueline and I got married when we were young. We always wanted to start family. We dreamed of having two kids, one a boy, one a girl. So, we set out to make that dream happen. We wanted nothing more than to have our family of four, but in the second half of our first pregnancy, a heart condition developed."

"Oh no!" I gasped, fearing what I'd hear next.

"Her pregnancy had it's ups and downs, but she was able to give birth. But, shortly after, she needed an operation." He looked away, then continued, "And...well...you know the rest."

I recalled what he told me outside the restaurant that one night. Tears were streaming down my face at his story. There were also tears coursing his cheeks.

"Jackie and I planned to raise our family together. She'd stay at home, and I'd be the breadwinner, the good old-fashioned way. But then, she died, and when I considered the hours I'd spend working at the hospital, I didn't think I could give our son the childhood he deserved. So, I decided to put him up for adoption, and went through a lawyer to do so. It was the most heart-wrenching decision I've ever made. I wanted to be sure he wouldn't go to a foster home, but rather, to a family who could raise him. Since it was done anonymously, I wasn't told anything about the family who adopted him. I was just assured he would be loved. And I can see he is. You've done an amazing

job with him, Mary.”

I was too stunned to do anything but sit down hard on the bed beside him. I couldn't believe what he was telling me. Was he really Albi's biological father?

I had to inquire further. “But, a match doesn't mean there's a hereditary connection. How'd you find out?”

“Well, a few days after you flew to find the lawyer, I got a call—from a lawyer.” When he said the words “from a lawyer,” his eyebrow raised, and he nodded affirmatively.

Mr. Peart phoned him?

The expression on Jeremy's face told me he knew exactly what I was wondering, and he continued in a matter-of-fact sort of way, confirming that it was Mr. Peart who had phoned him. “He assured my privacy, and told me about a mother who had come to see him. What he told me almost matched your account of what happened when you went to visit him.”

I listened in silence.

“You see, the sample size from the stem cell registry was small. They didn't sample anyone outside this hospital. It was a small database, so to find a match in such a small sample size was highly unlikely. That's why, at first, we didn't look there. Instead, we looked at databases from outside this hospital.”

I was following him, but there had to be more.

“So, when the lawyer phoned me, and the intern told me about the match, things looked promising. But to confirm, I did something that I didn't get your permission for: I asked the interns to do a paternity test on Albi and I, and it came back positive!”

“Oh!”

“Mary, I feel silly for saying this, because I know it worked for your benefit, but professionally, I apologize on behalf of this hospital.”

“Apologize...?”

"Yes. Our staff and interns used Albi's samples and ran queries without your permission. That's usually a violation of protocol, so I want to apologize for that.”

“Oh, Jeremy! Please don't apologize for that!”

“Hey, I have to be professional.”

I then let out one of the biggest laughs ever. Straight from the belly.

He was now smiling tenderly. “Okay. I think you know that even before I heard of a match, I already wanted to be in that boy’s life. In your life. I know I have no claim to him, Mary. Will you allow me to be a part of his life? A part of your life? I love you both so much.”

How could I refuse him, when he had done so much for us? He was the reason why my son was alive.

Our son.

Leaning over to him, I kissed him softly. “Yes, Jeremy. We’ve been waiting for you to make our family complete.”

As soon as I said that, I recalled his story: he initially wanted a family with Jacqueline. I wanted a positive male role model for Albi. Albi once asked about his father. Now, we each got what we wanted, and lo and behold, just in time for Christmas.

Epilogue

“One more gift, then breakfast,” I told Albi. He already had three of his gifts open and was beaming as he unwrapped another. Because he had been in the hospital this year, everyone we knew had sent him presents. He had presents from his paternal grand-parents, Judy, the doctors who had treated him at the hospital, his classmates, my co-workers, and neighbors.

Since it was his first Christmas with his son, Jeremy had also bought him many gifts. Seven, in fact. I had accused him of spoiling Albi, but he was allowed. No one was more ecstatic than Albi when we decided to tell him that Jeremy was his father. (And one day, we'll tell him about Jacqueline.)

