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### 1. Deleted Alternate Prologue: The night Emery Saved Ethan's Life.

*Nineteen months ago.*

“If we start treatment in his condition, we might kill him. But if we do nothing, he'll be dead within weeks for sure.”

Dr. Emery Love squirmed and fidgeted in her seat at the physicians' work station, while the oncologist retrieved the CT scan images from the computer. Her feet hurt, from running around the hospital all day and pacing back and forth in the ICU for the past hour—mostly mumbling curses against her practice partner Dr. Shawn McDevitt. When she'd agreed to cover for him so he could go on his honeymoon, she should've known that Murphy's Law would drop a bomb in her lap.

*“That patient shouldn’t give you any trouble. You can send him home in the morning,”* he’d said.

*Famous last words.*

Dr. Greene, the oncologist, succeeded at opening the images and Emery launched into her presentation.

“Ethan Cadman. Thirty-two-year-old never-smoker, previously healthy male, presenting with a three-month history of progressive difficulty breathing and weight loss.”

“Yikes!” Dr. Green winced, scrolling the PET-CT scan images on the screen. “Look at those huge lymph nodes blocking his airway! This guy is fried.”

“The radiation oncologist refuses to give emergency radiation while he’s on the ventilator. But unless we do something to shrink those nodes he’ll never be able to breathe on his own! You’re my last hope.”

The man groaned. “I don’t think I can help you either. It’s too dangerous.”

“But the pathologist said the biopsy showed Non-Hodgkin’s lymphoma! It’s potentially curable!”

“‘Potentially,’ meaning with a big dose of wishful thinking!” The oncologist snorted, then grimaced. “The chemotherapy we’d need to use is aggressive enough to kill a healthy patient—let alone a patient already this sick. You should transfer him to a tertiary center.”

“But he’s too unstable to transfer,” Emery argued. “We need to start treatment now!”

It was the oncologist's turn to pace. "You can't ask me to start chemo on a patient who's on a ventilator! When his white blood cell count plummets he'll be at risk of dying from an ICU acquired infection."

"But unless we treat the cancer, he'll be dead within days anyway."

"But at least he'll be dead without *me* having contributed to it!"

Emery covered her eyes with a hand and shook her head. She knew the oncologist was more worried about a malpractice lawsuit than about helping the patient.

And she couldn't blame him. Even she and her partner Shawn faced a potential malpractice suit if anybody argued that the patient's deterioration started from complications from the bronchoscopy and biopsy Shawn had done right before leaving; they'd led to pneumothorax, or partial lung collapse.

With the patient unable to give consent, and his family currently untraceable, starting dangerous chemotherapy was a big liability. It was the biggest dilemma Emery had faced in her entire professional life.

Emery felt the strange sense of grounding that descended upon her when she faced a real medical crisis—paradoxical, considering she would normally freak out in the presence of small drama. It was a huge medico-legal risk, but someone had to make the decision.

"I take responsibility for whatever happens. This is his only chance to survive," she said. "Let's start the chemotherapy. And God help us."

## 2. The day Ethan came off the ventilator:

Dr. Emery Love's hands trembled as she carefully peeled the tape off her patient's face to remove his endotracheal tube. The fear of hurting him by scratching him with her nails was only symbolic of the terror she'd lived in recent weeks, fearing her next

medical decision could kill him.

“After the tape is off, I’m going to deflate the air balloon holding the tube in your throat,” she explained. “And then I’m going to ask you to cough as I pull the tube out.”

As she talked, he opened his eyes and his deep blue gaze made contact with hers for the first time. The armor she’d worn until then to evade the senseless tragedy of the case crumbled. At that instant, the name Ethan Cadman emerged from under the pile of laboratory values and x-ray results where she’d hidden it, and became linked forever to this human being.

Starting him on chemotherapy while on the ventilator—the only hope of shrinking the lymph nodes blocking his airways—had been such an aggressive medical move some had called it reckless. And the following weeks had been brutal for both of them. The early respiratory improvement he gained from the steroids in the regimen was undone days later when his blood counts plummeted, he developed life-threatening pneumonia and she had to put him on the ventilator again.

And now the tube was finally out, and she could take in his image as the respiratory therapist performed his breathing treatments. Ethan Cadman’s bald head and pale puffy face suddenly reminded her of a newborn, and she felt an inexplicable tenderness and desire to protect him.

“I’m not sure how much you remember from the past few weeks,” she said as the therapist changed him to an oxygen mask and Steve the nurse worked on rearranging pillows on his recliner chair. “You developed pneumonia and sepsis right as your first dose of chemotherapy lowered your white blood cell count. You were in multiorgan failure. It’s a miracle you’re alive and your organs seem to be recovering.”

She felt like apologizing for everything he’d gone through. More than once, she’d beaten herself up for having submitted this poor guy to weeks of suffering, when it seemed he was going to die anyway. She still couldn’t believe that, at least for the time being, he was alive.

