

# BRAIN DAMAGE



FREIDA MCFADDEN

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a novel by  
FREIDA MCFADDEN

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For my patients

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## Prologue

If someone had asked me before this happened if it would hurt to be shot in the head, I almost certainly would've answered yes. Of course, yes.

It makes sense. A piece of metal rapidly shooting through flesh and bone... how could it not hurt? During my intern year, I spent time in the emergency room and I saw people who had been recently shot. None in the head, but one in the shoulder, one through the knee, and one unfortunate bullet ripped its way right through a man's stomach. I didn't need to ask any of those people if the bullet hurt. I could see it in their faces.

I wasn't someone who had to worry about being shot though. The patients I treated in the emergency room weren't upper-middle-class female doctors living in million dollar apartments overlooking Central Park. They all lived in a poor section of the city, where bullets whizzed through the air as commonly as raindrops.

I, on the other hand, was safe, insulated. I wasn't the sort of person who would be shot in the street while going to buy soda at the local newsstand. When I died, it would be from a stroke or cancer, or if I was lucky, my heart would stop beating one night in my sleep when my hair was as white as my pillow and my face was crisscrossed with deep wrinkles.

Or so I thought.

Back to the initial question of whether it hurt to be shot in the head. Because there is a lot I don't remember, but this part I remember very well.

I remember staring at the gun, not really believing that it would go off, not believing that this could happen to me. And then I remember the explosion, seconds before the bullet discharged, passed through my skull, shattering it to pieces, soaring through gray matter, white matter, neurons, ventricles, then back through my skull again, and finally lodging itself in the well-insulated wall that kept our neighbors from hearing the noise of the gunshot.

And none of that hurt. The truth is, I didn't feel it at all.

What hurt is everything that came after.

## Chapter 1

### *Two Years Before*

There are times when I truly do hate being a doctor, and one of those times is right now, right this minute, while I'm staring down at the groin of an obese fifty-two-year-old man.

One of our nurses, Jessica, is standing next to me, "assisting me," although in truth, she's actually here to protect me from getting groped by this half-naked man. It's happened before, and I've just gotten sick of it.

Yes, the life of a dermatologist is very glamorous. I still like it though.

"It's a fungal infection," I say, averting my eyes from Mr. Leroy's groin and gratefully redirecting them to his round face.

A fungal infection. Which Mr. Leroy's primary care doctor should have diagnosed himself. What a waste of my time. And dignity.

I try to back away, giving myself a little distance between me and the fungus, but I slam into a wall. Our examining rooms are tiny. Miniscule. Several of my coworkers have complained to Roger, our boss, that we can't work in such tiny spaces, but tiny spaces means more examining rooms to stuff patients into, which means we can see them faster. It's all about the bottom line with Roger.

"That's what Dr. Hanson told me," Mr. Leroy says. His jaws are working together like he's chewing something. Did he start *eating* while I was looking at his groin? Oh God. "And he gave me this tube of spermicide for it."

I purse my lips together, and glance over at Jessica.

"He gave you *what*?" I ask.

"Some spermicide," Mr. Leroy repeats, still chewing vigorously. "And I've been putting the spermicide all over the rash for like a week, but it's not any better. So I figured I should see a skin doctor."

I can tell that Jessica is struggling not to laugh.

"You mean *fungicide*?" she asks.

Mr. Leroy shrugs and rubs his chin. "Oh yeah. Maybe."

I have no idea whether Dr. Hanson gave Mr. Leroy a cream that wasn't strong enough or else he actually did give the poor man spermicide. Either way, I know fungus when I see it. The moist skin folds of Mr. Leroy's groin are ripe with it. If I were a fungus, that's definitely where I would want to live. (Not being a fungus, I live in a very nice apartment by Central Park in New York City. It's my one indulgence.)

