

NEW YORK TIMES BEST-SELLING AUTHOR

TED DEKKER

— & ERIN HEALY —

She steals more than your heart

Kiss

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Prologue

The view from my therapist's window is unremarkable. Four stories down, the parking lot blacktop ripples under waves of Texas's blazing summer heat. I stand here facing the view because it's easier to look at than the two men in the office behind me. There is dear Dr. Ayers, the wisest old soul I have ever met. He might be eighty, judging by that wrinkled cocoa skin and his head of hair whiter than cotton, but he's agile as a fifty-year-old. My beloved brother, Rudy, is also here. He has kept me tethered to my sanity in ways that should earn him sainthood.

Rudy comes to these sessions because he knows I need him to.

I come—have been coming for weeks now—because I am trying to put the past behind me.

But today I am here because tonight I will see my father for the first time in five months. My encounters with Landon are hard enough in the best of circumstances. They always end the same, with flaring tempers and harsh words and fresh wounds. But tonight, I must confront Landon. Not about my past, but about his future.

Yes, I call my father by his first name. The distance it creates between us helps to dull my pain.

“So your dilemma,” Dr. Ayers says to my back, “is that you fear the consequences of confronting him could be worse than the consequences of staying silent.”

I nod at the pane of glass. “Of course, I'd rather avoid everything. Even Rudy thinks I should wait until I know . . . more. But if I'm right, and I don't speak up now . . .” Why am I here? I have made a mountain out of a molehill and am wasting everyone's time. I should drop this. “Landon probably won't even listen to me. Not the way he listens to you, Rude.”

“He listens to you too,” Rudy says. Always looking for the positive spin.

The truth is, Landon does not listen to me. But Rudy, who is deputy campaign manager of Senator Landon McAllister's bid for the United States presidency, is following in the man's footsteps and so has his undivided attention. Also, Rudy doesn't look a thing like our mother, as I do. Mama was a Guatemalan beauty with a *café-au-lait* complexion. I have had her personality and her looks since the day my head of thick black hair came in. Even today, I wear my hair short and windblown, the way she did. I have her leggy height, her long stride, her laugh.

Against all odds, our father's recessive Irish genes won the genetic dispute over Rudy. As for me, I have always believed it is painful for my father to look at me.

“And I don't think she should gloss over this,” Rudy says to the therapist. “I think Shauna should step very carefully. Avoid burning more bridges with Dad, if it can be helped. If she's right, God help us all.”

I finally turn to look at my brother. “It’s not my goal to burn anything, Rudy, even though I’ll never have what you have with Landon.” This truth pains me more than the truth of what I’ve learned. And what I’ve learned, partial though it may be, is monstrous.

The tension headache that has started at the top of my spine spreads its fingers over the back of my head. The sickness I feel right now might come from what I suspect, or it might be rooted in my certainty that he will reject me again tonight.

Yes, I’m pretty sure that I am nauseated by the prospect of another rejection.

I’ll never forget the first time my father turned his back on me, though the second time was more painful, and though all the times since have clumped together in a unified throbbing heartache.

Rudy was the unwitting cause of Landon’s first abandonment. My brother came into the world when I was seven, and our mother died nineteen minutes after his birth. I remember not being able to breathe when I heard she was gone. I honestly thought that I might die those first few hours, my mother and I both dead in the same day all because of this baby boy.

My father said it was God’s fault, though he seemed to blame Mama’s passing on me. I guess I was the more tangible target.

After Mama’s doctor delivered the crushing news, my father turned away mumbling something about my uncle and carried Rudy out of the hospital without me. Uncle Trent found me two hours later, hiding behind a chair in the waiting room.

Truth not only hurts, it shames: at the time, I wished Rudy were dead. The day I stood at the head of Mama’s casket, I wondered what would happen to Rudy if I covered his squalling face tight with that silky blue blanket. Wishing that the balance of the universe might require Mama to come back.

It took just one night for me to understand that Rudy’s heart had been broken into more pieces than my own. The tears he cried for Mama came from some well that would not dry up. That night I fed him a bottle of warm milk and took him into my bed, promising to keep Mama’s memory alive in this little boy who’d never met her.

I’m twenty-eight now, and I have long since realized that the wounds of rejection do not heal with time. They reopen at the lightest touch, as deep as the first time they were inflicted. The pain is as real as flash floods in the wet season here in Austin, overwhelming and unstoppable.

The pain, even when I can successfully numb it, has kept me at a distance from people and God. Now and then I consider the irony of this: how it came to be that my mother’s God, who once seemed so real and comforting to me, managed to die when she did.

So many deaths in one night.

And here I am, expecting yet another tonight. The death of hope. For most of my life, hatred of my father and hope of gaining his affection have lived in stressful coexistence behind my ribs.