As she continued updating him, he kept his attentive blue gaze on her and she became more aware than ever of how emotionally exhausted and nerve-wrecked *she* was.

“And you were lucky in another way,” she concluded. “If you had to be intubated any longer we would’ve needed to give you a tracheostomy.”

She stopped realizing she was babbling medical terms to a patient who was probably still foggy and unable to understand much. She changed gears. “I bet you would’ve preferred to have a say on the decision to start chemotherapy, but we had to act fast. It is your right to opt out of treatment. But given your young age and the fact that you seem to be responding, I strongly recommend you continue it. I would also encourage you to get a second opinion at an academic center.” She paused. “Any questions?”

He was silent for a moment. She wondered if she had overestimated how awake he was and whether he could understand anything she said. After all, this was a man who’d fought dangerous low oxygen levels and plummeted blood pressures not long ago and could’ve suffered brain damage.

Finally, with the deep hoarseness to be expected after being intubated for so long, he spoke.

“Is Dr. Love *really* your name? All this time I heard the nurses say that, and I thought they were referring to some talk-show about romantic advice.”

His answer surprised her. Steve the nurse laughed, then she and the respiratory therapist followed suit.

*Yep. It seems the worst is over.*

And just like that. Mr. Cadman became Ethan. The favorite patient in the history of Holloway Hospital's ICU.

### 3. Ethan picks up the story:

The day Dr. Love extubated me was the first time I could see her face up close. I thought I was dreaming. She was the most beautiful woman I'd seen in my life.

The past month had been a blur. I'd drifted in and out consciousness, sometimes awake enough to understand the pessimistic conversations around me, sometimes so knocked down there were days and weeks missing from my memory. Amid the dreams and nightmares, I'd learned to recognize her soothing voice. She always addressed me by name. The touch of her hands when opening my eyelids to check my pupils, or when feeling the glands around my neck, always felt pleasant— so different from some of the troglodyte doctors I had.

The few times I'd seen her those days I was extubated the first time, I didn't capture much, in between the grogginess of my mind and the blurring of my vision due to my swollen eyes. Now after a few good doses of Lasix and sitting in a recliner for a few hours my eyes had deflated enough that I could take in her image for the first time.

Gosh, she was beautiful! So much I wondered if I was dreaming or hallucinating. After all, who really has a name like "*Dr. Love?*"

They discharged me to rehab shortly after, and that's where the diagnosis sank in and a see-saw of anger and depression hit me full force. The week I worked on regaining some strength, family and friends arranged for a second opinion consultation at the fanciest cancer center within driving distance.

There, the hematologic malignancies expert wanted to repeat every painful and annoying procedure in existence— from bone marrow biopsies to spinal taps. Later on I found out that wasn't truly necessary—he had an obsession with collecting samples and data so he could do research on them in the future.

And that's how I felt the three days of that consultation, like nothing but a potential research subject. All they talked about was their promising clinical trials for patients experiencing relapse.

Relapse? I wasn't even in remission yet and they were already setting me up for failure?

That did it. If I was going to die, let it be at home.

I went back to Dr. Greene and had my next cycle of chemo as an outpatient. That "outpatient" part didn't last long, as I was back in the hospital a week later with no white blood cells and another bout of pneumonia.

But even the worst things come with a blessing: there she was again. My angel. The most beautiful doctor in the world.

With her musical voice and her soft hands and her glorious smile. And that passion for her work that made her literally yell at me, threatening *to kill me* if I dared to die on her.

For a while she became a surreal fairy in my mind, too ethereal to be touched.

Until that day, shortly after my third admission, when she showed up to rounds wearing not scrubs, but instead that curve-hugging red dress that made her look like an old-Hollywood goddess.

Something sprang inside me—or rather from the southern parts of me. I was shocked to realize that, in spite of the recent threats of multi-organ failure, there was *a particular organ of mine* that was working *just fine* and had very clear wishes for Dr. Love.

Was that the third cycle of chemo kicking in? Or the blood cells finally coming back?

Ever since, every time I saw her all I could think about was what could be hiding under those scrubs. That's the secret of how I could guess when my blood counts were coming back up: I'd start having erotic dreams about her again.

I spent my time at home between admissions fantasizing about her. I knew it was ridiculous and she would never look twice at the disfigured being I'd become the past

several months— not only hairless and eyebrow-less, but also feature-less. I knew she was engaged to some rich lawyer and about to get married. But I cut myself some slack. A survival instinct told me that, unless I had some illusion to hold on to, I was not going to make it.

Steve and Jay knew, and I was thankful that they took it with humor. Since then, joking with Jay about my unrequited crush on Dr. Love—and other less classy descriptions of my drooling for her—became my biggest entertainment during sleepless nights.

Treatment didn't get easier with time, but I learned what to expect. I got used to the steroid high making me ravenous and making me feel unstoppable—followed by a crash after chemo, leaving me feeling like I'd been run over by a steamroller. I became an expert in nausea medication and monitoring my temperature; I didn't even have to call Dr. Greene anymore to know when to go to the ER. The fact that my counts kept dropping in spite of the painful growth factor injections didn't seem to slow down Dr. Greene—the Rambo of oncology. He was determined to beat the crap out of this cancer, no matter if it meant he had to beat the crap out of me.

