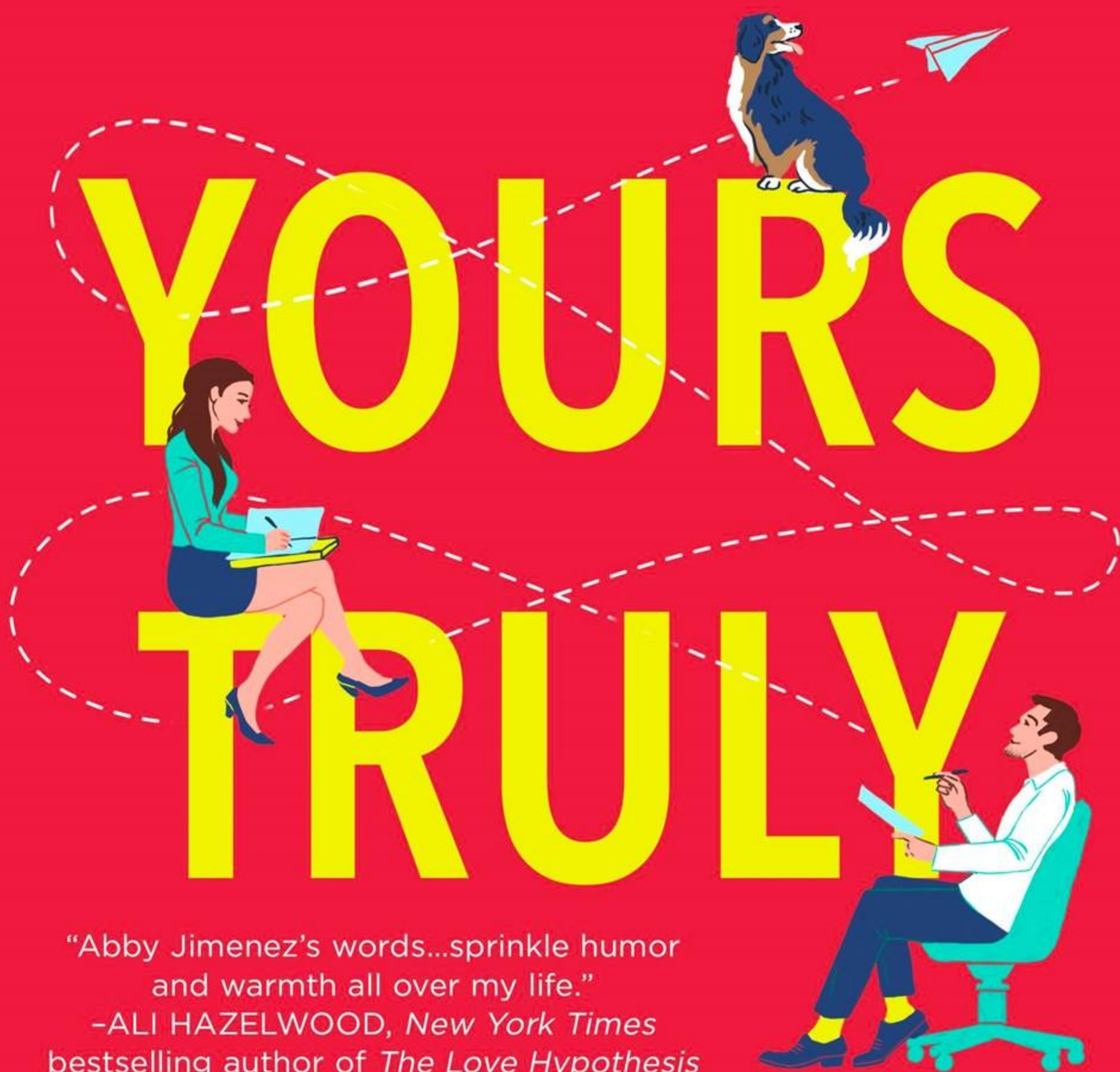


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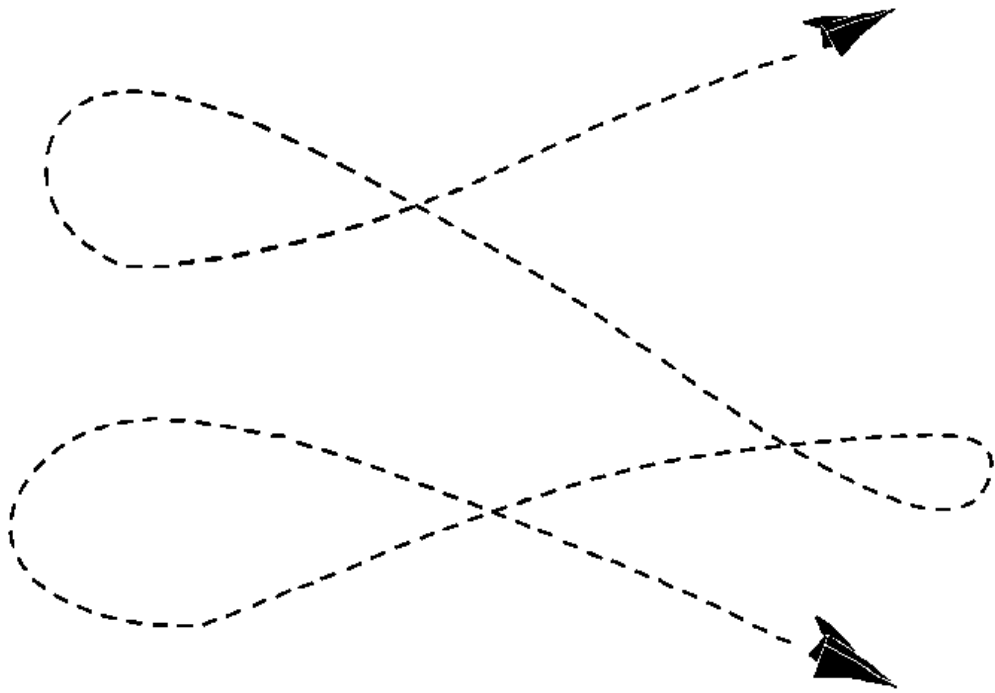
ABBY JIMENEZ



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and warmth all over my life."

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ABBY JIMENEZ



FOREVER

New York Boston

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Praise for Abby Jimenez

Also by Abby Jimenez

Content Guidance

This book is close to my heart for a lot of reasons, but before you dive in, I just want to give you a heads-up about a few themes, including a main character who was cheated on in a past relationship, a flashback to a pregnancy issue, a mention of suicide, and a character who has clinical anxiety. Yet despite these heavy topics, readers will be treated to laughs and happily ever afters for all. You can find further content guidance on my Goodreads page. Thanks so much for reading, and I hope you enjoy the book.

Best,

Abby

To my wonderful husband, Carlos, who has nursed me through some very tough times. Thank you for always being harmless to me.

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FOREVER

Chapter 1

Briana

They're calling him Dr. Death."

Jocelyn stood, peering at me dramatically from beyond the nurses' station where I sat at my computer charting my patients.

I glanced up at her over my screen and rolled my eyes. "Give him a break," I said, typing in my notes. "The guy's been here all of eleven hours. It's his first day."

"That's the point," she whispered. "He has a hundred percent kill rate."

I scoffed but didn't look back up. "You cannot call him that. We don't need patients hearing nurses whispering about a Dr. Death."

"Can we call him Doctor D?"

"No."

"Why?"

"Because Doctor D sounds like a penis thing."

She huffed. "Okay, but seriously. Somebody should look into this. Six patients dead?"

I checked my watch. "We work in an ER, Jocelyn. It's not entirely unheard of."

"Aren't you supposed to be chief of emergency medicine? Isn't it your *job* to investigate stuff like this?"

I did a final tap into my computer and looked up at her. "Dr. Gibson hasn't retired yet and the board hasn't voted on his replacement, so no, it's not my job."

"But it will be. You're totally going to get it. Don't you think you should dress for the job you want and stop the carnage?" She stood back

and crossed her arms.

I could feel the eyes of a dozen other unseen nurses peering at me from around the floor. Jocelyn was sent as an ambassador. Once the nurses latched on to something, they weren't letting go. This poor guy. He was *not* going to like it here.

