

## Chapter 2

Having a meal at Kubuki was more than just a meal. It was a performance. The hibachi chefs did a whole thing—lighting an onion volcano, shooting food morsels into the mouths of waiting diners, slapping their metal utensils against the hot cook surface and so on. Griffin and Allie sat with two other couples spread around two of the three sides of the table. Ward and Joan were at the caddy-corner side while Jordie and Olivia were closest. Jordie was next to Griffin and they chatted amiably about the state of the world. Invariably, the subject of EMS came up.

“Are you still doing the EMT thing?” Jordie asked.

“Yep.”

“How many years now?”

“Twenty.”

“Anything good lately?”

Griffin knew what he meant by “good”.

“Had a cardiac arrest the other day. Woman dropped dead in the ShopRite.”

“What did you do?”

“CPR, shocks. Didn’t help.”

Jordie returned to his food for a moment, then looked back at Griffin and asked, “Why not?”

“Five-percent survival rate for sudden cardiac arrest outside the hospital.”

“Even with CPR and the ADD?”

“AED. Correct. She was probably gone before we even got there.”

Jordie considered that, swished the fried rice around on his plate, then asked, “What’s the worst call?”

Griffin considered the question. “Well, any call where the patient dies is right up there.”

Jordie nodded. He looked like he was waiting for more.

“But anytime you hear a page for a patient bleeding from the rectum,” Griffin began. Jordie’s face lit up and he broke into an idiotic smile. “Nothing good’s going to happen on that call.”

Jordie started laughing. He held his fork stationary and laughed. “Bleeding from the rectum,” he cackled through a mouthful of rice. “Jesus.”

“What’s so funny?” asked Allie, who was sitting on Jordie’s other side. Jordie dropped his fork. He was spasming.

“Rectal bleeding,” Griffin said. “Jordie is charmed.”

Allie looked at him. “Christ, Jordie, you ghoul.”

Finally able to raise his head and swallow, Jordie took a deep breath and let out a final, “Jesus Christ, that is hall-of-fame!”

Later in the car, Allie looked out the passenger window and said, “What’s so funny about rectal bleeding?”

“Nothing. It’s a mess. It’s serious. The patient’s humiliated.”

“Have you had one of those?”

“Couple times.”

“What do they—why do they bleed from there?”

Griffin turned to look at her. “This you must know right now?”

She shrugged.

“It’s a bleed in the intestine or stomach. Sometimes they don’t even know it until they wake up, get out of bed and start shitting blood after bleeding into their gut all night.”

“Ew.”

“And if they bleed too much, they can pass out because their blood pressure tanks when they stand up.”

Allie was riveted.

“And if they don’t get IV fluid replacement pretty quick, they can go into shock from the blood loss, even die.”

Allie said nothing, then turned back to look out the window.

“OK?”

She asked, “Did they make it?”

“I don’t know. Probably.”

“You don’t know?”

“We take them to the hospital, then leave. They were conscious and talking when we left them, so I assume—”

“Alright,” she snapped.

Griffin was driving on autopilot and was barely aware of pulling into the driveway. He turned off the ignition and sat. Allie sat. He turned to her and said, "It's been 20 years. You know the drill. Why the questions tonight?"

She stared straight ahead through the windshield. "I guess it didn't occur to me," she began. Griffin waited for the rest of the sentence.

"What didn't occur to you?"

"That you, that—" She looked into his eyes. "The dead woman in the supermarket, the, the bleeding from the—" She stopped. She cocked her head to look at him from a different angle. She grabbed his neck with one hand and pulled him across the center console to plant a kiss. It was a sweet kiss. She broke it off and said, "I love you."

Griffin smiled. "I love you too."

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It was Griffin's night to get out of bed and go on a call, Tuesday night, 11:00 PM until Wednesday morning, 6:00 AM. He took care to have his last vodka by 10:00 PM, pretty sure that an hour would be enough for the effects to wear off. The squad building had no sleeping quarters and since the town of Forston was only a little more than one square mile in area, responding from home was acceptable.

His partner on Tuesday nights was Mira, supportive and patient while simultaneously unsupportive of bullshit and excuses. Her bedside manner was natural and embraced by almost every patient. Griffin was convinced that her accent helped. It made her a little exotic. He'd hoped that if he ever hit the deck and needed an ambulance, she'd be on the crew.

He had entered REM sleep when 2:18 AM arrived and the pager went off. He awoke with a start and was disoriented. Allie didn't budge. She could sleep through an avalanche. He instinctively rolled so that he sat erect on the edge of the bed in one motion, then bent down to paw through the clothes on the floor in the dark. His BDU pants lay there in a lump on top of his Forston Rescue Squad job shirt. It took a minute to shake them out and pull them on in the right sequence. He already had boxers and socks on. Cinching the belt, he wondered yet again why the pants were still called BDUs, Battle Dress Uniform, a 1980s term that stuck. There was no battle and they weren't dressy. They were, in fact, hot and bothersome with cargo-pants pockets that only the fiercest whackers kept loaded with tape and trauma shears and gloves and maybe a stethoscope.

He bounded down the stairs, out the front door, down the porch steps and out to the street where his Mazda was parked. Off he went, blue light flashing, through the dark, empty streets of Forston at 2:23 AM. He stopped for the two stop signs, stopped for the one red light, then went through. The squad building was exactly three minutes away with no traffic.