

APPENDICITIS

The man who goes into the hospital won't
be the same man who comes out, if
he makes it out.

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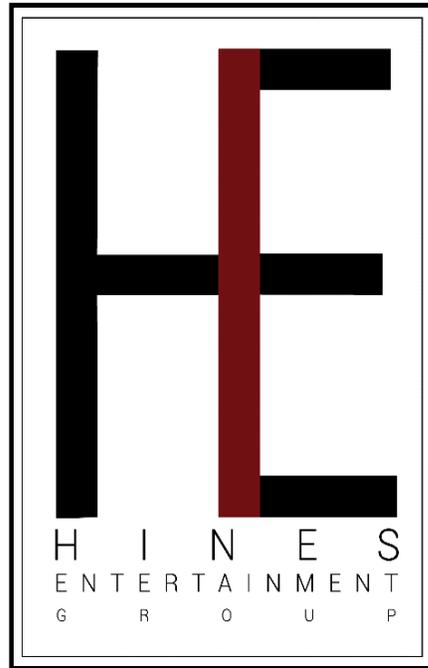
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CHAPTER 1

A

SICK

BUMBLEBEE

“What’s the score?” asks Allen.

“Eleven up,” I yell, out of breath while dribbling the basketball.

The game was now tied. We had come all the way back from five points down to even the score. Whoever scored the next point would win the heated contest. I’d always had a love for comeback victories. There was something about them that made them more meaningful, more memorable, and, frankly, more enjoyable. My greatest comeback victory was a doubles game of ping pong against my ex’s new boyfriend in college. We were down 3 to 18, playing to twenty-one. I thought, *I’ll be damned if he beats me! Anyone but this lame.* And he didn’t. My teammate and I came all the way back and won the game. They didn’t score another point. Victory was mine! And victory was also mine when my ex-girlfriend came to visit me that night.

“Jermaine! Come set a pick,” I shout.

Jermaine sprints in my direction and sets a firm pick on my defender. I drive hard to the right, pounding the basketball toward the basket. The path to the basket is wide open, more open than the HOV lane at two a.m. I pick up my dribble and take two long strides before jumping in the air for the game-winning layup. While in the air, the klutz of the gym, Fat Steve, jumps toward me in an attempt to block my shot.

Fat Steve is a man of tremendous girth. He’s approximately five foot nine and weighs just a smidge over three hundred pounds. His neck is short, and his calves are wide. He wears every piece of Nike gear one could possibly purchase at a sporting goods store. A yellow Nike headband on his head. Yellow Nike wrist bands on each arm. Yellow Nike volleyball knee pads on his arthritic knees. White Nike T-shirt. Navy blue Nike shorts. Black Nike shoes. Fat Steve is a walking advertisement for how not to dress when playing basketball.

He’s notorious for “accidentally” injuring players. Partly because of his size, but also because of his hustling nature. Fat Steve plays as though he’s a walk-on trying to earn a scholarship. Three weeks ago, he dove on someone trying to get a loose basketball. Damn near took the guy’s head off. The guy almost fought Fat Steve after he got up with a bloody brow. It took two of us to hold the guy back. Fat Steve apologized profusely, but the guy didn’t want to hear it, he just wanted blood for blood. I haven’t seen him play here since.

In the air, I glance at Steve and then back at the wooden basketball backboard. I lay the ball smoothly off the backboard, and simultaneously I’m clobbered by Fat Steve. We both crash to the floor, and I hit my head. I lie underneath three hundred pounds of a mediocre basketball player, seeing stars and wondering if I made the game-winning shot. My teammates roll him off me.

“Did I make it?” I ask after I’m able to see daylight again.

“Of course!” Jermaine informs me as he pulls me up off the floor. I clap my hands loudly in celebration.

My teammates proceed to give me sweaty half hugs and damp high fives. I've loved playing with these guys since moving to Louisville. These were my new friends. We played basketball early in the morning once a week in a small, run-down recreational gym. This was my stress relief. Everyone has one. Some people have food, some people have alcohol, and others have cigarettes. Basketball is mine. Nothing distracts me from life’s troubles more than basketball.

“Good shot, Daniel. I can’t believe you hit that shot. You lucky I didn’t have my good Nikes on. I surely would have thrown that in the stands,” says Fat Steve followed by a jovial laugh. We all sit on the metal stands changing out of our sweaty clothes. “Did you play basketball in college?”

“Thrown my stuff in the stands, Fat Steve? Yeah, right. And no, I didn’t play in school. I wasn’t smart enough to make good grades and play basketball at the same time. Not with my major. So, I gave up on my hoop dreams in high school.”

“Where are you from again?” asks Steve.

“Port Arthur.”

“Yeah, I bet y’all country as hell down there in P.A. Y’all probably wear cowboy hats and boots. I bet your mascot was like a crawfish or a picture of a cow being tipped over.”

“No, it wasn’t a cow. It was a bumblebee.” I snap back, which is followed by exuberant laughter by the other basketball players.

I can’t help but laugh as well. It was a country mascot. I wouldn’t dare tell him that we yelled “sting ’em” at opponents. That would only add fuel to his country bumpkin argument. I begin putting on my hoodie and sweats while thinking of a witty comeback.

“See. I was right! A country ass mascot.”

“Man, forget you, Fat Steve. I loved my country high school mascot. It struck fear in the heart of opponents far and wide. I don’t have time to argue with you all day about mascots. I have to head home. I haven’t been feeling well since I woke up. I was a little queasy earlier and threw up. But I still came through to play and performed well under pressure. Unlike your dad under your mom last night.”

“Ooohhhh,” scream all the players. One of the players throws a towel in the air as he laughs. Allen, our basketball court jester rolls on the ground laughing. You could have sworn that joke lit him on fire. Fat Steve doesn’t say a word. He just puts his head down in defeat. I lightly jog out of the gym on a high note to the front door.