Last night, Jeremy brought over a Christmas tree. Although it looked pitiful, never had a Christmas tree looked any better. That night, all three of us stayed up late, taking out all the decorations we had and decorating our tree. It would look like a mess to a professional, but it had been done by us, and we loved it. The little star at the top of the tree brought a tear to my eye every time I thought about it.

Near the tree, we had set up a Nativity scene that Jeremy brought home. It had become so significant to me.

“Mom, look what Dad got me!” Albi squealed with delight, and when I saw the new gaming system, I groaned. I was sure I was about to be excluded from this father-son bonding activity, but I didn't mind. I'd had him for seven years and didn't mind sharing him with the man who was responsible for me having him in the first place.

“That's quite nice!” I told Albi. “Did you tell your father thanks?”

He didn't just say thanks but launched himself at Jeremy, who was sitting on the floor behind him. With a laugh, Jeremy caught his little boy and hugged

him. The display of affection made my eyes moist. Tears of happiness.

“Can we play? Can we play?” Albi pleaded, over and over.

“Ask your mother,” Jeremy said, smiling at me. “She’s the boss of us.”

I chuckled at him, then grinned.

“You can have one game, and then we’ll eat.”

“Thanks, Mom!” He rushed out of his father’s arms and toward me to give me a hug and big kiss on the cheek. “You’re the best. Boy, this is the best Christmas ever!”

As they proceeded to set up the game system, I looked at the Nativity scene, my heart filled with gratitude and love. I remembered sitting in the chapel at the hospital and praying. That was where I had the idea to paint the Nativity scene for the hospital. Now we had our own Nativity scene in our home. As I looked at the Nativity, and then considered our story, something became very clear:

There was an unmistakable parallel between the Nativity scene and the three of us: *the Father sent his Son to be a Saviour. This Christmas, my son got a saviour... and a father.*

About the Author

D.K. Fynn was born in Montreal, Quebec, Canada. Though his first name is officially David, ever since 10th grade, he's been known as D.K. His passion for writing became evident in 8th grade, when his teacher said he probably “writes too much.” In his adult life, particularly as a direct-response copywriter and content marketer, writing played a significant role in his life.

It was around 2015 that D.K. became curious about writing fiction. Until then, most of his writing had centered around non-fiction.

So, D.K. took the time to begin a study of the craft of fiction writing. Then, in the summer of 2017, he was inspired to write four Christmas romance novellas. Though he had a few ideas, he really only felt that one was the best, and that idea led to the story you just read.

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Now That You've Read This, Did You Know That...

...I deleted the original first chapter of this book?

Not the prologue, but the chapter where you first met Mary Jane—or, to put it more accurately, where you were *supposed* to first meet Mary Jane.

You see, while editing this book, the biggest decision I had to make—the one I struggled with for weeks—was the fate of that first scene.

Why did I delete the first scene?

Well, very often, we modern-day writers are encouraged to avoid slow beginnings. (Yes, in times past, readers had more leisure time, and didn't mind a slow beginning; but today, where people are pressed for time, a slow start can be the premature death of a story.)

And, that's what I felt the original first chapter was: a slow beginning. There was nothing in it that you wouldn't have found out once you got immersed in Mary's life.

However, it does start out with Mary doing something that's loosely related to the end of the story.

I have that deleted scene here on my hard drive, and out of curiosity, I wondered what you might think of it.

That said, the deleted chapter is only about 292 words long, so it makes for a nice, quick read.

But when you do, you might understand why I took it out.

Or not. You might wish I kept it in.

Did I make the right choice?

There's only one way to find out: <https://dkfynn.com/asfc-deleted/>

Note: In the following pages, I'm going to present you with two more offers—namely, an interview, and the Why We Love Romance e-series. Signing up to any of these gets you all of them, so if you sign up using the link above, you'll also receive the other two offers. I respect your privacy and will not sell your information. You can opt-out or unsubscribe at any time.