I'm crying and didn't even notice I had started.

Dr. Ayers's voice is gentle. "Do you believe your father is culpable in this matter you are investigating?"

The question behind the question stabs at the tender spot in me that longs for Landon's love. *Do you believe your father is guilty of anything more than hurting you? Do you care about truth or only about the past?*

Somehow I care about both. Is that possible?

"I believe he is capable. More than that . . ." I sniff. "I don't know yet. Very soon, though, I will. Very soon."

Dr. Ayers leans back in his leather chair and folds his wrinkled hands across his slender stomach.

"Tell me: what do you want this confrontation to do for you?"

Several possible answers rush me. I want to be wrong, in fact. I want Landon to tell me that none of what I suspect is true. I want my father to reassure me that I have nothing to worry about, that he is an upright man who would never do anything so foolish, so hurtful. Nothing like what he has done—

Rudy's eyes bore into the side of my head, and the truth of what I really want punches me in the stomach. I step to my chair and sit.

"I want to bring him down," I say before I think it through. "I want him to know what betrayal feels like. I want to get him back."

My tears turn into sobs. I can't help it. I can't stop.

Rudy places his hand on my knee. Not to urge me to stop bawling, but to remind me that he is by my side.

Hatred for my father did not become a part of my life until the second time he turned his back on me.

I was eleven. Patrice had been my stepmother for three days when she took over my upbringing, with Landon's permission. He claimed Rudy and she got me.

Her style of parenting, if it can be called that, involved locking me in closets and burning the scrapbooks my mother had made me and refusing to feed me for a day at a time. As I grew I quit trying to make sense of such behavior and simply became more defiant. She responded by graduating to more extreme measures. There was no hiding our animosity for each other.

I suspect I reminded her, too, of my mother.

When she turned brazen enough to beat and burn me, though, I broke down and told Landon. I showed him the triangular burns on the inside of my left arm, imprinted by Patrice's steam iron for my failure to pull my clean clothes out of the dryer before they wrinkled.

Landon handed me a tube of ointment and turned away, saying, "If you ever go to such lengths to lie about my wife again, I'll bandage those myself. And you won't like my touch."

My wife. He had always called Mama *my love*.

Dr. Ayers makes no attempt to calm me. He has said before that crying is the best balm. Eventually I fumble through my mind for the words to justify what I have said.

"If Landon pays for what he's done, I'll get closure."

"On what?" says Dr. Ayers.

"On my past."

He takes a few moments to respond. Rudy produces a tissue out of thin air and I try to compose myself.

"So you're saying that closing yourself off from your past is what you need in order to move on with your life."

There is more than an attempt at clarity in Dr. Ayers's tone—a challenge perhaps.

"Yes." I swipe at my nose with the tissue. "That's exactly what I'm saying. I want to put the past behind me."

"By inflicting on your father what he has inflicted on you. By betraying him, you said."

"No. By forcing him to remember me."

"Ah! I see. So when he remembers you, then you will have accomplished your goal and can forget your past."

His words fill me with confusion. The way he says it, I have this all wrong. But in my mind, my goal is—was—clear. Isn't that how it works? Deal with the past, get justice, make the pain go away?

"Something like that," I say.

Dr. Ayers nods as if he sees everything clearly now. He rises and comes around the desk, propping himself against the front of it and leaning toward me.

The doctor reaches out with an aging hand and touches my shoulder. "Would you mind if I gave you an alternative theory to consider?"

Honestly, I have no idea.

Dr. Ayers straightens. "It is possible that your plan will only root you more deeply in the pain of your past, not separate you from it."

My confusion mounts. “So how do you suggest I put my past behind me?”

“It is behind you, dear. And that’s where it will be forever. You can’t make it vanish—”

“But I want to. I believe I can.”

“By creating more pain? The mathematics of that isn’t logical.”

“I can’t just ignore it!”

“No, that’s true.”

“But you think I shouldn’t confront Landon.”

“Oh, I’m not making any judgment about what you should do, Shauna. I’m only talking about your motivations. What do you *really* want?”

“To *forget*. I want to forget every single, stinging moment that was inflicted on me by people who were supposed to *love* me. I want someone to take these memories away from me.”

Dr. Ayers wags a finger in my direction, smiling. “I felt that way once.”

I take a steadying breath.

“You know I used be a reverend before I began helping people here?” He gestures to the modest office. “Ministry of a different but no less valuable kind. Got thrown out of my pulpit by some folks who said they loved God but hated his black children. I spent a lot of years feeling the way you do now—that if I looked far and wide enough, I’d find a way to erase both the blight of my memory and the stink of people I held responsible for my pain.”