I was back in the hospital a dozen times, as even the slightest cough sent doctors who knew my history into panic. And each time I was there, no matter how foolish or serious the reason for the admission, the admitting doctor always had to consult the pulmonary team. I crossed his fingers every time, wishing and hoping *she* happened to be covering for Dr. McDevitt. God had mercy on me, and most of the times, she was.

Every single time she entered my room, jokingly rolling her eyes and saying, “Please! Not you again!” The place would instantly fill with light, and my load would feel much easier to carry. I made it a point to make her visit pleasant and get her to laugh. And I gave myself permission to imagine she loved those visits as much as I did—who cared if my insurance company was paying her for them.

The day I learned my plan had worked and her wedding had been cancelled, I was more scared than relieved. Suddenly, the dream I'd been indulging myself with was— at



least in theory— no longer impossible. The idea of working on winning her over was daunting, and made me realize more clearly than ever how delusional I'd been to want her.

After I mailed her that picture I'd promised her—the picture of us together the day of my last discharge, I never dared to contact her again. I could have if I'd wanted to; I knew where to find her. But I was paralyzed by the fear of discovering that I'd imagined our connection all along, and all I was for her was just another patient.

And it was better like that. I assumed her mission in my life was completed. She had saved my life and kept me going, like a carrot on a stick, until my treatment was completed. I could not be so greedy as to want more from her.

#### 4. My Favorite Patient (Ethan's last hospital admission)

When Dr. Emery Love saw the next name on her list of patients, her stomach clenched. A flash of joy inside her overlapped with a pang of fear.

Ethan Cadman. The strongest hero she'd ever met and, at the same time, a fragile glass vase she'd been carrying around in her shaky hands for months, terrified of seeing it drop and shatter.

What terrible complication of chemotherapy brought him back to her ICU this time?

Surrounded by a small crowd of nurses and ancillary staff during rounds, Emery didn't have much time to ruminate on her thoughts. She braced herself for a repetition of the image of him that was still burned into her memory: unconscious, his frail body attached to monitors and the ventilator. Inhaling deeply, she straightened the white coat she wore over her mint-colored scrubs and stepped into the small ICU room.

When she found Ethan awake, sitting on the narrow bed and talking on his cell, an avalanche of relief hit her.

*Thank you, God!* She had no doubt that what had kept him alive for the past six months had been ten percent medical skills and ninety percent her prayers.

Following their usual routine, she looked up at the ceiling and grunted with mock annoyance. “Please! Not *you* again!” The twitch in her lips urging to curve revealed her joking intent.

The young, bald man’s ghostly pale face lit up. He disconnected his call. “Yes, Dr. Love, I can’t keep out of the hospital for long! I miss the tasteless Jell-O and the nurses waking me up every hour.”

She clicked her tongue repeatedly and shook her head. “I’m starting to suspect you time your admissions to make sure they happen when I’m on call.”

He winked. “You got me! I have informants texting me updates on the call schedule. I hold on to my white blood cells and don’t let them drop until it’s your turn to round.” His deep blue eyes twinkled. “I can’t pass up the chance to see the most beautiful doctor in this hospital.”

Emery crossed her arms narrowing her green eyes further. “You’re my hero, Ethan. You’re fighting lymphoma, flattened by chemo and walking around with half the blood of an average human—yet you *still* have the stamina to flirt?”

He gave her his signature blinding smile—the one that made the recipient forget about the ashy color of his skin. “I have to give my best effort now, before you put me on the ventilator again, Dr. Love. It’s hard enough to charm a lady when you’ve lost forty pounds and all your hair—but when you put the tube in my mouth and tape all over my face, that definitely ruins my looks.”

She shook her head, suppressing a chuckle. Ethan had certainly seen better days, but beyond the aftermath of six months of intense chemotherapy, Emery could tell he’d been quite an attractive man. His blue eyes held a lively spark in that compensated for the blurring of the facial features caused by months of high-dose steroid treatments. But even more than his appearance, he had an air of self-confidence around the female ICU staff that spoke of a man who’d once been used to tons of women’s attention.

Emery turned to the laptop on wheels the nurse behind her had been pushing around. “Let’s see why you’re here today.” It was their wordless agreement that, no matter how sick he was or how dangerous the reason for his admission, they’d joke about it and minimize it. “Febrile neutropenia again? But that’s nothing for you! That’s your *good day!*”

He rolled his eyes. “I know! I can probably treat myself by now.” He snapped his fingers and gave his voice a dramatic tone. “Start me on piperacillin, vancomycin and filgrastim. *Stat!*”

She chuckled at the accuracy of his prescription. Ethan’s work had nothing to do with medicine—it was something in real estate, if she remembered right—but he found solace for his powerless situation by constantly keeping notes and blurting out mouthfuls of medical terms. “You look too good to be in the ICU. How come you’re not on the oncology floor instead?”