I open the front door and feel the arctic winter air slice across my bare face. It is the middle of December, and we are experiencing a winter like no other. Well, no other for a Texan like me. I’m not used to twelve-degree wind chill and wearing eight layers of clothes. On some days, I feel like Randy from a Christmas story, with the many layers of clothes I have on to keep warm.

I get outside and gingerly begin to take steps toward my 2004 black Honda Accord. I say my steps aloud with the hopes that this will help prevent me from slipping on the icy path. Left foot. Right foot. Left foot. Right foot. Leeeeeeffftttt foooooottt. My left foot starts to slip in my black high-tops. *Hold it together, Daniel.* My feet begin to skate back and forth, kicking up ice like Nancy Kerrigan. I regain my balance, and continue cautiously, walking to my car and eventually make it. A big, airy sigh of relief exits my mouth as I collapse onto the car’s roof. I slide into my car and turn the heat on broil. Lil Boosie blasts through the speakers as I begin to warm up.

“Mmmh,” I groan as I grab my right side. It is throbbing with pain. *I must have pulled a muscle trying to stop myself from falling,* I think. As I turn down the ratchet music and begin to back out of my parking space, my phone begins to ring. “WIFEY” pops up in bold capital letters on the screen. The internal mental debate then ensues. To answer or not to answer.

I mean, I love talking to my Sweet Cakes, but I just want a quick little break from talking to her. Honestly, a break from talking to anyone. I just want some me time. I’ve learned in marriage that you rarely get this and that this time is very precious. Wifey is always around. I go to sleep, she’s there. I wake up, she’s there. I use the bathroom and unfortunately, she’s also there. There’s nothing like getting a moment alone.

Yet, I’ve also learned that marriage is about sacrifice. I must sacrifice myself for the betterment of the marriage. That’s the only way we’re going to make it through together. Despite my selfishness, I love hearing the voice of my Sweet Cakes. The voice of the angel I fell in love with four summers ago.

We met at a swanky Kentucky Derby party in the Galleria area of Houston, Texas. I had never been to the Kentucky Derby, but I’d always had been intrigued by the fanfare for the event. This party attempted to emulate the event while the race played on various big screens in the restaurant. The event was packed and very upscale. Gentlemen dressed in fine tailored

blazers and slacks. Women dressed in colorful dresses and hats with brims bigger than Saturn's rings. There were cutouts of horses plastered on the walls and cocktails named after each horse in the race. This party attempted to embody every bit of the spectacle along with an open bar and appetizers. Since I couldn't make it to the event in Kentucky, this by far was the closest thing to wet my whistle.

It was at the appetizer table where I literally ran into this beautiful, brown-skinned beauty with a booty. Her mouth was full of meatballs and her small plate was loaded with barbecue chicken wings and cheese. All of these items instantly spilled on to my cream-colored blazer as she turned away from the table.

"I'm so sorry," she apologized as she attempted to wipe the barbecue stains off my jacket making it smear even further.

"Now you have to buy me a drink," I told her.

"But the drinks are free," she said while continuing to smear the stain on my jacket.

"Well, that should make it even easier for you."

She got me that drink, and we talked for the rest of the night. Partly because I couldn't approach any other women with a huge barbecue stain on my blazer. But more so because I didn't want to talk to anyone else. She was the most beautiful woman at the party. Men and women alike turned their heads when she walked. Men looked to check out her curves in her sexy red dress, while women looked with envy to see if her purse matched her shoes. Her purse matched her shoes. It always did. She exemplified grace and elegance, but she also had a teaspoon of sarcasm, which I found to be totally sexy. That day, I knew I had found the love of my life. The love of my life who I would answer the phone for after the fifth ring.

"Hey, Sweet Cakes."

"Hey, my love. What are you doing?"

"Just got done playing my last game, and I'm about to head back home. "

"How'd you do?"

"Won three and lost one. I hit the game winning shot for the last game. They can't hold me, son!"

"You tell 'em babe. They can't hold you. Just like you couldn't hold your food down this morning. I heard you throwing up."

“You heard that? Yeah, my stomach was a little upset this morning. It must have been something I ate.”

“Well, the only thing you ate this morning was the breakfast I cooked you. I hope it wasn’t that.”

“No, Sweet Cakes, it wasn’t that. That breakfast was great. Thanks for making it for me.”

Actually, it may have been that. The breakfast was horrible. The full-hearted attempt at eggs and toast was a disaster. The eggs were so runny they could have won a gold medal in the Olympics. The toast was bright yellow on one side and Wesley Snipes black on the other side. She tried to keep the Wesley side face down, but I saw it after picking it up to bite it.

“How’s your toast babe?” she asked.

“Fit for a vampire slayer,” I replied. We both laughed, but for totally different reasons.

“Well, do you feel better?”

“Yes, I feel a little better. Still a little queasy, but now my right side and hip hurt. I think I pulled a muscle after I almost slipped and fell walking to my car.”

“Hmph. Now does your hip hurt or does it hurt right above your hip? Press on your hip bone and tell me if it hurts.”

I pressed on what I thought was my hip bone and the pain didn’t worsen.

“Nope. No pain.”

“Now, does your pain hurt right above that area?”

“Yeah. I guess. I hope you’re not trying to go all Dr. Gregory House and diagnose me. I hate when you try to diagnose me. Please stop. I just pulled a muscle and that’s it.”

“I’m sorry, babe, but this is what I do. I’m a doctor, and sometimes I can’t turn it off. Just like you can’t turn off your engineer brain when you see electrical stuff. So, you talked to me about your symptoms and you opened the door. So, I moseyed on through.”

“You must have not read the sign outside the door. It said whites only. I don’t trust you Negro doctors.”

“I hate you and your face. Do you know how hard it is for a black doctor? Let alone a female black doctor.”