I write Mr. Leroy a prescription for a tube of fungicide and explain to him how to use it. He could probably also use some counseling on weight loss and getting his diabetes under control, but I'm not a miracle worker. Considering he doesn't know the difference between spermicide and fungicide, I have a feeling any words of wisdom I have to offer will likely be lost on him. Besides, I've been told by Roger that I've got a ten minute quota for each patient, and I've already used up nine of those minutes.

As I hand over the prescription to Mr. Leroy, I suddenly see the beginning of moisture forming in the corners of his eyes. A second later, they're full on tears. And all I can think is: *What the hell?*

It's not like patients don't cry in here. I've had to hand over more than a few cancer diagnoses in my time, and I've got a box of tissues in the corner of the room that gets replaced



on a regular basis. It's something they teach you in medical school: How to comfort a crying patient. Except the first time you actually see it, you panic. You don't know what to do aside from patting their shoulder and saying, "There, there."

But after several years in practice, I've got it down to a science. The compassionate arm rub, the box of tissues, the sympathetic and caring voice. It's not like I'm going to make anything all better, but if I can make them feel even a *little* better, I'll take it. Even if I have to go over my ten minute quota. (Screw you, Roger.)

Still, I have to say, this is the first time I've gotten tears over a diagnosis of jock itch. Did he think I said fungating carcinoma instead of fungus?

Damn, I'm definitely going over my stupid quota.

"Sorry," Mr. Leroy says, dabbing his eyes self-consciously with the back of his hand. "I'm being dumb, sorry."

"What's wrong?" I ask as I reach for our stock of tissues.

Mr. Leroy gratefully swipes a tissue from the box. "It's just that..." He sighs deeply. "My wife left me last year, and I've gained all this weight, and now I have *fungus*. I mean, what woman is going to want me with *fungus* growing on my crotch?"

I clear my throat and force a smile. "Mr. Leroy, I'm sure there are plenty of women who—"

"Would you date a guy with crotch fungus?" he interrupts me.

Would I? I visualize Mr. Leroy's moist, red groin folds and my stomach turns. "Sure," I say.

Mr. Leroy snorts.

"Look," I say, holding up my prescription. "You use this cream and the fungus will be gone in two weeks. Lose some weight and I promise it won't come back."

Mr. Leroy pulls the piece of paper from my hand and looks at it like it could be a winning lottery ticket. "Yeah?"

"I *promise*," I say.

I hold my hand out to Mr. Leroy and he shakes it. His hand is big and warm. In spite of the fungus, Mr. Leroy isn't an entirely unattractive man. He needs to lose some weight, as much for his health as for his appearance, but he has warm, brown eyes and a nice smile.

"You're a nice lady, Doc," Mr. Leroy says to me. "I heard good things about you."

I feel my cheeks color. "Thank you."

He smiles again. I glance up at the clock: fifteen minutes spent with Mr. Leroy. I'm already bracing myself for a lecture from Roger as I work through my twenty-minute lunch break.

Jessica has already put my next patient in a room, and the chart is sitting in the rack outside the door. I grab the chart from the rack and scan the details. Clark Douglas. Thirty-eight years old. Here to have a suspicious mole checked out. I'm just relieved that it's not another teenage acne patient. Not that I mind teenage acne... raging teenage hormones definitely help pay the bills. But when it gets to be August, it seems like that's all you see. I guess the kids figure they want their skin to be clear before school starts up again.

I knock on the door once then enter without waiting for an answer because the doors are inexplicably soundproof.

Let me just say that I may be a doctor, but I'm only human. And sometimes when a patient strips down in front of me for a mole check, even though I am a complete professional in my behavior, I can't help but react to a body that is incredibly wrinkled or covered in skin lesions or thick folds of fat.

Or in this case, the most perfect body I've ever seen. In my life.

Clark Douglas is gorgeous. I'm not sure I've ever used that word before to refer to a man,

certainly not in my adult life, but it really does seem appropriate in this case. He is *gorgeous*. And also, he's topless. Topless on my examining table, his pecs and deltoids perfectly toned but not ridiculously so. I can make out the bulge of a six pack on his slim abdomen. This is not a man who's got fungus hidden in the folds of his fat, that's for sure.