He made a dismissive wave. “My blood pressure was low in the ER and the doctor panicked. Just because I went into septic shock once or twice before, they always think I’m going to do it again.”

She glanced at his labs and her chest tightened. No wonder the ER doctor was scared. His labs suggested he was on early metabolic acidosis—a potential sign of poor tissue oxygenation, heralding shock. Was he about to crash on her again?

*Please, stay with me, Ethan. You’re almost done with treatment, you can’t die on me now.*

As her eyes rushed through the electronic records, verifying that the admitting doctor had taken all the right steps—blood cultures, antibiotics, ID consult, IV fluids—she forced herself to calm down. She couldn’t allow her face to show any fear. Ethan was alive and in remission thanks to his unbeatable positive attitude. No matter how grim things were, she had to do everything in her power to help him keep it.

She turned to the tall, brawny male nurse next to her. “Steve, we don’t have a lactic acid level back yet?”

Steve shook his shaven head. “The lab got the order but not the sample. The ER must’ve forgotten to draw it or lost it.”

“Please get one stat and also an ABG.”

Ethan groaned. “I hate the arterial blood gases! Do we really need them?”

Approaching the bed, she started her physical examination by looking in his eyes with a pocket flashlight and teased, “Ethan, you’ve had two bone marrow biopsies and a bunch of spinal taps since I met you. Are you *seriously* going to complain about a needle stick?”

“At least for the bone marrow and the spinal taps the IR guys put me to sleep,” he mumbled.

She looked in his throat with the flashlight, then felt the glands around his neck while asking him questions about symptoms, rushing through her review of systems.

“Any sore throat, trouble swallowing, cough, trouble breathing...”

His answer was always no. Ethan refused to complain no matter how sick he felt. He bragged that he could talk himself out of anything, from the chemotherapy-induced nausea to the bone pain after growth factor injections, by denying the symptoms. She thought for the hundredth time that he put to shame all the whiners and hypochondriacs of the world—starting with her fiancé Ken. Ethan was such a refreshing breath of air in the ICU, where almost every other patient was a depressing, hopeless case.

While asking him the questions, she rushed through most of the physical exam, leaving the auscultation for last, so he could talk until the end. As a pulmonary specialist, she took extra time listening to his lungs.

When she was done, she took off the stethoscope and hung it around her neck. “Well, Ethan, your blood pressure is better after the IV fluids, but we’ll watch you here for a little longer before sending you to a regular floor. You know the routine; your neutrophil count has to be above five hundred before we even talk about letting you go home.”

He nodded. “It’s going to take a few days. I can tell.”

Emery couldn’t help smiling. Ethan claimed to be so in touch with his body that he could feel when the blood counts were coming up. The freaky part was that he was usually right.

Emery went over the rest of the labs and x-rays and gave a few more orders. The team was wrapping up and moving to the next patient’s room when Ethan called out.

“Hey, doc!”

She turned around. “Oh, sorry. Do you have any questions?”

There was a short silence. Ethan looked at her so intently it almost gave her a chill.

“Are you doing alright, Dr. Love? You seem a little down today.”

Sometimes Ethan’s intuition scared Emery.

The truth was that she was putting on an act that day to smile at the patients. She'd had a horrible fight with Ken the night before. She'd considered breaking their engagement more than once, but with the wedding date only weeks away—and her biological clock screaming at her—she couldn't afford to indulge in cold feet.

The rest of the staff had already exited the room and they were alone. Ethan kept looking in her eyes. The kindness and warmth of that brave old soul enveloped her, inviting her to open up. Gosh! Here was a man fighting for his life against a lethal cancer with weapons that were beating him up as much as the cancer itself—and he was worrying *about her*? She felt a clamp in her throat. For a moment, she felt like letting the tears flow.

But she couldn't.

She had no doubt that the survivor in front of her, whom she admired and respected deeply, had invaluable wisdom and solace to offer to her wounded soul. But sharing anything about her personal life would be crossing the lines of appropriateness between patient and doctor. The roles were clearly defined. She was there to take care of *him*, not the other way around.

She shrugged. "I'm fine. Just the usual stuff, you know. Too much stress at work...plain life."

He nodded. But something in his expression hinted he knew she lied. Respectful of the boundaries of their roles, he didn't press the issue.

He smiled weakly. "If you ever need a dose of *perspective*, just let me know."

Emery laughed. She knew he was changing the strategy to humor.

Having overheard the last sentence, Steve the nurse rushed back in to the room. "Wait! I want my dose of perspective. I dig those!"

Ethan's smile widened to a grin. He clapped his hands once and held both palms up, flexing and extending the fingers. "Bring it up, big guy!"

Steve lifted a finger. "I just found out that my stupid credit card company has been hitting me with hidden charges and raised my interest rate without me knowing it. It cost me hundreds of dollars on my bill."