“Yes, Sweet Cakes I know. You tell me melanin medicine stories at least once a week. Subliminal racism stories, menstrual cycle chronicles, and discussions of how to keep your hair nice while on the go. Those are our weekly conversations. So yes, I know.”

“And don’t you forget it! It’s hard being a black. And even harder being a black physician sometimes. What’s our saying baby?”

“Melanin all day every day,” I grumble.

“Yes, melanin all day every day. I can’t take this black off. Nor do I want to, but sometimes it does pose a challenge.”

“In case you forgot I’m black too! I’m black mixed with education. So, I know how it is. Now, what are you diagnosing me with?”

“Well, on my differential is gastritis, Crohn’s disease, appendicitis, kidney stone, and just for fun, ruptured ovarian cyst.”

“Ruptured ovarian cyst? Last time I checked, I didn’t have ovaries so we can cross that off the list. You also forgot to say muscle strain, which is what I have. This is not some complicated diagnosis. It’s a muscle ... aaaahhhh,” I groan as my side starts to hurt again.

“It’s likely not a muscle strain, honey. I’d consider that if you were moving and having pain. Also, this morning you were nauseated and threw up. If I were a betting woman, I’d put my money on appendicitis. You need to go to the hospital. Immediately.”

I could hear it in the tone of her voice that she was concerned for me. Instead of a suggestion, she said I needed to go. Immediately. As much as we laughed and joked together, she did have a serious side that saw the light when necessary.

Friends and family members call, text, or send Facebook messages asking medical questions that she always has an answer for. *No, it’s nothing major, but make sure you go to the doctor. Yeah, that’s serious; make sure you get that checked out immediately. Just take some Benadryl, and the rash will go away.* Now, it’s my time to receive the advice, and put my trust in my wife.

“Okay. I’ll go get checked out. Just for you. What hospital should I go to?”

“Just go to the new University Hospital. I’ll text one of the doctors I know in the ER to let them know you’re coming. You shouldn’t have to wait long to be seen. That’s one of the perks of having a wife in medicine.”

“Is it too late to go back?”

“To go back where?”

“To my old girlfriend. She’s not a doctor. She wouldn’t make me go to no stupid hospital.”

“Yeah, you can go back to her. Right after you get evaluated at the hospital.”

“Okay, Sweet Cakes. I’ll take the back roads since the highway is probably still icy.”

“Okay. Text me when you get there. Love you.”

“Love you more.”

CHAPTER 2

THE POINT

of

NO RETURN

As I enter the emergency department waiting room, a security guard promptly instructs me to remove all metal objects from my pockets. It baffles me that hospitals need metal detectors. I know they're needed for safety, but who would think to bring a knife or loaded gun into a hospital? Who are they going to shoot? A dying patient? A nurse? A doctor? That wouldn't make any sense at all. Nevertheless, I proceed to take everything out of my pockets and put it in a tray. In the tray goes a wallet with twenty-one dollars, a black Galaxy phone with a partially cracked screen, and a Batman keychain holding a large assortment of keys that could rival any janitor's set.

I've always admired Batman but did so even more after watching the movie *Batman Begins*. He overcame so many obstacles in that movie. He lost both of his parents, traveled overseas for superhero training, ordered weapons that didn't work, and his house burned down. That's a lot for one man to triumph over, even in one fictitious movie. Yet, despite all these hurdles, he found a way to accomplish his goal of protecting Gotham from corruption. Hence, Batman serves as an inspiration for me. Whenever I work, I take on the mindset of Batman and don't let anything or anyone stop me from reaching my goals. I even tell myself that I am Batman for encouragement, although I know that couldn't happen. Not because he's not real, but because "the man" wouldn't allow that to happen.

I walk through the metal detector.

"Okay. You're good," says the hefty-sized security guard.

"Thanks, Officer Winslow," I mumble back while picking up my items. I hope he didn't notice my sly *Family Matters* jab. I walk toward a seat in the half-empty waiting area. There are about five people sitting in the waiting area. The local morning news is playing on the old television hanging on the wall. A middle-aged man sips smoking-hot coffee and stares at me as I look around. A large, black Rottweiler sits at his feet. The Rottweiler perks up as I look in their direction. The dog's name tag, Bo, dangles from his neck. I hope Bo knows that he better sit his ass down. I'll hit him with a two-piece jab right on his black nose if he jumps at me.

Bap! Bap!

His owner pets him on top of his head to calm him down.

"Daniel. Daniel James," calls a voice.

"Yes."

"Hi. I'm Richard. Your wife texted me and told me you were on your way. Come on back."

“Wow. That was fast. Say, can he bring that dog in here?”

“Apparently so. He says he’s a military veteran and that’s his emotional support dog,” he responds in a soft voice.

Richard is a strikingly handsome Caucasian young man. He stands about six feet tall with a muscular build. His gray T-shirt is one size too small and serves to accentuate his muscular frame. There’s no doubt that he goes to the gym every day, including holidays. I can bet most assuredly that underneath his workstation there is a plastic jug full of water that he must finish before leaving work. As I firmly shake Richard’s hand to signify my manhood, his big blue eyes catch me and place me in a hypnotic trance. Undoubtedly, this gel-filled blonde-haired man is the Dr. McDreamy of the hospital. I bet he gets all the girls here. Well, all the girls except for mine.

“Thanks, man. I appreciate it. This will be an easy case for you, anyway,” I whisper back.

“I hope so. I don’t need anything to be wrong with you. Your wife put a lot of pressure on me already. She told me to make sure you’re okay or that she’ll find a way to make me work an extra week of night shifts. We worked night shifts together a few times, and she knows I hate them. So, let’s hope this is as easy as you say it’s going to be. For your sake and mine. Let’s get you triaged, and then we’ll get you to one of the ER rooms.”

Richard scans his badge over the sensor on a metal door. The latch unlocks, and the door opens into the front of the emergency room area. He directs me into a small room. A woman spins around in her squeaky office chair as I enter.