I let out a long sigh. "The first patient was a ninety-six-year-old with a bad heart. The second one was an eighty-nine-year-old stroke victim who had a DNR. There was a car accident crush injury—I got a peek at the X-rays, and nobody but God could have saved that man. Patient four was a gunshot wound to the head, which I don't need to remind you is ninety percent fatal. The victim was comatose with no evidence of brain stem function upon arrival. Five was a cancer patient on hospice, and six was so septic he was practically dead when he got here." I looked her in the eye. "Not. His. Fault. Sometimes it happens."

She pressed her lips into a line. "Sometimes. But not on your first day," she pointed out.

I had to agree with that. The odds were a little low. But still.

"Just...send all the new patients to me, okay?" I said a little wearily. "He only has another hour. And no Dr. Death. Please."

She gave me a look. "He's rude, you know."

"How is he rude?" I asked.

"He told Hector to put his phone in his locker. *You* never make us put our phones away."

"Isn't Hector in some epic breakup with Jose? He's probably checking his phone every five seconds. I probably would have made him put it away too."

The door on room eight slid open, and an auburn-haired white guy in black scrubs came out. His back was to me, so I couldn't see his face. I watched him peel off his gloves and drop them into a hazardous waste basket. He pinched the bridge of his nose, took a deep breath, then dragged himself toward the locker rooms with his head down.

Hector came out of the room behind him and looked over at us. He held up seven fingers and sucked air through his teeth.

Jocelyn gave me an I-told-you-so look, and I shook my head. “No Dr. Death. Now go. Do something productive.”

She pouted for a second, but then she left.

My cell phone pinged, and I pulled it out.

Alexis: I want to come see you on the 19th.

I typed in my reply:

I’m totally fine.

I wasn’t fine. But I also wasn’t summoning my pregnant best friend out of the warm embrace of her honeymoon period to come hang out with me in the abandoned haunted house my life had turned into. I loved her too much to condemn her.

My phone rang in my hand.

I got up and ducked into an empty room, and swiped the Answer button. “I’m telling you, I’m okay,” I said.

“Nope. I’m coming. What time are you off?”

“Alexis.” I groaned. “I just want to pretend that day is like any other day.”

“It’s *not* like any other day. It’s the day your divorce is final. It’s a big deal.”

“I’m not going to do anything stupid. I’m not going to drunk-dial him. I’m not going to get shit-faced and throw up in my hair—”

“I’m more worried about you throwing Molotov cocktails through his windows.”

I snorted. “I guess that’s a valid concern,” I mumbled.

I didn’t exactly have a history of being calm and rational when it came to Nick. When I finally found out he’d been cheating, I’d like to tell you that I acted with poise and grace, a vision of dignity in the face of unfathomable betrayal and heartache. What I *actually* did was lose my fucking mind. I flushed my wedding ring down the toilet and watered his

houseplants with bleach. Then I called his mother to let her know what kind of a man she raised—and that was me just getting started. I'd shocked even myself with the levels of pettiness I was willing to sink to. The grand finale of the depths of my depravity was so embarrassing I forbade Alexis to bring it up to this day.

“Unless you have a date, I'm coming to see you,” she said.

“Ha. Right.” I sat on a gurney and put my forehead into my hand.

Since Nick, I had been through some of the worst online dating in the history of the internet. The amount of garbage I sifted through on Tinder over the last year was so bleak, Nick looked like Prince Charming by comparison.

“Still no luck?” she asked.

“Last month I went on a date with a guy who had a court-ordered Breathalyzer installed in his car because he'd had that many DUIs. He asked me to breathe into it so his car would start. There was the one who showed up to our coffee date with a swastika tattoo on his neck. The last date I went on, the guy's wife, which I didn't know he had, showed up to the Benihana and asked if this was what he was doing with the money he said he needed for the kids' school supplies. He told me he didn't have kids.”

She must have blanched into the phone. “Oh, *gross*.”

“You have no idea how lucky you are that you found Daniel. Seriously. Make a sacrifice to the dating gods for that one.” I looked at my watch. “I gotta go, I'm on shift. I'll call you after work.”

“Okay. But really call me, though,” she said.

“I will really call you.”