He leans forward again, encroaching on my space. “But I discovered something better. Shauna, your history is no less important to your survival than your ability to breathe. In the end, you can only determine whether to saturate your memories with pain or with perspective. Forgetting is not an option. I tell you the truth now: Pain was not God’s plan for this life. It is a reality, but it is not part of the plan.”

I exhale. “God and I aren’t exactly on speaking terms. Especially not about his plans for my life.”

“Pain or perspective, Shauna. That’s all that’s within your control.”

I drop my head into my hands, feeling more certain than ever that absolutely nothing is in my control.

* * *

In spite of Dr. Ayers’s warning, I decided to talk to Landon tonight. Regardless of the outcome—closure for me or more pain for him—I hoped the truth would count for something.

Instead, when the moment came, I tripped all over my words. Landon's larger than life and had the upper hand from the outset. Instead of staying on topic, I took offense at something he said. I can hardly remember now, something about a man's world, and when I tried to set him straight he cut me to the floor with a few harsh words.

So here I am once again, driving fast through the night on a rain-slicked road away from yet another argument with Landon. And as he has so many times before, Rudy has come along to calm my explosive temper. He is smiling slightly at my ranting. Sometimes I think he finds me entertaining.

The hum of tires kissing asphalt through water soothes my anxious heart. "I don't know why I let him roll over me like that, Rude."

"You handled yourself just fine. I thought you showed remarkable restraint."

"But not enough."

"Okay, not enough." Truth does not make Rudy flinch. My car follows a downward slope onto a bridge, pointing me east into Austin.

"Underneath it all, Dad worries about you, you know."

I look at Rudy. No, no I didn't know. Just as Rudy doesn't know about my scars from Patrice's iron. I've told Dr. Ayers, but not Rudy. He and Patrice get along.

"What does he worry about?" The relative unsafety of my little car? The condition of my heart?

My heart is even more mangled than the skin under my arms.

So why have I never stopped wishing? Wishing that Landon would only—

"Watch out!"

Rudy's cry comes at the same moment that glaring lights from another vehicle blind me. It all happens so quickly that I don't have time to think about swerving or stopping.

A horn is blaring, and voices are screaming, and then the terrible sound of metal smashing into metal.

Daddy . . .

This is the last plea for help that fills my mind before the world ends.

* * *

He shifted his cell phone to the opposite ear and stared at the hospital entrance through the windshield of his car. The parking lot lights were still on, though dawn had broken the horizon behind him.

"She was in surgery six hours," he said. "Internal bleeding."

“Where is she *now*?”

“Private room.”

“But still in a coma, correct?”

“Yes.” Ironical that Shauna McAllister had dodged death only to end up in a coma. “I can get to her easy enough now. She’ll be dead within the hour.”

“No. Change of plans. Our hands are being forced. I’ll explain later, but for now she stays alive.”

“She’s too big a risk to just—”

“What’s her prognosis?”

“Too early to tell. She could be in a coma for a day or for a year.”

“Or forever. Even if she comes out, she could have brain damage.”

“Yes, that’s possible.”

“So she stays alive for now. She’s not a threat as long as she’s unconscious.”

“And when she comes around?”

“With any luck, she’ll forget everything.”

“I don’t do business with luck.”

“You will today. Like I said, our hands are being forced in this. Her condition buys us time. I’ll call Dr. Carver; he’ll have options for us. If we have to change course, we do it later.”

“What if she remembers?”

“If she remembers, she dies.”

Chapter 1

Six Weeks Later

Nightmares of death by black water ticked off the hours of the deepest sleep Shauna McAllister had ever experienced. In an eternal loop, she choked and drowned and was somehow resuscitated, only to choke and drown again, and again, in an endless terror. Always the same fight, the same thrashing for air. Always the same intense agony for the same amount of time before the screen of her mind dimmed.

Then it would flicker back to life.

Merciless, exhausting.

Her stomach hurt with the penetration of a hundred slicing knives, cutting her enough to scrape and bleed and sting. The cold water was not a strong enough anesthetic.

She could not remember where she was or how she had come to be here.

Why wasn't her father with her? And where had Rudy gone?

The water closed over her head again. She considered welcoming death and letting her fatigue have its way. She was so tired.

Something touched her. A stable hand, gentle and helpful, grabbed her wrist. In that Herculean grip was all the strength she could not muster. And so it was that at the very moment she resigned herself to drowning, she sensed as she rose through the black waters that maybe she would not die today.

Shauna broke the surface, gasping and flopping like a snagged fish tossed onto the deck of a—

No, she was on a bed, some narrow thing that rattled when she moved. Her hands hit metal rails and she grabbed hold to avoid sliding back underwater, though some sixth sense told her there was no water. She started coughing and could not stop, as if the oxygen in this place would kill her just as quickly as liquid.