“Hi. I’m Alex. I’ll be taking your vitals.”

“I’m Daniel. Nice to meet you.” Alex gestures for me to sit down.

I sit down in a blue plastic chair and Alex straps a black blood pressure cuff around my arm. Gradually, she begins pumping up the cuff. Slowly, the python grip of the cuff ensues. With big eyes we both eagerly stare at the blood pressure gauge. I have no idea what the numbers mean, but I figured I’d watch as well. I mean, it’s my blood pressure. She lets the air out of the cuff and begins to pump up the cuff again.

“Is everything okay?” I ask.

“Yes. I always like to check it twice for accuracy.” Alex rechecks my blood pressure.

“What did you get?” I question.

“One forty-nine over ninety-two.”

“Is that good or bad?”

“It’s a little high. Do you have a history of high blood pressure, or are you in pain?”

“No high blood pressure, but I am in a little bit of pain.”

Alex grabs my wrist and feels for my pulse. She stares at her digital watch for a few seconds.

“Heart rate eighty-eight. Can you open your mouth for me?”

“Yeah, but that’s gonna cost you extra,” I reply facetiously. Richard chuckles outside the door.

“Well, lucky for you I got paid today. So, I can afford it. Now, open your mouth for me, please.” I open my mouth, and Alex puts in a white digital thermometer.

“Temperature one hundred. Do you feel feverish?”

“Not right now, but I was on fire earlier while playing basketball. Get it, on fire?”

Alex rolls her eyes so far back into her head that she looks demon possessed. She hands me a stack of hospital papers and points toward the door. I take the papers and walk outside the room to meet Richard.

“You’re quite the funny guy,” says Richard.

“Yeah, I am sometimes. Whenever, I’m nervous or anxious I tend to make more jokes. I think it’s my coping mechanism.”

“Well don’t get nervous or anxious. Everything is going to be okay. I’m going to take great care of you. Let me show you to your room.”

We begin walking down the chilly, bright hallway. It’s fairly quiet. No patients strung out in the hallway. No one yelling out in agony. No doctors running around frantically like the ones on *Grey’s Anatomy* or *Scrubs*. No J.D. and Turk around causing mischief. Just peace and quiet.

“Quiet this morning,” I say to Richard.

“Yep. It usually is around this time of day. Our goal is to try to get all the people who came in overnight out of the ER. We either admit them or send them home if they don’t need to stay. That way, I and the other morning shift doctors don’t have a crazy load of patients waiting for us when we come in. So, the doctors who worked the night shift did a good job. There’s not that many people here now. There’s usually a morning rush of sick people who

come in later. It's still kind of early and they probably haven't woken up yet. Trust me, when they wake up, they'll be here. Here with that same cough or vaginal discharge that they've had for a month and now want to get checked out for. Let me give you a quick tour before I bring you to your room."

"That would be nice. It would give me some cool points with the wife. I could tell her later. Oh, I saw this and that. Richard let me shock a patient. It was really fun in the ER. I can't wait to go back!"

Richard starts to laugh. "If you tell her that, I'm surely going to get more night shifts." Richard begins to point out the different sections of the ER as we begin walking.

"Okay, in that back section over there is our drunk tank area. All the patients who come in drunk or high on drugs go in that area. I think we have three people over there right now sleeping off their high. We'll assess them a little later and then send them home, if they feel better. They often come in with some scrapes and bruises from falling. We usually let medical students practice suturing on them."

"That's cold, man."

"Hey, it's the honest truth. Think about it: Everyone has a first patient they do a procedure on. Even brain surgeons have to have a first patient to operate on. Everyone has to start somewhere. So, we let the med students learn on the drunk people. They can take their time while they're knocked out and not feel pressured."

"I guess."

"Now, back there is our trauma area. That's where all the big shit goes down. Gunshots, car accident victims, stabbings. You name it. That's where the real action is. Whenever a trauma comes in, the head nurse yells 'Code Superman' on the PA system."

"Why 'Code Superman?'"

"This signals everyone to fly to the trauma area and save lives, like Superman."

"That's cheesy, man."

"Yes, very cheesy. It started before I got here. Honestly, I would have picked Batman. He's way cooler and anyone can be Batman. Not everyone can be Superman. Am I right?"

"Yeah, sure," I respond while looking away.

“Upstairs, we have all the different patient rooms. ICU, labor and delivery, surgery, et cetera, et cetera. The cafeteria is located in the basement floor below us. They shut down in the next hour or so to transition from breakfast to lunch. And here’s your room. Lucky number twenty.”

We enter the small room composed of clear sliding doors. The walls are painted a lazy gray with no accent colors. At the center of the room is a medium-sized hospital bed with white sheets that I hope are freshly cleaned. An outdated television is mounted to the wall. A rerun episode of *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air* plays on mute. Carlton is stealing the basketball from Will. Richard slides the clear doors closed behind us.

“I’m going to ask you a few questions to get the ball rolling on working you up.”

“I know the drill,” I state as I plop down on the bed. “The wife has given me the rundown on all the usual questions you guys ask. I’ll tell you all you need to know.”

“Well, go-ahead, Mr. Know-It-All. Give it a shot.”

“My stomach started hurting this morning. I threw up two times. I think it may have been the eggs and toast Lisa cooked me. That shit was nasty. I went to play basketball after that. I felt better playing, but my right side started hurting afterward. It’s a sharp pain at the right lower part of my stomach. It doesn’t spread anywhere. On a pain scale, it’s about a five out of ten. I haven’t taken anything to make it go away, and nothing makes it worse. It’s just constant. I haven’t had a fever, chills, chest pain, or shortness of breath. I think I may have pulled a muscle. However, my wife thinks I may have appendicitis or a ruptured ovarian cyst.”

I continue staring at Richard as he chuckles with his hand covering his mouth.

“How am I doing so far?”

“Actually, you’re doing great. Continue.”