We hung up. I sat for a moment just staring at the wall. There was a pain-assessment chart hanging there. Little cartoon faces in various expressions over coinciding levels of pain. A green smiley face over the number zero. A red crying face over the number ten.

I fixed my eyes on the ten.

I'd managed not to think too much about the nineteenth. I was hoping if I didn't focus on the date, maybe I'd luck out and be a few days past it before I realized it had come and gone. It's not like much would change when the divorce was finalized. Nick and I had been split for a year. This was just making it paperwork official.

But still.

Maybe Alexis was right and I shouldn't be alone for it. In case it crept up and boob-punched me.

The last hour of work was uneventful. I took the only patient who came in—nobody died. But to be fair, it was just our regular, Nunchuck Guy, with another concussion, so the odds were in my favor.

I was getting ready to clock out when Jocelyn came back around.

“Hey, Gibson wants to talk to you before you leave.” Her eyes were sparkling. “This is it!” she sang. “He's giving you the position.”

Gibson was the current chief of emergency medicine for Royaume Northwestern. He was retiring this month. Technically he'd retired almost a year ago. Alexis had gotten his job and he'd left. Then a month later she quit to move to her new husband's tiny town in the middle of nowhere and open her own clinic, so Gibson came back.

“There's no way the board has voted yet, so I doubt it,” I said. “But I appreciate the confidence.”

But then I thought about it, and maybe he *was* giving me the position.

Not one person other than me had raised their hand for it. Nobody else was running. Did they even need to vote? What else would Gibson want to talk to me about if it wasn't this?

I made my way down the hall toward Gibson's office, a little excited. I mean, taking on the new job was going to be a ton of work. Six days a week, eighty hours or more. But I was ready. My whole life was Royaume Northwestern Hospital. Might as well work to my full potential.

I knocked on his door frame. “Hey. You wanted to see me?”

Gibson looked up and smiled warmly. “Come in.”

He sat behind his desk, his gray hair neatly combed back. He reminded me of a sweet old grandpa. I liked him. Everyone did. He'd been in the position forever.

"Close the door," he said, finishing something he was signing.

I slipped into the chair in front of him.

He finished his paperwork and moved it aside and gave me a full, toothy smile. "How are you, Briana?"

"Good," I said brightly.

"And your brother, Benny?"

I bobbed my head. "As well as can be expected."

"Well, I'm glad to hear that. Such an unfortunate circumstance. But he's got some great doctors."

I nodded. "Royaume Northwestern *is* the best. Speaking of which, I'm excited to get started—not that I'm looking forward to you leaving," I added.

He chuckled.

"Is there going to be a vote?" I asked. "Nobody else is running."

He threaded his fingers over his stomach. "Well, that's what I wanted to talk to you about. I wanted to tell you personally. I've decided to delay my retirement for a few more months."

"Oh." I tried to disguise my disappointment. "Okay. I thought you and Jodi were moving to some villa in Costa Rica."

He laughed good-naturedly. "We are. But the jungle can wait. I'd like to give everyone some time to get to know Dr. Maddox before we put forward a vote. It only seems fair."

I blinked at him. "I'm sorry. Who?"

He nodded in the direction of the ER. "Dr. Jacob Maddox. He started today. He was chief of emergency medicine over at Memorial West for the last few years. Great guy. Quite qualified."

I was rendered mute for a solid ten seconds. "You're holding off the vote? For *him*?"

“To give the team a chance to get acquainted.”

“To give him a leg up,” I said flatly.

He looked a little surprised at my reaction. “No, to make it fair. You and I both know these things can be a bit of a popularity contest, and he deserves a clear shot.”

I stared at him in disbelief. “You’re actually doing this. Delaying the vote so he has a greater chance at taking the position. I’ve been here *ten* years.”

He looked at me seriously. “Briana, I have to consider what’s best for the department. A broader pool to choose from is always preferable. There’s no glory in getting the job by default—”

“It wouldn’t be by default. It would be on merit. Ten years of merit.”

He peered at me patiently. “You know, Alexis didn’t run unchallenged. Competition is healthy. If the job is yours, it’ll still be yours in three months.”

I sat there trying to breathe calmly through my nose. It took everything in me not to blurt “They call him Dr. Death!”