How did she get here?

Someone shoved a pillow under her shoulders. Someone was speaking. Several people were speaking at once, animated and urgent.

She opened her eyes and took her first full lungful of air.

A middle-aged woman in nurse's scrubs stood next to the bed, bright eyes wide and gap-toothed mouth slack. She hit an intercom button in the panel over the bed, punching it so hard the plastic speaker rattled.

Shauna was half aware of people spilling into the room.

"Dr. Siders," the woman said into the wall. She put a hand over her heart as if to prevent its escape. "We need you here now. She's awake!"

Still disoriented, Shauna lay at the center of the small gathering in the room. Through her mental haze, she locked onto tall doctor in a white lab coat as he moved to the head of her bed. The man was eighty percent limbs and twenty percent torso, long and wiry and strung taut.

"Hello, Shauna. You can hear me?"

She felt her chin dip a fraction of an inch.

He put his hand on her arm. “I’m Dr. Gary Siders. And you—well let’s just say you’re one very lucky girl. Without a doubt, the most unusual case I’ve had in here for a while.”

Where was *here*? Where was Rudy?

She tried to remember. Random images collided in her mind in a wreck that could not be construed as an explanation: shopping at an open-air market in Guatemala, congratulating a colleague at the CPA firm where she worked, stir-frying veggies in a wok at her downtown loft.

These stray events seemed disconnected from this white bed, this white room, these people dressed in white. She couldn’t remember, and the void was the most disconcerting piece of this white puzzle.

She saw a flash of color. Blue. A blue class ring on a long, angular hand that was supporting a man’s chin. A handsome man. He stood under the TV, arms crossed, and his worry-lined forehead tripped some wire in Shauna’s brain that said *friendly*. His brown eyes held hers and he smiled almost imperceptibly, hopefully.

Her mind held no recognition. But he was a relief to her senses, a warm, sympathetic object in an unfamiliar, cold room. She smiled back.

On the other side of the bed, her eyes landed on Patrice McAllister.

Shauna shivered involuntarily. How was it possible, after all these years, that the woman could make her feel afraid? Patrice wore her trademark navy blue pantsuit and deadpan expression. She had all of Diane Keaton’s good looks, but her heart was a stone.

The scar tissue under Shauna’s arm seemed to burn, as always when Patrice stared at her. Shauna looked for her father. No sign of him. No surprise there.

Instead, she saw Uncle Trent standing behind Patrice. A close-cropped layer of white hair covered his sun-spotted head. Trent rested his hand on Patrice’s shoulder as if forcing her to stay put. The laugh lines around his eyes eased Shauna’s fear.

In these beats of recognition, Shauna felt her body with new awareness, as if her senses had been on vacation and just returned: the stiffness of her limbs, the pain in her stomach, the hardness of her mattress, the discomfort of her itchy sheets. She wanted to get out of bed. Her muscles would not respond.

“Let’s sit you up.” The doctor reached the controls for the hospital bed, and she rose with a whirl. “Better?”

“Where is this?” Her vocal chords rasped.

“Hill Country Medical Center.”

She’d been in this hospital many times, but never as a patient. Behind him on a counter, old flowers wilted in dirty water. Other empty vases lined up behind these.

“How long?”

“This should only take about five minutes. We’ll schedule a complete neuropsychological evaluation when we know you’re up for it. That will take a day or two.”

“I mean, how long have I been here?”

He hesitated. “Six weeks.”

Six *weeks*?

“You’ve drifted in and out for several days, never fully awake.”

“I don’t remember any of that.”

“Not unusual.”

“What day is it?”

He checked his wristwatch. “October 14. Sunday. You came in September 1.”
September.

She tried to remember August.

Nothing. July.

Nothing. Farther.

Nothing.

She’d been here six weeks? Her mind didn’t want to connect with the idea of it, much less any specific memory of it.

He flashed a blinding light across her eyes and she winced. The stranger under the TV stepped to the bed and placed a warm hand on her blanketed foot. The gesture gave her courage. Who was this man? Someone she trusted, apparently.

“Follow my fingers,” Dr. Siders said. She focused on his sinewy hand, contemplating how so much time could have slipped by without her knowing it. Six weeks from—

From what?

She’d taken her trip to Guatemala. That was when, March?

He lifted the blanket and ran a fingernail along the sole of her other foot. Her reflexes snatched it out of his reach. “You have no respect for the Rancho Levels—if you move through those any faster I’ll have to discharge you this afternoon. The GCS score is useless. Apparently all you’re guilty of is a concussion. No TBI. The MRIs and CATs are clear, though they’re not the most reliable, considering you’re in a drug trial.”

She had no idea what he was talking about.

“Can you tell me who’s here in the room with us?” he asked her.