“Okay. Ummm. My past medical history consists only of seizures. My last was five years ago and I’ve been off my medication for two years. I haven’t had any surgeries before. I currently don’t take any meds. I’m allergic to latex, but no medications. The only family history I have is high blood pressure in my father. I don’t smoke or drink. And the only thing I get high on is Jesus. Anything else?”

“Nope. That’s about it. I think you covered it all. Your wife taught you well. You don’t know how much that helps out when people come in knowing their information. It makes it so much easier to help them. Now I’m going to do a physical exam on you.”

Richard takes the fire-engine red stethoscope off his neck and listens to my heart for a few seconds. He then lifts up my hoodie and places the stethoscope on my back. It's ice cold.

"Take a few deep breaths for me in and out of your mouth."

I breathe in and out deeply, as though I'm trying to blow out trick birthday candles.

"Alright, lay back for me. I'm going to listen to and feel on your stomach."

I lay back and immediately grimace. The pain is starting to intensify. *Man, I hope he doesn't find anything major wrong and I get to go home.* I hate seeing doctors. They always find something wrong, like when you bring your car to the shop. You go to the doctor's office for a cough, and they tell you that you have high blood pressure. You take your car in for an oil change, and they tell you that you need new tires. *If you don't just give me some cough syrup and change my damn oil!* I didn't ask you to search for other problems that I can't afford to fix. I can only afford one crisis at a time.

"Okay, Daniel. I'm gonna listen to your stomach and then do some pressing on it. Let me know if you have any pain."

Richard once again places the cold stethoscope on me and begins to listen to multiple areas of my stomach. He stops listening and then begins to press on my abdomen. The inconspicuous medical torture continues.

"Ouch. Yeah, that hurts over there," I state as he presses on the lower right side of my abdomen where I've been experiencing pain.

"Okay. Now, I'm going to press a little harder on your abdomen in the same area. Tell me if it hurts still."

Richard presses even harder in that area. I reach up and firmly grab his wrist.

"Yeah, bro. That shit really hurts. Chill out on that area for a second, if you don't mind."

"Okay. No problem. I'm just going to press on the left side now. Tell me if you feel pain on the right side when I press on the left side. I know it might not make sense, but just roll with it." Richard presses on the left lower side of my abdomen.

"Yeah, it hurts on my right side when you press my on the left. Not as much, but still hurts. "

"Rovsing's sign positive and tender in the right lower quadrant," Richard mumbles to himself.

“What does that mean? Is that good or bad? Cancer? Is it cancer? Give it to me straight, doc. How much time do I have to live?” I freak out.

“Relax, Daniel. All signs are pointing toward appendicitis right now. So, here’s what we’re going to do. We’re going to get some blood work and imaging done on you. You’re going to get a CT scan of your abdomen and pelvis. So, sit tight, and I’ll get the wheels in motion.” Richard begins walking out of the room.

“Wait. Wait. CT scan? Is all this necessary, Richard?” He turns around and walks back in.

“Yes, it is. You have all the usual findings. You have been having pain in the right lower quadrant of your abdomen. That’s where your appendix is located. You almost jumped off the table when I pressed on that area. In addition to this, you have been throwing up and have a little bit of a fever. We have to check to see if you have appendicitis and make sure your appendix hasn’t ruptured.

“I’d rather be safe than sorry. So be prepared for the possibility of having surgery today or tomorrow. I know you probably didn’t want to hear that, but you said give it to you straight. So, I’m giving it to you straight, like a shot of whiskey. I’m going to go put some orders in for you, and I’ll check on you a bit later. Your nurse will come get your blood for lab work and someone will transport you to the CT machine. So, sit tight.”

Richard gives me a slight comfort tap on my thigh and then walks out of the room. As he left, so did any chances of me leaving the hospital anytime soon.

CHAPTER 3

DIAGNOSIS

MURDER

“Morning, sugar! My name is Ann, and I’ll be your nurse. I’m going to get a little blood from you.”

After rummaging through the cabinets in the room for equipment, the robust nurse in light blue scrubs walks happily to my bedside and rolls up my right sleeve. Ann appears to be in her early fifties but has the spunk of a twenty-two-year-old. She smells like cocoa butter. I’m sure she waxes her brown skin with it nightly after she exits the shower. Ann throws down a

bunch of empty test tubes by my side. Then, like a magician, she pulls a dark blue ribbon out of thin air and wraps it tightly around my arm.

“Alright, sugar, make a tight fist for me.”

I grip my fist as tight as a child holding on to a piece of candy while Ann begins tapping on my arm looking for a vein.

“Isn’t there a machine that you can use to find my vein?”

“Yes, there is, but I don’t need that thing, sugar. I’ve been doing this longer than you’ve been alive. How old are you?”

“Fourteen going on fifteen. My Quinceañera is next month.”

“See, just like I thought, smarty pants. Longer than you’ve been alive.”

“Good. I don’t want you poking around my arm searching for a vein. I like seasoned veterans who know what they’re doing. I don’t want anyone practicing on me like I’m one of those drunk people in the back.”

“Who told you about that?”

“No one here. I watch *Grey’s Anatomy*. That show is just like real life.”

“Yeah, sure it is. Coworkers having quickies in closets. Hearts beating in a box. There are so many HIPAA violations in that show.”

“So many violations,” I reply, not knowing what in the world HIPAA means.

“Okay. That’s it. I got all the blood I needed.”

I look down on my arm only to see the blue ribbon gone and a freshly placed Band-Aid on my arm. The three test tubes are now filled with blood.

“Wait. What just happened? When did you stick me? When did you draw the blood? When did you place the Band-Aid? Are you some sort of witch?”

“I told you I was good, and yes, I am a witch. Team Slytherin.”

“Well, I’m team Gryffindor. So, we might have an issue.”