Ethan scoffed. "You want to talk about credit card bills? After six months of vacations in this *luxury hotel*—" he moved his hand around him, indicating the ICU

room, “—my out-of-pocket hospital bills are so large I’m going to need to sell my organs to get out of debt. I actually tried! I went to *sell-your-organs-on-the-black-market-dot-com* and tried to sell a kidney, a cornea and half my liver.” He rolled his eyes. “Nobody wants them! Just because I went into multi-organ failure a time or two they say my organs aren’t good enough for them!”

Emery and Steve laughed. She resisted the temptation to be the buzzkill and remind them that no transplant recipient in the world would ever take an organ from a donor with history of cancer. A few other members of the staff were rushing back in to take part in the comedy improv routine.

Steve continued. “An a-hole policeman gave me a ticket for driving five miles over the speed limit. Five freaking miles!”

Ethan groaned. “I wish I got a speeding ticket! *That would mean I’m driving!* My neurotic neurologist refuses to clear me for that.” He rolled his eyes, then fake-sobbed. “The closest thing to driving I’ve done in months is sit on a stretcher while they transport me to x-rays, and twirl the bedpan in my hands, pretending it’s a steering wheel.”

The staff laughed.

Steve charged again. “My girlfriend dumped me last month and I haven’t gotten any action since.”

Ethan grunted. “The closest thing to action *I*’ve had in the past six months is a nurse shoving a urinary catheter down my—”

“Whoa, whoa!” Emery waved her hands while laughing. “I think we all get it, Ethan. Compared to you, we should *not* complain.”

He joined his hands up in a victory gesture. “I’m the ultimate winner of the suckiest-life award! ”

The whole staff mock-cheered. In the middle of the laughter, Emery wanted to cry.

*He’s my hero.*

Why couldn’t she be more like Ethan? Strong and resilient, able to laugh at himself and joke about his worst tragedies. Her mother’s daughter, Emery’d spent her life feeding on small drama. Facing an iron-strong survivor like him made her feel ashamed of herself.

His deep blue eyes met hers again across the room and a strange flutter overtook her heart. She reprimanded herself and looked away. He was her patient. He was her ultimate inspirational story. She could never allow herself to see him as more than that.

“Wait, doc!” he called her out again before she walked out. As usual, he seemed reluctant to let her go.

“Do you have any questions?” she repeated, in a hurry to get back to her rounds.

A hint of eagerness flashed in his expression; his voice sounded tentative and apologetic. “You forgot your line.” He fluttered his uneven eyelashes, giving her the begging puppy eyes she was now familiar with.

Silence fell between them. Emery wasn’t in the mood to perform their little banter routine today. And she acknowledged that sometimes they pushed the physician-doctor boundary.

But she would do anything to make Ethan smile—and he knew it.

With a theatrical gasp and mock-indignation, she recited her lines. “Ethan! Do you have any idea how hard I’ve worked to keep you alive?” Flipping her long auburn hair, she put a hand on her hip, squared her shoulders and stamped a foot on the floor. *“If you die now, I’m going to kill you!”*

Ethan burst into laughter—that clear and beautiful laugh she relished so much because it was an unquestionable sign that he was doing better.

Yes. She was blurring the lines of doctor and patient. But if that made Ethan forget about his struggle for a moment and smile like that, she’d gladly bend the rules.

##### 5. The day of the picture: Ethan’s last discharge.

“Dr. Love! Would you like to sign the card?”

Sharon, the young nurse, interrupted Emery in the ICU physician’s workroom as she reviewed the records of the patient she’d just admitted.

“Who is the card for this time?” Emery asked. There always seemed to be a birthday or someone’s milestone going on in that darn ICU. Maybe the nurses’ way to

cope with stress was making up excuses to have cake.

Sharon beamed. “It’s for Ethan! The oncology nurses are wheeling him here to say goodbye before he’s discharged. He’s done with chemo, so we don’t expect him to come back.”

Emery opened the card, which was nearly filled with signatures and messages.

“I’ll miss you, Ethan. You were such an inspiration to me.”

“Your words that day gave me my strength back.”

“Thank you for all you taught me. I’ll miss your daily dose of perspective.”

The card was so full of loving messages she had trouble finding an empty space to write. Knowing she was guilty of the doctor’s handwriting syndrome, she was extra careful to make it legible.

“Dear Ethan: We all love you. We’ll all miss you. *Please never come back.*”

She added a smiley face. It was a joke, but it was also true. He was in remission now. If they ever saw him back in that ICU, it would mean something had gone terribly wrong.

“He’s coming! Everybody get ready!”

Emery found herself pushed and dragged by the ICU staff members into the break room. She was usually too busy to socialize with them, and they seemed ecstatic to have her take part in the celebration. Emery didn’t want to be the buzz killer, but she wondered how safe it was to leave the unit under-supervised.

Balloons, garlands and ribbons decorated the break room. A red plastic tablecloth covered the table and, on top of it sat a cake— of course, they had to get cake.

When Amy, the oncology charge nurse, entered the room pushing Ethan in the wheelchair, the whole staff cheered and clapped.