Shauna kept her eyes on the doctor. “My father’s wife, Patrice McAllister. And Uncle Trent—Trent Wilde, a family friend. He’s not actually my uncle.”

“And what does Mr. Wilde do?”

The answer came to her without her needing to search for it. This surprised her. “He’s the CEO of my father’s company. McAllister MediVista.”

“Where is that company located?”

“Houston.”

“Do you know who he is?” Dr. Siders gestured toward the man whose warm hand still rested on her foot.

She studied him again. High hairline. Color-coordinated waves and eyes. Dark brown sugar. Older than she was, maybe midthirties. Professional. He might be an athlete—a distance runner or a cyclist. As for who he was, she came up empty.

She shook her head. Patrice sighed and tapped her fingers on her crossed arms.

“You have no recollection of Wayne Spade?” the doctor asked. “I understand you two are well acquainted.”

“How well?”

Uncle Trent exchanged a glance with Wayne, who averted his eyes and shoved his hands into his pockets.

“Honey,” Trent said, “you and Wayne have been close for several months.”

Embarrassment settled over Shauna. “You don’t mean—”

“It’s okay, Shauna.” Wayne’s tone was careful, and his smile covered up what Shauna sensed was disappointment. She heard what he didn’t say: they had been more and he didn’t want the truth of it to hurt either one of them. “Take your time.”

How could she have forgotten someone so close to her? Distress filled her stomach.

“I’m sorry,” she whispered.

Dr. Siders turned back to her. “Wayne saved your life, my dear. He pulled you out of the water and performed CPR until the paramedics arrived.”

This man? He saved her life? What water?

The doctor went on. “Where do you live, Shauna?”

“Wha—? Um, Austin.”

“What is your father’s name?”

“Landon. McAllister.”

“And he is presently campaigning for the office of?”

“President,” she said. “Where is he?”

“California, I think. Our staff is in the process of contacting him about your status. Can you tell me the outcome of the primary elections in February?”

He won, of course, or else he wouldn’t still be campaigning. She had a few questions of her own, but the conversation was moving too quickly for her to articulate the bottom line. Why could she remember her father but not—what was his name? Wayne? Why could she remember last year but not this summer? She stood unbalanced at the edge of a yawning gap filled with nothing but anxiety.

“Can we move it along please?” Patrice asked.

Dr. Siders checked his notes. “Do you remember the accident?”

Wayne seemed to recover from the blow of Shauna’s forgetfulness. Touching her ankles, he said, “Is now the best time to bring all this up?”

“The—I was in an accident?”

“Oh, for crying out loud.” Patrice murmured.

Wayne frowned at her. “Mrs. McAllister, *please*.”

Shauna could not look at her stepmother, but she caught Uncle Trent’s eyes. He shook his head at Shauna. *Let it go*.

“Yes,” the doctor said to Shauna. “Do you remember it?”

Shauna looked at Wayne. “You were there? How did you . . . ?”

“He was following you home from my house,” Uncle Trent said.

“I don’t understand,” Shauna said.

“Dr. Siders,” Wayne said, “she’s so tired.”

“She’s been sleeping six weeks,” Patrice said, standing. “She can stay awake a few more minutes.”

“Patrice,” Trent said.

“No,” she snapped. “Enough of this melodrama. We deserve to know what she knows.”

“I don’t understand.” Shauna gripped the bed sheets in a double fist. “What happened?”

“You tell us, Shauna. I believe you know precisely what I mean. If you’re pulling a stunt”—Patrice leaned over the bed—“if I find out you’re making a mockery of Rudy and your father with this *act* . . .” She frowned and fumbled for words.

Nothing but Patrice's own twisted view of the world could make sense of such accusations. Shauna's temples throbbed. She looked at Uncle Trent, begging him without words to sort this out for her.

He pulled Patrice away from the bed. "Rudy was with you, honey. You were driving when your car collided with a truck and went off a bridge."

Shauna managed a shallow breath but she couldn't exhale. "Is he okay?"

Wayne's eyes shifted. Dr. Siders appeared as baffled as Shauna felt. Trent looked at Patrice but offered no answer.

"Is Rudy okay?"

Patrice glared at Shauna. "You don't deserve an answer to that. You will tell us exactly what happened. Where you got the drugs. Why you planned to hurt Rudy. I can't believe anyone would go to such lengths. You're a beast. You have nearly ruined your father. It's a wonder he has managed to go on."

Rudy was hurt. Fear injected adrenaline into Shauna's heart.

Drugs?

"Where is he?" she demanded.

"California," Trent said.

"I mean Rudy!" She threw back the covers.