And he's just as amazing from the neck up as well. I always thought that chestnut was a nice way of saying brown, but this guy has the most gorgeous thick chestnut locks of hair on his head. He has dimples too, not huge ones, but just enough to be sexy—*perfect* dimples. His eyes lock with mine and they are clear blue, like the untouched waters of the Pacific.

Oh God, I sound like a teenage girl writing terrible poetry.

I've got to get myself under control.

"Mr. Douglas?" I ask, consulting his file. I strip my voice of any sort of emotion.

Clark Douglas smiles at me. God, even his *teeth* are gorgeous. It's almost disgusting. "Guilty as charged."

"I'm Dr. McKenna," I tell him. I hold out my hand to him and he shakes it. His hand is broad and warm, perfectly enveloping my smaller, plumper hand.

"Didn't Jessica give you a gown?" I ask him. I know very well she did. I see it lying unused next to him on the examining table.

Mr. Douglas shrugs. "Isn't it easier if I don't wear it?"

"It's for modesty," I explain.

"I'm not much for modesty," he says with a wink.

I'll bet. He knows how hot he is. That rat bastard.

The mole in question is on Mr. Douglas's back. It's about three millimeters in diameter, light brown, and a perfect regular circle. It's perhaps the least concerning mole I've ever seen in my career. If I were to write a journal article about moles that are completely benign, I might consider including Mr. Douglas's in the article. Not that I would ever write such a frivolous article, although it would actually be an excuse to get in touch with him. Not that I would ever do anything like that.

This guy is really scrambling my brain. Jesus.

"I think you're in the clear," I tell him.

He raises his eyebrows at me. "You don't even want to biopsy it?"

"There's no need," I assure him. "It's completely benign."

"Well, that's a relief," Mr. Douglas says. I notice he doesn't make any movement to put his shirt back on.

"Do you have any other questions or concerns?"

"Yes," he says. "Just one. Are you allowed to date patients?"

Ha ha, very funny.

He's making a joke, obviously. Men who look like him don't actually want to date women who look like me. Not that there's anything wrong with me exactly, but I'm just in a different league than Clark Douglas. He's gorgeous, and I'm just average. Maybe if my blond hair were thick and wavy and luxurious instead of short, practical, fine, and really closer to dirty blond. Maybe if I were six inches taller with long, shapely legs. Maybe if I dropped twenty pounds. Okay, thirty pounds.

Anyway, it doesn't matter. It's just a fact of life. Like that the sky is blue and groin fungus is disgusting.

"No, I don't date patients," I coolly inform Clark Douglas.

"No exceptions?" he asks, turning the full effect of his blue, blue eyes on me. And how does

a *man* end up with such beautiful eyelashes? I would have to empty half a bottle of mascara onto my pale lashes to have that effect.

“No,” I say, hoping to put an end to this ridiculous line of conversation.

I open up his chart to make a note in it. I happen to notice his occupation: attorney. He’s a gorgeous *attorney*. He probably thinks he’s God’s gift to women, that he’s doing me a huge favor by flirting with me. That I’ll run home and tell all my girlfriends about it. What a thrill.

He hops off the examining table. He thankfully grabs his shirt and swings it over his head. Unfortunately, he’s even more attractive dressed. Well, no. That would be impossible. But he’s *equally* attractive dressed.

“What if I stopped being your patient?” he asks. “I can find another dermatologist.”

I shake my head. “I’m afraid not.”

He raises his eyebrows at me. “So you would never go out with anyone who was *ever* a patient of yours? Even if it was ten years ago?”

I sigh. “Fine. Maybe if it were ten years ago.”

“How about five years ago?”

I shake my head again, but I can’t help smiling slightly. I know he’s still just flirting harmlessly, but he’s so freaking charming. It’s hard not to fall under his spell, just a little bit. “Maybe.”