Emery watched from the corner of the room as a line formed to greet him. After a dozen hugs and thank-yous, Ethan spoke. “Thank you, guys! You’re the best!”

“So how does it feel to be done with treatment, man?” Steve asked while offering Ethan a slice of cake.

Ethan rejected the cake offer with a wave of his hand. “I’m not sure. After so long in chemo I’m afraid of going into withdrawal without it or something. I’ll be like a junkie, running around...” He yelled: “ *I need my fix of cyclophosphamide and Adriamycin!*”

The staff laughed.

Ethan rubbed his hands. “And I can’t wait to start radiation in a few weeks. Maybe it will make me glow in the dark!”

Emery walked around his wheelchair to stand in front him. “Ethan, you know radiation doesn’t make you glow, don’t you?”

The flash of joy that crossed his face when he saw her warmed up her heart. “Dr. Love! You’re here!”

She stopped herself before shaking his hand and reached for the hand sanitizer dispenser on the wall. She used a generous amount to clean her hands, then shook them to dry them.

Ethan smiled. “You know, Doc, you don’t have to put yourself inside an autoclave machine before touching me anymore. My counts are back up.”

“Never too cautious.” She winked at him and extended her hand.

He held it, while keeping eye contact. “Don’t worry; I’ve taken so many antibiotics my hands have the power to disinfect everything I touch.”

She laughed.

Keeping his hands a few inches away from her, he moved them on the air up and down her body. “See? The beam shoots out a foot away. I’m sterilizing your white coat as we speak.”

She chuckled again. Gosh, she was really going to miss him.

Steve intervened. “Be careful, Dr. Love. If I were you I wouldn’t let this guy close.”

Ethan frowned and seemed to shoot Steve a warning look.

Steve continued: “He can *accidentally* grab your boob and blame it on the numb hands from the chemo induced neuropathy.”

Ethan rolled his eyes. “Please, Steve, I apologized a hundred times! I told you it was an accident when I grabbed your butt-cheek.”

The staff guffawed as Steve covered his behind with his hands while shooting Ethan a funny, offended look. Gosh those two were a riot!

“Watch your language, sir!” she joked to Ethan.

Steve scoffed. “Don’t let his clean boy looks fool you, doc! This guy is shameless as a dog! And he’s evil!”

“Steve, don’t say that!” Emery reprimanded him.

At the same time, Ethan snorted. “Tell me something new!”

Besides his smile, Ethan’s eyes were sad when he turned to her. “Doc, life’s too short to waste time worrying about what other people think of you.”

His gaze held her captive and Emery froze. Did he know? Was he inviting her to stop fearing the scandal? Had Ethan read her mind and seen her recent secret struggles about cancelling her wedding?

Amy’s voice interrupted Emery’s thoughts. “Sorry. Time to take Ethan back to the

oncology floor so he can be discharged.”

“Wait! Wait!” Ethan searched around him on the wheelchair and found a cell phone, extending it to Steve. “Would you please take a picture of the two of us?” He turned to Emery. “I promise I’ll print it out and mail a copy to your office.”

Emery kneeled next to Ethan’s wheelchair, wrapped him with one arm, and smiled for the picture. While posing in that half embrace, the memory of their evening on the hospital rooftop returned, and she felt like crying without knowing why.

*I’m going to miss you so much, Ethan.*

But she pushed away the thought and reprimanded herself.

#### 6. The full Ethan’s Comedy Show.

*(At the Music and Comedy Fundraiser night at Joe’s Blues Club Ethan performs a stand up comedy routine with Jay and Steve while Emery and her friends watch from their table among the audience)*

Emery had witnessed Ethan’s sense of humor many times before, but never like this. He had a way of carrying himself that enhanced the experience. The right pause at the right moment. The perfect facial expression. The perfect irreverent gesture and occasional sprinkle of a cuss word. She found herself laughing very often and very loud.

His best weapon as a comedian was interspersing the jokes with deep, heart-wrenching talk about life lessons learned during his battle with cancer— moving the audience to tears, and giving the comedy more impact when it returned. Between the jokes and serious talk, he would fake a “chemo-brain attack,” letting his expression turn blank and diverting to a completely unrelated topic.

“Are you familiar with the medical term neutropenia?” Ethan asked the public, his eyes glassy. “It means you have too few neutrophils—the type of white blood cells that

fight infections. It's a dangerous side effect of chemo and I was admitted several times because of it." He sighed deeply and faked relief. "I was glad to learn what that word meant. I kept hearing the doctors say I had neutropenia and wondering, 'Does that mean I have a *neutral penis*'?"

Steve snapped his fingers at Ethan's face. "Focus, Ethan! The chemo brain got you again!"

Ethan shuddered. "Sorry, my bad. What were we talking about?"

"We were talking about the lessons you learned during chemo," Jay replied.