Patrice stepped back into Trent. Dr. Siders snapped out of his gawking. He dropped his charts onto the counter behind him, then leaned across the bed to catch Shauna's arm. "I want you out of here, all of you! We spoke about this."

She slapped Dr. Siders's hands away. "Tell me where Rudy is."

Wayne's face lit up with worry, and he reached for Shauna as she dropped her legs over the edge of the bed. A rolling table stood between them, and he bumped into it.

Her bare feet hit the floor and she tried to stand on her atrophied legs, which resented her demands as much as everyone else in the room apparently did. The blood in her body raced to her feet to be of help, emptying her head. Patrice stood back and watched Shauna fall. She went down before anyone else could catch her, clipping her jaw on the table and clamping down on her tongue. She tasted blood and heard her skull smack the vinyl flooring, then she slipped back into the black waters.

Chapter 2

Wayne held Shauna's elbow and helped her down the white hallway. She insisted on walking this time, desperate to get out of the wheelchair, and determined to get out of this hospital as quickly as possible. It was already Wednesday.

After a day of fluctuating consciousness followed by two full days of being scanned, tested, poked, quizzed, and studied, she had many more questions than the first time she awoke.

But no more answers. They were all refusing to speak to her about Rudy and it was driving her crazy.

"I can't believe how much progress you've made already," Wayne said as her energy flagged. She paused for a break and leaned against the wall. "You're amazing."

She searched his eyes. "Please, Wayne. Tell me."

"Tell you what?"

"What no one else will. About Rudy."

"We've been over this." His tone reflected sadness rather than impatience. "Shauna, they've told me as much as they've told you. How bad can it be if they've sent him home?"

"This is ridiculous! Why all the secrecy?"

"He's home. And he's got the best care your father's money can buy."

"So for all we know they've sent him home to die?"

Wayne chuckled. "Wow. You really do go to the worst-case scenario, don't you?"

"Don't laugh at me." Shauna started walking again.

He sobered up and stayed by her side. "I only meant that your father wouldn't be on the road if that was the case."

"It's maddening!"

"I'm sure it's for your best. Trent has everything taken care—"

"My father should be the one in that role. But then he never was where he needed to be, was he?"

"He's on his way back."

"So I hear."

Wayne didn't say anything to that. Really, what could he say? Shauna didn't wish her family's dysfunctional dynamics on anyone.

"Thank you for all you've done these last few days."

“You’re welcome.”

“I feel really bad about . . . about not . . .”

Wayne placed a finger on her lips, giving her a light static shock. She flinched. He looked surprised, then grinned.

“Don’t worry about any of that,” he said. “We’ll figure it out as we go. Right now, you have bigger things to worry about.”

He placed his free hand between her shoulder blades and guided her into the office, rubbing her back gently.

Dr. Siders was already there, his gangly body folded into a chair too small for him. The office had been painted uninspiring shades of mauve and green that failed to calm her. The colors clashed with the hyper arrangement of chairs and a chaos of paperwork on every flat surface.

“I’ll wait outside,” Wayne said.

“You can stay.”

“This is your private business,” Wayne said. “Tell me as much or as little as you want later. I’ll be here for you.”

His sensitivity took the edge off her nerves. She would press for information about Rudy until they told her what she wanted to hear or discharged her.

Dr. Millie Harding, a devil-may-care psychiatrist with frizzy red hair and glowing lipstick, crossed paths with Wayne at the door, then greeted Shauna with a kind touch on the shoulder.

Shauna hardly noticed it.

“You promised to tell me about Rudy,” she said to Dr. Siders.

“Absolutely, Shauna. But you’re our main concern right now. Let us bring you up to speed on our evaluations, and then—”

“I’ve spent three days imagining the worst.”

“You’ve had a terrible crisis to face,” Dr. Harding said. Her gravelly voice suggested she had smoked for decades. “Memory loss is catastrophic enough to process. One thing at a time, dear.”

“If someone would just say, ‘Rudy’s fine,’ I would—”

The door opened again and sucked in a rumpled man straight from the eighties. He wore a tan corduroy blazer and sage green tie. His sandy brown hair stood in a wave off his forehead.

Dr. Siders stood. “Rudy’s fine. Shauna, allow me to introduce Dr. Will Carver.”

“You look remarkable, Ms. McAllister,” Dr. Carver said, taking his hands in and out of his trousers’ pockets. He did not sit when Dr. Siders did. “We’re so pleased.”

“Dr. Carver is the clinical sponsor-investigator overseeing the administration of new drugs to you during your coma, Shauna.”

“New drugs?”

“From a trial still in its earliest stages. Your father was able to enroll you under expanded-access protocols—”

“My father.”

Dr. Carver hesitated.

Dr Siders said, “You realize that this hospital is closely affiliated with McAllister MediVista’s research and development.”

Shauna had not known this.