“Well, we’ll settle our beef later, sugar. I have to drop off your blood work. I’ll be back later to check on you. Someone will be here shortly to transport you to the CT machine. You have to drink this liquid before you go. It’s called contrast. It will help give a better picture on

the CT. So, drink all of it.” Ann hands me a cup full of liquid and a gown. “And put on this gown and wipe all that sweat off your forehead. You look a Gryffin mess.”

“Thanks. I was starting to feel a little warm. It must be from still having this stupid hoodie on. See you later, Ann.” Ann exits the room and slides the glass door closed.

I take a sip of the contrast and touch my forehead. It is drenched with sweat. I take off my hoodie and begin putting on my gown. I should have taken off this stupid hoodie long ago, but I’m still not used to the cold weather. I am cold all the time. It hasn’t been easy for this Southern boy to get accustomed to Kentucky’s winter climate. However, I didn’t hesitate to move up here for my love’s job. Hell, I would have moved to Mars if I had to. I just wanted to be with her and make her happy.

Moving with Lisa back to her hometown of Louisville, AKA the Derby City, brought her heart so much joy. While dating, she would tell me various stories about the fun times she’d had growing up here. From her first kiss during the country’s biggest fireworks display, known as Thunder over Louisville, to her countless arguments against fans of her rival University of Kentucky. She had countless stories of her life in Kentucky. In my heart of hearts, I knew that we would have to move here once she graduated medical school. It was only right. She loves her hometown, and this is where she wanted to be. But, if I had my way, we’d be in Atlanta. But we’re not. We’re in the Ville.

Luckily, I’m good at adjusting to new situations and places. As an adopted child with two wonderful parents, I am pretty good at making new friends. I had to find a way to socialize and not feel lonely. Thank God my parents put me in basketball and karate, which provided an easy source of friends, who would eventually turn into family. Consequently, I never felt like I needed a brother or sister. I had my “family.”

I asked my mom once if she ever wished she could have children. She responded, “It wasn’t in God’s plan, honey. And if I did have them, I may have missed out on the blessing of having you. I’m so thankful for you. You are mine through God’s plan. No matter what anyone says.”

I loved her for that answer. My parents never made me feel like I was adopted. They made me feel loved. Sometimes overly loved. I could probably sell my extra love on eBay and get good money for it, but I wouldn’t. I’d hoard all that extra love for myself. It’s a joy to be over-loved rather than under-loved. Some people aren’t loved at all.

Sweet Cakes is equally as loved by her family, and her family is huge — two brothers, ten aunts and uncles, and more than twenty first cousins. She knows each one of them by name and branch on the family tree. I, on the other hand, would be lucky if I recognize them at the

next family gathering. They all love her. Friends and family members alike love having engaging conversations with her. She can go from talking about the latest political news to arguing about who is the greatest singer of all time. Her personality is so infectious. People connect with her, and she connects with people. That's what probably makes her a great doctor — her ability to connect with people. And we have a great connection.

Since, our first date we have been inseparable. On it, I told her "you're mine until you find someone better. And trust me you won't find anyone better."

She laughed, but I was dead serious. I don't know if at that point she thought I was her husband, but I knew that she was my wife. I didn't want anyone else to have her, and no one else did since that date. We always reminisce and laugh about me telling her that. Sometimes, you have to speak stuff into existence.

A few months later we were living together, or as old people call it, "shacking up." We didn't want to, but it just seemed like the optimal situation. We were always at each other's house and hanging out together. After, crunching some numbers and having a conversation we figured it would just be best. We didn't tell our parents for fear of judgement. Even though we were *grown*, we still valued their opinion of us. Living together brought us closer.

We got to learn each other's tendencies and insecurities on a whole new level. I know she likes to sleep with a box fan on, and she knows I get scared when it thunders. She holds me and caresses my hair without judgement when it rains hard. It comforts my soul. We know each other like the back of our hands. If I come back in another lifetime, I hope that I can find her again. Just so I could love her twice. I miss her. I wish she was here with me now to comfort me.

"Mr. James?" says a young, sad voice wheeling in a wheelchair.

"Yes?"

"Hi, I'm Todd from transportation. I'm going to be wheeling you down to CT. Can you confirm your name and birthday for me?"

"Daniel James. Seven-two-eighty-three."

"Thanks. Alright, hop in this wheelchair for me, and I'm going to wheel you down to CT."

Todd is a thin, young white man, approximately five feet ten inches tall and one hundred pounds soaking wet. He has weak posture and his body frame hunches forward like an old grandpa. The repetitious action of leaning forward to push people in wheelchairs has most likely contoured his body to be in a forward position. The puffiness around his eyes signifies that he's been either working all night or is still waking up to start working. The blue-collar life

is starting to take a toll on him at such a young age. He's not fit for this life. He should have gone to college.

"Can I leave my stuff here?"

"No, I'll put your valuables in this plastic bag. It'll be in the back of your wheelchair. There are a lot of sticky fingers around here. So many people are in and out of rooms here. I don't want your stuff to get stolen, so we'll take it with us."

I hand Todd my valuables. My keys, phone, wedding ring, and wallet. Todd secures them into a plastic bag and neatly tucks them in a pouch behind the wheelchair. I hope no one steals my wedding ring while I'm getting scanned. Sweet cakes would be so mad it me for even taking it off. I carefully step down from the bed and begin shuffling toward the forest green wheelchair with the twenty-inch rims. I plop down in the chair.

"Time to drive, Ms. Daisy. To the CT machine, Toddrick!" I exclaim.

"It's Todd. Just Todd. And, yes, sir." Todd pushes the wheelchair.

I could hear it in the tone of his voice that he didn't like being called Toddrick or the Ms. Daisy reference, but I don't care. I'm going to enjoy this opportunity to have a young white man wheeling me around. This doesn't happen too often. Hell, it hasn't ever happened to me. So, I'm going to soak all of this up for what it's worth. Today, I will gladly be Ms. Daisy.