Ethan tapped his forehead. "Oh, yes! That's right!" He took the microphone back from the stand and held it as he paced around the raised platform. "One could argue that my life during chemo was hell—and it sure felt it like it a big chunk of the time." His expression turned serious. "But even in the midst of that suffering, there was a saving grace: all the wonderful people who helped me along the way. At the end the predominant feeling when I recall the experience is *gratitude*."

"Oh my God, he's so sweet!" Joy elbowed Emery. "He's so deep and wise. I can't believe you haven't fallen at his feet already,"

*I can't believe it either.*

Ethan continued, "There were people I didn't even know who were praying for me. There were friends coming to visit me in the hospital." He pointed at Jay. "This guy here, for example, used to sleep over in my hospital room, entertaining me with jokes all night to distract me from worrisome thoughts." He erased his smile. "I kept wondering, 'Doesn't he have a life? Why doesn't he ever go home?' I tried to kick him out a dozen times, but he wouldn't take a hint!"

The audience laughed, while Jay faked-sobbed and pretended to wipe a tear from his eyes. "I love you too, man!"

"Now seriously." Ethan walked to Jay and wrapped an arm around his shoulders.

“When a friend puts his life on hold for you because you’re sick, and hangs around so much that *you* get sick of *him*—that’s loyalty.”

Jay continued pretending to cry. “Not the time to confess I was just hanging around hoping he’d share his prescription brownies.”

The audience guffawed again and Ethan continued. “There were also wonderful nurses.” He pointed at Steve, then his eyes searched for Emery in the crowd. “And some amazing doctors who made the journey bearable.” He paced the platform with a serious expression. “Like my oncologist, Dr. Greene, who couldn’t join us tonight because he’s at the cemetery, digging corpses out of their graves to give them chemo.”

Giggling, Fe touched Emery’s hand. “Ethan is just so funny.”

*I know.*

He returned the microphone to the stand. “Talk about going above and beyond the job description, there was a doctor who used to come visit me at the oncology floor when she was off duty.” His eyes returned to Emery. “One night, she got me a pass off the floor, and wheeled me in my chair to the hospital rooftop, so I could be outdoors and see the stars for at least a few minutes.”

Moans and gasps of awe sounded in the audience. Emery was moved, remembering that night.

He smiled, at her. “That’s what I call a moment of perfect bliss within what should’ve been the worst time of my life. The stars above us; the city underneath us; the wind on my face...”

Emery smiled back. *I know exactly what you mean.*

“And tonight I want to honor that doctor.” He extended his hand in her direction. “Dr. Emery Love, would you please join me on the stage?”

Emery cringed. *Please no.* She hated being in the spotlight—something she

definitely didn't inherit from her mother.

She tried to refuse by shaking her head and begging with her eyes, but the audience clapped and chanted her name, demanding she show her face.

Dreading it, she walked toward him and hoped a wave would satisfy the audience. Ethan helped her up and led her by the arm to center stage. "Can you believe this gorgeous woman was my doctor? Isn't she beautiful?"

The crowd clapped and hooted, making Emery feel self-conscious.

He continued. "How can you want to get better when you have a doctor who looks like this? I confess I kept putting myself in the hospital just to see her."

"Aaaww!" The audience answered, encouraged by Steve.

"No, I'm serious!" Ethan insisted. "I waited until my white blood cells got at the lowest, and then I did anything I could to get an infection and spike a fever, so they'd admit me. Once, I did snow angels on the floor of a gas station restroom. And another time, I licked the handle of a Wal-Mart grocery cart."

"Eeeeww!" Steve said, prompting the audience to join too.

"And every time the nurses came to take my vitals, I would hold my breath for as long as I could until the thingy they put on my finger marked that my oxygen was low—to make sure they consulted Dr. Love to come check my lungs." He grinned. "I passed out twelve times and lost a quarter of my brain cells from low oxygen—but it was all worth it."

The audience was having a blast. Emery couldn't wait until this part of the show was over and she could stop being in the spotlight. But he kept holding her hand, preventing her from leaving.

"I used to count the hours until she came to do her rounds, wearing her green

scrubs. I have to confess I developed a fetish about scrubs.” A dreamy expression transformed his face. “She used to do her physical exam, feeling the glands in my neck, and I’d be like—” His eyes rolled back in fake pleasure. “Yeah, baby!”

Emery blushed deeper as the audience roared.

“One time she gave me a *testicular exam*...” He grinned. “It was the happiest day of my life.”

*What is he doing?* That wasn’t even true, yet the audience was roaring in laughter.

“And every single time she came to see me after that, I just prayed.” He clasped his hands together, still keeping hers captive. “Please, please, please do it again!” He faked a disappointed expression. “But she never did; she must’ve not liked what she found down there.” He lifted one eyebrow and tilted his head. “Which would explain why she now refuses to date me.”

The audience was dying laughing and Emery wanted to disappear.

He continued. “Well... I guess you figured out by now that I had a big crush on this doctor. I nicknamed her ‘the future mother of my children.’” He grimaced. “Which is ironic because the only time I had a sperm test it showed nothing but little skulls and crossbones.”