“Now we’re talking…” He nods thoughtfully. “What would you say to… three months ago? What if I ask you out again in three months?”

“Fine,” I say, just to put an end to the whole thing. “You can ask me out in three months.”

Mr. Douglas pumps his fist. “Alright!” He winks at me again. “I guess I’ll see you in three months, Dr. Charlotte McKenna.”

I will never see this man ever again. I’m willing to bet the farm on that.

## Chapter 2

### *Two Years Before*

My apartment is my haven.

No matter how long and exhausting and frustrating my day is, I feel comforted when I walk into my apartment. I live near Central Park, and I have a great view, a spacious living room, a beautifully furnished kitchen, and two bedrooms.

Yes, it's *just me* living there. Thanks for asking.

The one thing I do wish we had is a doorman. We have a buzzer to enter the building, and it always makes me a little nervous. You know, being a single woman living all alone and all. I mean, everyone just lets everyone in behind them even if they don't know them... it's like a free-for-all. Then again, I don't like the idea of having a doorman that I would have to make small talk with every time I leave or enter the building, and buy him an obligatory Christmas gift. Plus we've got Johnny, our burly maintenance guy, who is always somewhere nearby. And I've got a padlock on my door that the locksmith assured me that not even the best spy in the CIA would be able to jimmy open.

So anyway, I feel pretty safe.

When I get home, I toss my keys onto the kitchen counter and let out a long, cleansing sigh. Before I've taken two steps into the apartment, my cat races over to me and meows loudly, then looks up at me with big, longing green-yellow eyes. Two years ago, I adopted a black cat from an animal shelter, which I named Kitty (I'm a doctor—I'm not creative). She's like my best friend now.

I'd wanted a cat forever, but I was afraid to get one. Why? Partially because I work long hours and I wasn't sure if I'd have time to take care of a cat. But also because I was afraid that getting one cat might be a gateway drug to becoming a crazy cat lady—someone who goes to work covered in a layer of cat hair and throws kitties at teenagers playing their rap music too loud.

The crazy cat lady isn't just a terrible stereotype. I honestly believe it's a real thing. At least fifty percent of cats carry an infection known as toxoplasmosis, which is the reason pregnant women shouldn't change litter boxes. I've read that toxoplasmosis can theoretically infect the brain of the owners, effectively causing psychosis. So the crazy cat lady might not just be crazy because she's got twenty cats in her home... it might be because of toxoplasmosis. That's a *real thing*. I didn't want to end up with toxoplasmosis psychosis.

But then I figured, screw it, I'll get a cat.

I open up a can of cat food for Kitty. Kitty refuses to eat any dry food and will only eat gourmet brands of canned cat food. I swear, the stuff looks so good, sometimes I'm tempted to take a taste. (Okay, I admit it, I did try it once. I don't recommend it.) I honestly don't know why my cat is such a spoiled diva, especially considering three months before I adopted her, she was eating out of garbage cans.

For myself, I pull a salmon filet out of the refrigerator and throw it in the frying pan with some olive oil, salt, and pepper. No matter how tired I am at night, I always cook myself a hot meal on the stove. Nothing gourmet, but hey, it's better than a TV dinner.

I hear my phone buzzing inside my purse, and contemplate whether I should answer. It could be my best friend Bridget (well, best friend after Kitty), but more likely, it's my mother. Ever since my father passed on, she's been checking up on me on a daily basis. And our

conversations always touch on the exact same topics: the fact that I live alone and the fact that I don't have a boyfriend. I'm just not in the mood right now.

Oh hell, I'll talk to her for a minute and that's it.

"Charly!" my mother booms. She must be on her cell phone. She's somehow unable to regulate the volume of her voice when she's on the cell phone. She basically always just shouts into the phone, thinking I won't hear her otherwise. She sounds the way I do when I'm talking to my older, deafer patients.

"Hi, Mom," I say. I glance over at my salmon, which is currently steaming. "I can't really talk. I'm in the middle of cooking dinner."