“It’s just three months,” Gibson continued. “Then we vote, and I’m off to drink from coconuts on a beach somewhere and hopefully you’re right where you want to be too. Enjoy the calm before the storm, take it easy. Spend some time with Benny.”

I let out a slow, centering breath.

Gibson probably knew this Dr. Death guy. They must be friends. They probably golfed or something. This whole thing reeked of nepotism. But what choice did I have? If Gibson had decided not to retire yet, there was nothing I could do.

“Thank you for letting me know,” I said stiffly. I got up and let myself out.

The second I got in the car I called Alexis. “I hate the new guy,” I said when she picked up.

“Well, hello.”

“They call him Dr. Death. He killed seven patients today. *Seven*. First day.”

“Well, it happens.” She sounded distracted.

“And get this, Gibson is holding off on his retirement so the new guy can get a shot at getting the chief position. It’s total boys’-club bullshit.”

“Uh-huh,” she mumbled.

I listened for a second. Then I recoiled in horror. “Oh my God! Are you guys making out? I’m on the phone!”

She and Daniel were always all over each other. I think they only came up for air to eat.

I rubbed my temple. “Can you please toss some cold water on him and talk to me? I’m having a crisis.”

“Sorry, hold on.” She whispered something I couldn’t hear and giggled. Then *he* giggled.

I rolled my eyes and waited. This year was going to be my villain origin story, I just knew it.

A door closed in the background and she came back on. “Okay. I am here. Tell me all the things.”

“Okay, so the new guy is some hotshot transfer from Memorial West. I guess he was their chief over there, so Gibson wants to delay the vote so everyone can get to know him better. The guy’s a total dick, the nurses hate him—”

“Well, if the nurses hate him, you have nothing to worry about.”

“That’s not even the point! Do you think Gibson would do this if the transfer was a woman?”

I heard her pressing buttons on a microwave. “Eh, yeah. I do. Gibson’s pretty fair. I don’t picture him making this a gender thing.”

“You are supposed to be on *my* side.”

“I *am* on your side. Look, there is no way you’re not getting it. He did you a favor. He just handed the summer back to you without you being

tied to the ER for eighty hours a week. Benny needs you right now. It's better if you're free for the next few months while he gets adjusted."

I went quiet. The way things were going with Benny, I'd probably see him as much in the ER as I would at home. I pushed down the knot I always got in my throat when I thought about my little brother.

"So what does this new guy look like?" Alexis asked, clearly changing the subject.

"I have no idea," I mumbled. "He's like a shadow demon. Every time I'm about to walk into a room he's in, he steps out the other door. I've seen the back of his head a few times, but that's it."

"You didn't introduce yourself when he got there?"

"I mean, I was *going* to. But we got slammed the second I clocked in. And then when it calmed down, I couldn't find him. It's like the guy hides in a supply closet somewhere when he's not declaring people dead."

"Look," she said, getting back on topic. "Everyone loves you. You're going to be a shoo-in, no matter who runs against you. And that new guy? I give him a month. The nurses will eat him alive. You'll be the first Salvadorian chief in Royaume history by the end of summer, *te lo prometo*."

Alexis was trilingual. English, Spanish, and American Sign Language. She was brilliant, a world-renowned philanthropist from a prestigious family—and an optimist to boot.

I heard her open the microwave door. "Hey, when I come up, I'm making you scones," she said.

Aaand now she was baking too. I had to smile despite my mood. Alexis making scones was comparable to me going out back and chopping wood—hell would freeze over first. She really had changed when she met Daniel, and for the better.

I rested my elbow on the car door and put my head in my hand. I felt myself calming down. My best friend always de-escalated me. Sometimes I hated that about her. There were times when I just wanted to be pissed

off, careening forward on the strength of my pure rage. I was grateful for my ability to stay furious, especially over the last year. Anger is a powerful fuel. It can be very motivating. Fortifying.

The only problem with anger is that it burns hot and fast. It doesn't tend to burn long.

Sadness burns long. Grief. Disappointment.

I realized that's what I was afraid was going to happen on the nineteenth. My divorce would be final, my rage would finally burn out, and I'd be left with what was left of me.

And that wasn't much.