"Now you make sure you go the speed limit, Toddrick. We can't get any speeding tickets. Okay?"

"Yes, Mr. James."

As Todd wheels me in the creaky wheelchair down the hallway, I can see there are more people starting to trickle into the emergency department. To my left, a woman lies on a stretcher with a brace wrapped around her neck. A bloody bandage is affixed to her forehead. She moans in pain. Behind her is a man on another stretcher with some sort of breathing apparatus on his face. He breathes heavily and keeps his hand firmly attached to the apparatus. White smoke seeps through the mask with each breath he takes. To my right, I hear hurling and peer into the room as I roll by. I glance in and see a young lady pouring all of her guts into a blue vomit bag that is already half full. Richard was right. I guess all of the sick people are starting to wake up. I pray that whatever is going on with me doesn't keep me trapped in here with them. The emergency room is a smorgasbord of people and germs. And I don't plan on getting acquainted with either one of them, if I can help it.

“Roll down the windows for me, Toddrick. I want to wave at the kiddos. Hello kiddos! Come by later; I made some brownies,” I jokingly state at the fictitious children.

“Are you okay, Mr. James?” questions Todd.

“Why, yes, I am, Toddrick. Never been ... aaahhhhh,” I groan as my side begins to hurt again.

“Never been better, huh, Ms. Daisy?”

“Uh huh. Turn the radio up, please. I don’t want to hear myself groan.”

After entering the CT room, Todd and the radiology technician help me out of my wheelchair and onto the machine’s table. As they strap me in, I begin to feel more pain in my side. I regret not asking my nurse for some pain medication before I left.

“Okay, this should only take about fifteen minutes,” states the white female technician. “I’ll put some headphones on you, and you can listen to music during the procedure. Would you like me to put it on the local rap station?”

“No, actually, could you put it on the country station? I love Toby Keith and Carrie Underwood. Her voice just touches my soul.” The technician stares at me in amazement as though I had just pulled a rabbit out of a hat.

“Are you serious?” she asks.

“I dug my key into the side of his pretty little souped-up four-wheel drive. Carved my name into his leather seats. I took a Louisville slugger to both headlights. I slashed a hole in all four tires. Maybe next time he’ll think before he cheats!” I bellow out the Carrie Underwood lyrics. “Shall I continue singing, or are you going to put it on the country station? I can go all day.”

“The country station it is, Mr. James. I’m so sorry. We’ll get the imaging started.”

The tech puts the loosely fitting headphones on my head while Todd checks the straps one last time. They then leave the room, and I’m left all alone on the table strapped in like Frankenstein’s monster. “Boot Scootin’ Boogie” blares through my headphones. Not one of my favorite country songs, but it’ll ease my anxiety while I’m in this confined space.

I wouldn’t say that I’m claustrophobic. I’ll just say I’m semi-claustrophobic. A closed room with a huge, noisy machine like this doesn’t bother me that much. However, crowded elevators really ramp up my anxiety. They make me feel like a lone sock cramped in a sock drawer. Everyone is so close. Strangers accidentally touching me as they get on. People talking

loudly on their phones about subjects no one cares about. *Yeah, girl, I had so much fun last week. I lost my shoe and my virginity. One of those I can't get back. He he he. Don't tell mom.* Ma'am, no one cares about your conversation, and based upon your outfit, your mom probably knows you're not a virgin anymore.

"Hey, Daniel," says the startling voice looming over me.

"Oh, Richard, you scared me. I was just daydreaming and listening to my country music. Is it over with already?" Richard begins to unstrap me from the table.

"Yeah. I was in the back watching you get imaged. It looks like you have appendicitis. You're going to need surgery. Luckily for you, you're one of our VIP patients, and we can knock this out fast. So, I'm going to need you to get on this bed over here, and we're going to bring you up to the operating floor for surgery. I've already contacted the surgery team. They have an open surgery room available, but we have to bring you up there right now."

"Wait. Wait. Surgery? I don't even feel all that bad. Just a little nauseous and some stomach pain." Once I'm finally unstrapped, I sit up.

"Well, that's all because of the appendicitis."

"Can't you just give me some medicine and send me home? What do you guys call it? Outpatient? Can't this be treated as outpatient?" I ask.

Richard grabs a chair from the hallway and slides it in front of me. It skids loudly on the floor. He plunks down, puts his hand on my knee, and looks directly into my eyes.

"Look, Daniel. I know this is a lot to happen unexpectedly. Trust me, I get it. You came in thinking it was something simple and now you're having a surgery. Quite the start to the morning. Trust me it won't be as bad as you think it will be."

"Will I get to call Lisa before I go upstairs?"

"No time right now. We gotta get you upstairs pronto. I don't want anyone to take your surgery room. I'll call her for you and give her an update. But, right now I need you to sign this surgery consent form and hop on this bed."

I pause for a second to take everything in. Surgery. Wow. I've managed somehow to avoid it my twenty-eight years of life, but now there's no denying it. Today, it will be my turn to go under the knife. I grab the ballpoint pen and long white consent form out of Richard's hand. I shakily scribble my signature next to the giant X. The X that doesn't mark the spot of treasure but my impending surgical doom.

"I'm scared, Richard."

"That's understandable for your first surgery, but it's a fairly routine surgery. We have a great surgery team here, and you will be taken care of. Now, let's get you upstairs."

"One last question. Is this the surgery where I get ice cream at the end?"

"No, that's a tonsillectomy," responds Richard followed by a chuckle.

"Well, I'm getting ice cream at the end anyway. Rocky road."

"Ice cream does sounds like a good plan, Daniel. Now, let me introduce you to Charles. He's one of the surgeons. He, along with one of the nurses, is going to wheel you upstairs to the surgery floor."