"What are you making!" she shouts.

"Salmon with a salad," I say as I pull a head of lettuce out of the fridge. Since I read that pre-packaged lettuce is dangerously unhealthy, I've been cutting my own, so I have to balance the phone precariously between my chin and my neck as I slice. I miss the days of ignorance.

"Don't forget to turn off the oven when you're done," she warns me.

"You really think I'm going to forget to turn off the oven if you don't tell me?" I say. I'm trying to keep the irritation out of my voice but it's hard. "I mean, I've cooked *thousands* of meals living on my own, and you think that the *only thing* stopping me from keeping the oven on and burning down the building is you telling me to turn it off? Is that really what you think?"

"It can't hurt to remind you," she sniffs.

I love my mother. I really do. Probably more than anyone else in the world. But somehow it's become impossible to have a conversation with her without my ending up shouting, then feeling guilty about it later. Why does talking to your parents always make you regress to your teenage years?

"Charly," Mom says, "I know you're going to say no to this, but the son of this woman I met playing bridge is interested in—"

"No."

"But if you could just meet him and—"

"No."

"Why are you so stubborn, Charly?" Mom says. "I mean, you're in your mid-thirties. Don't you want to get married and have kids?"

"I told you—if it happens, it happens." I shrug at my salmon. "If it doesn't, it doesn't."

"If you don't make it happen, then it won't happen."

*"Then it won't happen."*

"But Charly—"

"My dinner is ready," I say as I lift the lid off my pan containing the salmon. The filet has turned that perfect pink color that lets me know that it's cooked to a medium-rare. Perfect. "I'll have to talk to you later."

My mother reluctantly gets off the phone so that I can assemble my plate of dinner. I love being able to eat whatever I want for dinner, then watch whatever I want on television while Kitty settles down on the sofa next to me so that I can stroke her soft, black fur.

The truth is, I haven't met a guy yet whose company I enjoyed better than the peace of my own home. Why wreck something that's already perfect?

But then as the perfectly cooked salmon dissolves on my tongue, I can't help but think about Clark Douglas, that patient from this morning. And how, even though it's practically impossible, I wouldn't entirely mind if he were here, sharing dinner with me right now. And maybe hanging around for a bit afterwards.



## Chapter 3

### *One Week After*

The light feels like a knife.

Yellow light inches away from my pupil, jabbing at my eyeball like an ice pick through my brain. I want to close my eyes to block it out, but I can't. My eye won't close. Something has wedged it open.

I try to cry out to protest, but my lips don't move. While something holds my eye open, something holds my lips shut. Tape, I think.

"No pupillary response," a voice announces.

With those words, my eyelid is released and I am plunged back into blessed relative darkness, marred only by a large green spot in the center of my vision. I want to live in this darkness.

"No way," a second voice says. "Are you blind? I got a definite contraction of that pupil."

It happens again. My eyelid is yanked open and I see the blurry outline of a face before the light floods my field of vision again. The pain came slower before, but this time it is immediate. I've never been a religious person, but I find myself praying that the light will go away.

*Please, God, make it go black again...*

"She had pretty eyes," a voice comments.

They are complimenting me in the past tense. That can't be good.

"See?" a triumphant voice announces seconds before the light shuts off. "I told you it contracted."

"Fine," says the first voice. "Keep her breathing on the vent for another month or two instead of giving her organs to somebody who isn't brain-dead."

There's a long pause before I hear: "She's an organ donor?"

"Said so on her driver's license, apparently."

Another long pause. The pain in my head is fading and with it, my consciousness. Blessed darkness. Thank you, God.

"Well, she's not dead yet."

Those words are comforting to me. Something has happened to me, but I'm not dead. I'm alive. I'm still here. Not dead.

Yet.

I hear one last remark before I slip away again:

"Do you think she's really still in there?"