Yours Free: An Interview With the Author (in Exchange for Your Email Address)

Are you interested in knowing what I struggled with when creating this book? There's something that occurs in the opening pages that, technically, wouldn't happen under normal circumstances, but in order to make the story more compelling, I had to pull a few strings and make some conceivable exceptions.

If you want to discover how I was inspired to create this, I think you'll find the interview very interesting. I will say that I was probably a little shy during that interview, and I mumbled a little bit, so I apologize in advance for that. Keep in mind that elsewhere, I mention a deleted chapter and the Why We Love Romance e-letter series. Signing up for any offer will get you access to all of them, so you really only need to sign up to one of the three offers.

That means that, if you sign up for the interview, you'll also receive the deleted chapter and e-letter series, so you won't have to sign up for those other two. Also, be aware that when you confirm your subscription, you may get frequent messages from me. Don't worry: I respect your privacy and will not sell your information. You can opt-out or unsubscribe at any time.

[Click here](#), or go to dkfynn.com/interview/

Why We Love Romance

Dear Reader,

Have you ever experienced a romance read that was magical...

...An experience where you got absorbed into the characters and world?

They say that a magician shouldn't reveal their secrets, but...

...I'm going to take a bit of a risk here.

I cordially invite you to receive my e-letter series, titled Why We Love Romance.

In it, I'll reveal some of the inner workings that make romance work. Some of these workings are usually only known to bestselling writers and relationship experts. I, however, believe that a more enlightened readership/community knows exactly what it wants and what to ask for. And in turn, authors who listen to their audience (such as yours truly) can know exactly what they're looking for.

That's right: I do reply to emails (provided I'm not sailing somewhere in the world). So, if you have any feedback, or would like to read about a particular theme, convention, or trend, I'm open to suggestions. I can't promise I can deliver on everyone's suggestions, but if I see that enough readers are asking for something, I'll do my best to see whether my author friends or myself can fulfill that wish.

That said, here are just a few items I intend to cover:

- The "one love story to rule them all," and why it's so great.
- A formal introduction to the "proof of love" concept. No, it's not just a simple I-love-you statement, though that can definitely be a part of it. It's something more profound. It's something one person does for someone, without any promise that they'll win the heart of their love. (And surprisingly, there are a lot of romance authors who don't fully know what this is. It's why, when you read a romance that doesn't have this, you may have felt that something was...missing...but weren't quite sure exactly what it was.) I'll more fully explore this in Why We Love Romance.

This "proof of love" concept is so profound that I'm using it as the basis for my upcoming series. I'll let you know more when the release date approaches.

And speaking of release dates, as a subscriber, you'll get the chance to receive an advanced review copy (ARC) of each of my upcoming releases. (These will be limited, so when I announce them, you'll need to act quick!)

Also,

- I have a number of other author friends who are willing to give you special deals on their new releases.
- I'll send you continuous updates about my current WIP (work in progress), what I'm reading, my friends' books, and other recommendations.
- I have a lot more planned, but for the sake of time, I'll just direct you to the sign-up page.

When you click the link below (or just type it into your browser), you'll be taken to a sign-up page.

On that page, you'll be asked to click a button, which will bring up an email field. Just enter your email address, click the "Sign Me Up" button, and you'll be shown further instructions.

<https://dkfynn.com/wwlr/>

In the preceding sections, I also offered to give you access to the deleted first chapter and an interview. If you signed up for any of those, you'll also get Why We Love Romance.

Finally, I respect your privacy and will not share, rent, or sell your information to others. As with all legitimate email messaging practices, you may unsubscribe at any time by clicking the unsubscribe link at the bottom of each email.

Let your voice be heard! If you liked this story, do consider leaving a review, which you can do on [Amazon](#), [BookBub](#), [Goodreads](#), or wherever you deem appropriate.

If you'd like to contact me, you can do so via email at dk@dkfynn.com

My Facebook author page is at <https://www.facebook.com/authordkfynn/>

With the release of this book, maybe I'll be more active on
Twitter: <https://twitter.com/dkfynn>