“What protocols, again?”

“Expanded-access,” Dr. Carver said. “In the simplest terms, these are reserved for exceptional situations in which physicians believe the promise of some experimental drug, even in the earliest stages of development, holds out a patient’s only hope of recovery.”

“We couldn’t explain why you slipped into a coma at all,” Dr. Siders said. “You had no evidence of brain injury, and no other explanation for your condition.”

“It is possible for a drug overdose to push a person into a coma,” Dr. Carver said. Dr. Siders frowned at him.

“Overdose?” Shauna echoed.

“A blood test showed traces of MDMA in your system, enough to make you unsafe on the road—”

“MD what?”

“Ecstasy. It’s impossible to know how much you actually had—”

“I never had *any*!” Even though she couldn’t remember, Shauna knew in the deepest part of her that she never would have done such a thing. Never.

Would she?

“The tests were quite—”

Dr. Siders held up two hands. “Let’s slow this train down. No one is being attacked here.”

Dr. Carver raised his eyebrows but finally sat and let Dr. Siders take over the explanation.

“When your coma entered its second week, Senator McAllister ordered the pharmaceutical branch of MMV to take your case. Coma patients’ chances of full recovery decline sharply after five weeks. Even without a brain injury to worry about, everyone was pressed with the need to bring you around, if we could, before then.”

Shauna was sure her father’s campaign had applied most of the pressure. MMV would’ve loved to get their hands on her in the midst of a presidential campaign. It made sense, at least when it came to generating sympathy for the frontrunner. That kind of medical breakthrough in a personal crisis would be huge for soft-hearted voters.

Dr. Carver cleared his throat. “We’ve been testing the applications of a new drug cocktail in trauma patients, and we believed it might stimulate your brain out of its coma. We theorized that your brain shut down as the result of some kind of overwhelming shock rather than physical injury.”

“You’re saying my brain couldn’t handle a simple car accident?”

“It was hardly simple, Ms. McAllister, but yes. This was the idea anyway.”

“And your psychological tests so far have supported this,” Dr. Harding said.

Dr. Carver continued. “The cocktail includes a complex combination of antianxiety meds, including propranolol and D-cycloserine—you’ve heard of these?” Shauna shook her head. “It’s got a few other things in there too. These were originally developed to treat conditions like hypertension, but they’ve been successful in recent years in treating victims of violent crimes, war injuries, that sort of thing. They reduce patients’ stress and speed up their recovery time.”

“By erasing memories?” she asked.

Dr. Harding shook her head hard enough to give her mass of curls a lift. “No no no. Though that kind of technology isn’t so far out of reach anymore. No, these drugs work by suppressing the intensity of the emotions associated with your memory. Their impact becomes less traumatic over the long term.”

Less traumatic than what the last three days had been like?

“And these drugs work two weeks after the event?”

Dr. Carver crossed his arms. “In your case it did, though that was an unknown. MMV’s formula is unique in that it also incorporates the latest pharmacogenomics technology.” He hesitated, as if explaining it to her might be an insult. She was, after all, the daughter of MMV’s founder and president. When she blinked, he continued, “That means we adapt the chemical balance of the drugs to match your personal response to each element—a response determined by your unique genetic code.”

Shauna blinked again.

“You messed with my *genes*?”

Dr. Carver chuckled, which Shauna found irritating. “No, we ‘messed with’ the drugs, based on what we know about your genes.”

The weight of her already heavy heart grew. She had taken drugs—unbelievable—and been given drugs, and now her mind was a black hole she might never climb out of. Her hands began to tremble. She wished Wayne had stayed.

“It’s complicated, but progressive. We’ll keep you on the regimen for several more weeks, then taper it off while we monitor your recovery. It’s important that we keep the chemical balance of your brain stable. I’ll come by later to go over each medication with you.”

“Overall,” Dr. Siders said, “your recovery couldn’t be going more smoothly. You’re already progressing faster than we expected.”

“You mean physically.”

“You had extremely minor injuries for such a violent accident. Some trauma to your abdomen, glass cuts mostly. We think that happened post-accident, when you escaped the car. But no internal injuries. Not even a broken bone.”

“You might have the ecstasy to thank for that,” said Dr. Carver. Shauna’s cheeks warmed. Was it possible? Why couldn’t she *remember*? Her despair took on the bonus element of frustration.

“What about my mind?”

The men turned to Dr. Harding. “Think of your mind as shielding you from something it knows you can’t handle yet,” she said.

“You think the trauma of the accident caused my memory loss?”

“It’s the most convincing culprit.”

“Not all these experimental drugs?”

“Unlikely.”

“But when will I remember?”

“When your mind is ready. It’s not something you can force or rush.”

“How can I . . . help it along?”