---

I don't know this girl, but she is very pretty and her hair is tied back into a blond ponytail. She is young, maybe in her twenties, with a fresh-faced eager look. There are freckles sprinkled across her nose, which make her look even younger and more fresh-faced and pretty. Her smile fills my vision and makes me feel comforted, optimistic.

"Are you ready to try eating something today, Charlotte?" she asks.

Who is Charlotte?

I have no idea who she is talking to. But her eyes are locked with mine. I think she might be talking to me. Yes, she is definitely talking to me. I am Charlotte. That is my name, I think.

It's a pretty name. Charlotte. I like it.

I look down and see there is a plate in front of me. On the plate, there are three mounds of food. They all sort of look like mashed potatoes, but one is gray, one is white, and one is yellow. Multicolored mashed potatoes. I wonder how they do that.

The girl spoons a bit of the gray material and then lifts the spoon to my lips.

“Open your mouth, Charlotte,” the girl says.

I look down and see the badge hanging from the pocket of the girl’s bright purple scrub top. Written in big letters is the word Amy. The girl’s name must be Amy. That’s a pretty name too. Almost as pretty as Charlotte.

“Come on, Charly,” she says to me. Amy. Her blue eyes are wide and hopeful. “Open your mouth for me.”

She demonstrates by opening her own mouth. She has a little pink tongue.

I really want to make Amy happy, so I do what she did. I open my mouth. Amy’s face lights up like a Christmas tree. She’s even prettier when she’s happy, although I’m not entirely sure why opening my mouth made her so happy. “Great job!” she tells me.

My reward is a mouthful of gray material on a spoon. It’s not a very good reward. The spoon tastes metallic and bitter, but the food tastes even worse. It almost tastes like meat, but with an odd aftertaste. I don’t like it and I don’t want it in my mouth. I want to spit it out, but I don’t think Amy will like that.

“Now chew, Charlotte,” Amy instructs me as she removes the spoon.

Amy demonstrates this one by letting her lower jaw fall slack, then raising it up again, then lowering it again as if I didn’t understand what chewing is. I mimic her movements and Amy looks like she may faint from happiness. Her standards for happiness seem ridiculously low.

“You’re doing amazing today, Charlotte,” she says.

Amy’s standards for “amazing” seem ridiculously low too.

“Now I need you to swallow.”

I understand what she wants me to do. I mean, I do and I don’t. I know what swallowing is, and I know I’ve done it before, but I don’t entirely know how to do it right now. I’m not entirely sure why.

I see a little crease forming between her brows. Amy isn’t happy anymore. I want to make her happy, but I don’t know what to do. Whatever it is, I’m obviously not doing it.

“Swallow, Charly,” she says. “Come on, *swallow*.”

I stop the chewing motion. I feel some of the gray material sliding out of the corner of my mouth. Amy allows the food to trickle down my chin before she dabs at my face with a napkin.

I feel terrible. I want to let Amy know that I am trying my best, I don’t mean to disappoint her. I want to do what she’d like me to do.

But when I open my mouth to tell her those things, I lose the rest of the food that she placed in my mouth and it leaks down my chin and splatters on a napkin across my chest.

Amy just sighs and shakes her head.

---

The ball is red and I keep watching it. This is trickier than it sounds. The ball goes up, down, to one side then it’s gone. Magically, inexplicably gone. Where did it go? I try turning my head, but I still can’t find it.

Where is it?

“Whoa, Charly,” a voice says. I feel a hand on my shoulder, pushing me. That’s when I realize that I have been falling to the side. The hand is keeping me from falling.



There's the ball again! I found it!

It's red.

The person holding the red ball has short brown hair like a boy, but I don't think it is a boy. Her features are delicate like a girl. And her voice is low pitched, but still definitely sounds like a girl. So I think she is a girl. I'm like ninety-nine percent sure.

Also, I look down and her name tag says Valerie, which is a girl's name. So yes, I am ninety-nine percent sure she's a girl.

"Is this what you were looking for, Charly?" the girl (I think) says.