Wincing inwardly, Emery tried to free her hand, but he tightened his grip.

“And speaking of that, let’s talk about the day I had to give that sperm sample.”

*That’s it.* Emery jerked her hand free and darted off the stage. She swung by her table to pick up her purse and, without saying goodbye to her friends, she rushed out of the club.

## 7. Deleted Mini-Scene: Emery and Ethan watch remodeling shows together .

Days when delayed permits or pending inspections halted construction at the Survivors Lounge, they would watch the HGTV channel, looking for remodeling ideas. She called it indulging in “construction soap opera.”

“I love the drama of unexpected discoveries during construction.” She faked a dramatic gasp and clasped her heart. “Oh no! We found asbestos piping!” She waved her arms in the air. “Oh no! There’s mold!” She grabbed chunks of her hair. “Oh no! the electric needs updating and we risk going over budget!” Chuckling, she released her hair and got comfortable in the couch. “You would think that the couples in the show must’ve watched previous episodes and know that’s a probability. But still, they act like this is the first time in history such a thing has happened and the world is coming to an end!”

“But that’s human nature,” Ethan replied, reclining on the couch with his feet up on the coffee table. “We always think ‘*That* may happen to other people, but never to *me*.’ Take diseases, for example. Before my diagnosis, there were people with cancer around me all the time. Sometimes they were invisible to me, sometimes I knew they were there, but I clung to some defense mechanism that made me think ‘that would never happen to me.’”

She studied his profile against the bluish walls, and nodded slowly. “Shawn told me something similar once about having a child with special needs.”

He agreed. “After my diagnosis, and after I got over the first phases of shock and outrage, I realized how absurd my anger was. Instead of asking, ‘Why me?’ I had to ask, ‘Why *not* me?’ I’m not special, or different from anyone else. Why did I ever think I should be spared?”

“You must be a very special soul to say something like that,” she replied, seriously impressed. “If I had been the one diagnosed and going through everything you went through, I know I would’ve been angry at the world.”



He shrugged and repeated. “Why *not* me? About one point seven million people were diagnosed with cancer the year of my diagnosis just in this country. Can you believe that? That’s only counting new cases, not people diagnosed in years prior. Who am I to think I had to be spared?”

8. Deleted Scene: The day Ethan brought Emery to meet Joe Wilkins and his family. *(This scene was originally set right before Ethan showed Emery the dilapidated beach house he’d just purchased)*

Ethan’s friend Joe was the sweetest soul Emery had met in a long time. He had an amazing spirit and an incredible sense of humor despite living his life in a wheelchair. Emery learned he was the owner of the Blues Club where they’d held the fundraiser. Joe’s wife had a sassy personality and a full figure that reminded Emery of her Jamaican aunt. Their daughter Harmony, currently the Blues Club manager, possessed an uncommon mix of strength and wisdom beyond her years that one might only find in someone whose family has risen above tragedy.

They seemed to love Ethan, and openly expressed their gratitude because he’d bought the Blues Club and gifted it to Joe years back—so he could keep making a living after the accident that caused his paralysis. Later on, Ethan explained it was a small attempt to compensate Joe for his loss. Ethan’s former business partner Mel had been indirectly responsible for Joe’s injury. Mel had hired a gang to scare him and convince him to move out of his building—and something had gone horribly wrong.

After the pleasant visit, Ethan took Emery for a walk on the beach.

“So a stray bullet severed his spine?” she asked. Her plans to break up with Ethan had long been pushed to the background.

Ethan nodded. “Talk about dumb luck! Joe is my biggest inspiration when I dare to complain about my life.”

As they strolled together holding hands, he continued, “Joe was fifty when that happened. Then when he learned about my illness later on and came to offer his support, he called himself lucky because he got to have almost two decades of good health more than I did.” He chuckled. “And I think *I* am the lucky one, because at least I got a condition that could be cured.” He tightened the grip on her hand and kept walking. “We never knew where my cancer came from. I never smoked, I thought I had a healthy lifestyle, my oncologist tested me for all cancer genes and they all came back negative. Dr. Greene said once that, in my case, getting cancer was like being hit by a stray bullet—and of course I immediately thought about Joe. He’s a giant even better than me, because on top of accepting his fate, he also had to forgive the man who hurt him. At least cancer was not something anybody did to me—my body did it by itself.”

After a moment in silence, processing his words, Emery asked, “Is that why your partner Mel disappeared?”

He half shrugged. “I’ve heard several versions. Some people say the gang leader was seeking revenge against Mel because several of his men were arrested after the operation that hurt Joe. Others assume that Mel owed the gang more money than he could pay and they turned against him. Nobody knows for sure.” He stopped. “Well, strike that. I’ve always suspected Mercy knows more than she’s told me. But she’d rather get herself killed than tell anybody what she knows. She still cares for Mel, and has never given up hope he’ll mend his ways.”

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*What did really happen to Mel? What secrets does Mercy know? Stay tuned for the next story in the series, tentatively entitled: “Marvelous Mercy.”*