“Is that what you want?”

Shauna wasn’t sure. But if she had to decide in this moment, she would lean toward the affirmative. She might die by falling into this gaping hole of nothingness. More important, their silence regarding Rudy could only mean that she was responsible for some horrible tragedy, some unspeakable harm she had done to him. She

should be punished for it! And if they refused to punish her, she would do it herself by remembering every detail.

“Yes.”

Dr. Carver cleared his throat.

Dr. Harding tilted her head to one side and contemplated her answer for several moments.

“For many people, amnesia is traumatic in the beginning, and then they find it to be more of a mercy. I’m not sure how it will be for you, but if you can find a way to embrace this, if you can think of your situation as something not entirely bad, you put yourself in the most positive frame of mind.”

“Not entirely bad?”

“A clean slate. A new beginning.”

Shauna shook her head, unsure how else to respond. She could imagine how some kind of selective obliteration of certain memories might be merciful. But a gaping hole in the past? That didn’t make sense to her.

Dr. Harding seemed to see that Shauna wasn’t convinced. The red-headed psychiatrist leaned toward her and spoke more slowly. “Then . . . I suggest you face forward. Look forward down the road of your life rather than over your shoulder. Don’t try too hard to remember. Leave the past behind you and let your mind decide when it’s ready to revisit your history.”

“I should do nothing, you mean.”

“Not exactly. Pick up in life wherever it was you remember leaving off. I can help you with this. Let your memory, if it chooses, reconstruct itself in context.”

“I don’t understand.”

“What are some threads that you might be able to hang on to or revisit? A church, a job, a social scene, a hobby, a boyfriend?”

Shauna lifted her hands, at a loss. All her life she had kept herself at a distance from close friendships. Mostly, the choice had been a coping mechanism for her, a way of shielding herself from pain upon pain, a way of conserving her emotional energy. She had reduced her world to a small, manageable size. Now she wished she hadn’t.

“I don’t . . . I can’t . . .” She shook her head. “Wayne Spade?” He was far more a question than an answer in her own mind.

Dr. Harding folded her hands across her lap. “Tell me about Wayne.”

“I don’t know much to tell.”

“Then maybe that’s where you should begin.”

Maybe. Maybe? Was that all these people were good for, pronouncing one possibility after the other, never certainty? When would she get the answers she needed? The real answers, not these speculations?

She had been patient for long enough now. It would end here, beginning with her most urgent question of all.

“When will I see Rudy?”

Dr. Siders set his charts beside him and leaned forward. “As soon as we know—”

“What is so hard about my questions about my brother? I’m asking for the most basic level of information—”

“Shauna, when you’re ready to—”

“I’m ready now! I want to see him *now*!”

Shauna’s frustration dissolved into gut-wrenching tears. If only Rudy were here to calm her. Without him, without her memory of that terrible night, she was lost.

“What did I do? What happened that is so awful no one can talk to me about it? I deserve to know the truth!”

She put her hands in her hair and gripped it by the roots. Rudy hadn’t come to see her in the days since she’d come out of this coma. That fact alone should have been all the information she needed to confirm the monstrosity of her situation.

She lifted her head and stared at them through blurred eyes. The room tipped. Dr. Harding was shaking her head and saying something, but Shauna could only hear her own guilt, screaming at her. She closed her eyes and saw nothing but Rudy.

In a gasp for air she heard Dr. Siders say, “We’ve got to sedate her.”

She shook her head and moaned. Rudy. Rudy.

When a needle penetrated the thickest muscle in Shauna’s upper arm, she welcomed the pain. She allowed it to cover and quiet her grief.

Dr. Harding’s coarse voice reached Shauna’s ears at the same time the sedative reached her brain. “You’re all fools.”

* * *

Millie Harding barreled down the hall after Will Carver, taking one stride for the pharmacologist’s every three.

“What was all that in there?” Millie asked.

Carver pulled up and turned on his heel, saw who it was, then resumed his walk without answering. She caught him in four more strides.

“Were you and Siders planning to tell her everything?”

“I thought that’s what you were doing.”

Millie got in Carver’s way, hands on hips. “What are you talking about?”

“You’re going to hand her memory to her on a silver platter?”

“I was perfectly misleading. And I didn’t give her any ideas that will actually help her recall what happened.”

“I’ll be the one to decide that.”

“No you won’t. *I* don’t even get to decide anything except whether I want to get paid at the end of the day.”

“We’ll all get paid. But only if we behave like professionals.”

Millie grabbed the arm of Carver’s jacket, stopping him. “You two might want to become better liars.”

Carver jerked his sleeve out of Millie’s grip. “The only lies that ever really work are the ones that can actually be mistaken for the truth.” He stalked off. “Don’t question me again.”