Who is she talking to? Who is Charly?

Oh wait, I think that's me. I think that's my name.

Valerie rotates the red ball around in her fingers. She holds it in my face. "Do you want to try grabbing it?"

I know she wants me to do something, something to do with the ball, but I don't really understand what. So I just look at the ball. We wait there for a minute, then Valerie's face breaks out into a smile and she shakes her head.

"Wishful thinking," she says with a laugh.

I keep watching the red ball. I watch it goes up, up, up. This time, I swear I'm not going to lose track of it.

"How is she doing today?"

The question was asked by a pretty girl with her blond hair in a ponytail. She looks a little bit familiar. I look at her name tag and read her name. Amy. I'm sure I've seen her before.

Valerie shrugs. "Pretty bad at the beginning of the session, but just now she was tracking this red ball pretty well. I mean, she didn't grab for it or anything, but she followed it almost everywhere."

"Everywhere?"

Valerie smiles. "Well, she loses it when it goes to the left. Her left neglect is still horrendous. She has no awareness at all of her left side. She's practically falling out of her wheelchair to the left."

Who is "she"? Who are they talking about? There's nobody else here besides me. They couldn't be talking about me though. I can't be falling out of my wheelchair because I'm not in a wheelchair. Why would I be in a wheelchair? Those are for old people.

I look down, to my right side. I see an armrest, then a large metal rimmed wheel.

Huh. Maybe I really am in a wheelchair.

"Better than nothing," Amy comments. She sounds a little bit sad, but I'm not sure why. "I don't know... She had one really good day about a week ago when I got her to open her mouth for some food and even chew it a little bit, but then nothing since then. I can barely get her to stay awake through my session."

"We did the coma scale yesterday," Valerie says, brushing some strands of brown hair from her eyes. She has very pretty eyes.

"And?"

"What do you think?" Valerie snorts. "Still vegetative. No purposeful movements."

They are both quiet for a minute.

Oh shit, I don't see the red ball. They were distracting me and I lost track of it. Where did it go?

"It's sad," Amy says. "I just can't get anything out of her most of the time. I hate to give up though. She's so young... and she used to be a doctor."

“Yeah, but her insurance...”

Oh my God, there it is! The red ball! It’s in Valerie’s hand. I found it!

This time, I am definitely not going to lose track of that ball. Valerie gestures with it and I watch it. It goes up and down. It’s easy to follow because it’s red.

## Chapter 4

### *One month After*

“Open your eyes for me.”

There is a very pretty girl with blond hair sitting across from me. She is smiling at me. I like her smile. She has very straight teeth. And there are freckles across her pert little nose.

I feel something stroking my hand. I look down and see that the pretty blond girl has my hand in hers. Her hand is so soft, like a baby.

“Very good,” the blond girl is saying. “Now I want you to keep your eyes open.”

I keep my eyes open, focusing on the blond girl’s smile. It’s hard. I’m so tired. It would be nice to close my eyes.

“Good,” she says. She rubs a cold washcloth over my forehead and my cheek, and I shiver. A droplet of water slides down my cheek and down my neck. “You have such pretty eyes. The color is so unusual. Violet, like Elizabeth Taylor.”

Violet is like purple. How could I have purple eyes? Purple is not a normal color for eyes.

“Listen to me,” the blond girl says, “I want you to give me a thumbs up if I say your name. Okay?”

I read the name off of the blond girl’s name tag: Amy. She looks sort of familiar to me. I think I met her before. Her hand feels very soft, like a baby.

“Is your name Susan?” she asks me.

Is my name Susan? I don’t think it is. That doesn’t sound familiar.

No, I’m almost certain that my name isn’t Susan.

“Is your name Lisa?”

I don’t think Lisa is my name either. What is my name again? That seems like something I should definitely know.

But I’m sure if she says my name, I’ll recognize it.