Charles assists me over to the bed and latches the guardrails in place after I get in. The loud sound of the guardrails locking into place awakens me to the reality of the situation. *Am I really about to go under the knife? Am I really being wheeled to the elevator for surgery? For surgery?* The little comfort that Richard provided was nice, but it didn't help much. I bet he uses that same pickup line on all of his patients. *Oh, it's a routine surgery. You'll be okay. It doesn't even hurt the first time.* Yeah, right.

As the nurse pushes me into the wide elevator, Charles presses the number eight. All the way to the top floor of the hospital we go. As the door slams shut, I close my eyes to relax myself and try to find some peace and comfort.

"First time having surgery?" asks Charles.

"Yes." I quickly reply as I try to travel back to Peaceville.

"Oh, it's not that bad. This is a simple routine surgery. We just put you to sleep. Then, we'll cut you here, here, and here," he states as he touches my abdomen. "Then, we'll take out your appendix. Easy peasy. Unless something goes wrong. Then, we'll have to filet you all the way open."

Well, it looks like someone has infiltrated Peaceville. Sound the alarm! An intruder has knocked down the metal bar gates with LEAVE ME ALONE displayed on the front. Clearly, this guy is not good at reading body language. My eyes are tightly closed, I'm clutching the white sheets in my hands, and my teeth are clenched as though I'm having surgery right now. I absolutely hate needles, and now this guy wants to cut me wide open. Cut me open! That's not normal. My skin is designed to keep my insides wrapped up like a mummy, but now this guy wants to unwrap the mummy. This pharaoh is not pleased.

It kills me how carefree everyone is taking this surgery. Just a routine procedure. What is routine for them sure as hell is not routine for me. They may be accustomed to doing the surgery, but I am surely not accustomed to having surgery. I'm about to be put to sleep and cut open.

Will I wake up? Will I wake up the same? What happens if I don't wake up? Will they cut out the right thing? How many appendices do I have? What happens if I have two appendices and they take out the wrong one? Will they have to cut me open again? I know I'll surely die from that surgery. Then, who will take care of Sweet Cakes? Will she remarry? She better not go back to her ex. I'll haunt her ass for the rest of her life if she does that. I would be the most irritating ghost of all time. I'd probably flip the toilet paper the opposite direction, hide the TV remote, or put the thawed meat back in the freezer. Guess who's not having chicken for dinner? Cheating Sweet Cakes and her new husband, that's who. Wait. Hold up. What am I doing? Am I really freaking out here? I am. I'll be okay. Just breathe, Daniel. Keep it together. Go back to Peaceville. Where the weather is a nice seventy-five degrees, and you're lying in a field of blue bonnets eating green grapes. Yes, Peaceville. The land of sunshine, happiness, and serenity.

As the elevator reaches the top floor, the door opens and the nurse pushes me out. I'm more relaxed and calm now, as they roll me toward the operating room. No longer am I clutching the covers like I'm Charlie Brown's friend Linus. My eyes are wide open as we pass the other operating rooms, and I read the room numbers. *Room 1. Room 2. Room 3. Room 4.* We make a sharp left turn and enter room 5.

"Okay, Daniel. These lovely people in here are going to get you prepped for surgery. I'm going to go scrub in. My attending, Dr. Baker, will also be scrubbing in. The next time you see me will be in the recovery room, and your appendix will be out. You'll be okay."

"Thanks, Charles." Charles and the nurse who rolled me in exit the room.

"Mr. James, I'm your anesthesiologist, Dr. Holloway," states the muffled voice of a woman who has replaced Charles in my line of sight. She towers over me like a Martian over its abductee, ready to dissect and possibly probe me. A light blue mask covers her mouth and a light blue cap covers her head. "I'm going to be the one putting you to sleep. Are you allergic to any medications?"

"No. Just latex."

"Okay, good. That's one less thing I have to worry about. I'm going to be giving you some medication to help you go to sleep. I call this my 'knockout juice,'" she states while tapping a hanging bag of liquid medicine. "I'm going to put an IV in you, and then we'll begin

sedating you. Normally, my nurse would do that, but it's just me. Just me. Where is everyone?" she questions under her breath.

Dr. Holloway puts an IV in my arm and then hooks it up to the IV bag.

"Okay, Daniel. I'm going to start the medication. I want you to count backward from one hundred, and you will gradually fall asleep," says Dr. Holloway.

"One hundred, ninety-nine, ninety-eight, ninety-seven," I count aloud.

"That's it. You're doing good."

"Hey. Are you Dr. Holloway?" an out-of-sight manly voice inquires from the door entrance.

"Yes, I am. Why? Who's asking?" she replies back.

"Ninety-six, ninety-five, ninety-four, ninety-three."

"Do you work with Dr. Morrison?" the voice questions.

"Why, yes, I do from time to time. What can I help you with?"

"Nine-two, ninety-one, ninety, eighty-nine," I continue counting and let out a sigh.

"Do you remember a patient by the name of Marilyn Smith?"

"I'm sorry. I don't remember her. I've worked with so many patients."

"Eighty-eight, eighty-seven, eighty-six, eighty-five. I'm getting sleepy."

"It's okay, Daniel. Just go to sleep. Once again, sir. May I help you? Who are you?" she sternly yells to the pestering man.

"To cut a long story short, she was my wife, and you helped with her surgery. But since you don't remember her. Let me show you something that will help you remember her."

The door loudly swings open and bangs against the wall. Two loud shots ring out from a gun. Dr. Holloway falls flatly on top of me. I attempt to push her off, but I'm too weak from the medicine coursing through my veins. What in the world is going on? The assailant walks over to me and lingers over me. All I can see is a shadowy figure above me. My eyes are so tired and heavy.

"Well, you said that you were sleepy. Let me help you out a little," he calmly states as he twists the knob up on my medication.

I reach up to grab him, but my arms are pinned by Dr. Holloway. More medicine begins to course through me. My eyelids are so heavy. I can't fight off the sleepiness. Leaving Peaceville. Next stop Dreamland.