I look to my right and see that there is another person in the room besides Amy. It is an older woman, with gray hair that is pulled back into a bun, although dozens of loose scraggly strands have escaped and fallen around her face. She’s wearing gray-rimmed glasses that slide down the bridge of her nose. I look for a name tag, but I don’t see one.

“How come she always has her head turned to the right?” the older woman asks.

“Injuries to the right side of the brain can sometimes cause a neglect of the left side,” Amy explains. “Basically, she has trouble paying attention and noticing stimuli on her left side.”

“So she can’t see things on her left side?”

“It’s not necessarily a question of vision,” Amy says. “It’s about perception. Like, for example, if I touch her on her left arm, notice how she doesn’t really respond, even though her nerves are working fine. She just doesn’t *perceive* that I’m touching her. She ignores any stimuli on her left side.”

Is Amy touching me right now? I guess she must be. I’m just not *perceiving* it, whatever the hell that means.

“That’s so bizarre,” the older woman says.

Amy nods. “And weirdly, it doesn’t just apply to real life. Patients with hemispatial neglect on the left side can ignore the left side of hallucinations, dreams, or memories too.” She turns her attention back to me and smiles. “So tell me. Is your name Charlotte?”

Is that my name? I’m not sure. It sounds familiar.

“Give me a thumbs-up if your name is Charlotte,” Amy says.

The older woman is leaning forward eagerly, her blue eyes wide behind the lenses of her glasses. She has dark circles under her eyes. Her blouse is wrinkled, like she slept in it.

“She did it!” the older woman says triumphantly. “I saw her thumb move.”

Amy shakes her head. “I... I’m not so sure.”

The older woman sniffs. “Well, you weren’t paying attention then.”

Amy bites her lip.

The older woman stands up. She stands next to me and lays a hand on my shoulder. I try to look up at her, but my head feels funny when I lift it. There’s something resting on my head making it hard to move. Something strange and heavy.

“You know your name, don’t you, Charly?” the woman says to me.

I’m confused. Is my name Charly then? Or is it Charlotte? Or is it Lisa? Or Susan?

For God’s sake, why don’t they just tell me my name already?

“She’s tracking better,” Amy says.

The older woman waves her hand as if this is no consequence to her. She leans forward so I can make out all the wrinkles on her skin. She is so old and smells like flowers. “You know more than you’re letting on, don’t you, Charly?” she says. She winks at me. “You know who I am, don’t you?”

I have absolutely no idea who this woman is.

“Mrs. McKenna,” Amy says in a soft but stern voice. Her pretty face looks angry. “We agreed you could sit in on my session if you promised not to disrupt your daughter’s therapy.”

Amy is angry. Really angry. What have I done to make her so angry? I must’ve done something terrible to make her so upset.

Oh my God, what have I done?

“Oh, Charlotte,” I hear Amy say suddenly. “Don’t cry! Why are you crying?”

The older woman starts asking her if it is good that I am crying, and meanwhile, Amy keeps rubbing my hand. How could it be good that I am crying? What is wrong with that stupid old woman?

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I am dreaming, or at least, I think I am.

A gunshot echoes in my ear, and I try to see where it came from, but I can’t. I can see the right side of my apartment so clearly—my bookcase filled with textbooks about skin conditions, a maple wood desk, and my wide-screen television. But I can’t see who’s making the footsteps coming from my left side.

Even though it’s a dream and I know it’s a dream, I still can feel hot breath against the left side of my neck. And I hear words hissed in my ear. It feels so real.

Then I wake up.

The room we are in now is real and it’s small, with only a bed, a single dresser, and a television. Nobody else is here but the two of us. This is my room. I think so, anyway. That’s what everybody says.

The older woman is with me, but she’s on the phone. She’s speaking in a hushed, urgent voice but I can make out the words she’s saying.

“Do you think you could come see her this weekend?” the woman murmurs into the phone.

The older woman is sitting in a chair next to me. I am sitting too. In a wheelchair. I’m always sitting in a wheelchair these days, even though I’m not old or sick. Well, I might be sick.