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BRAIN DAMAGE

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Poisoned Pen
PRESS

PROLOGUE

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

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

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

I, on the other hand, was safe, insulated. I wasn't the

sort of person who would be shot in the street while going to buy soda at the local newsstand. When I died, it would be from a stroke or cancer, or if I was lucky, my heart would stop beating one night in my sleep when my hair was as white as my pillow and my face was crisscrossed with deep wrinkles.

Or so I thought.

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

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

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

What hurt is everything that came after.

CHAPTER 1

BEFORE

There are times when I truly do hate being a doctor, and one of those times is right now, right this minute, while I'm staring down at the groin of a forty-five-year-old man who smells like he hasn't bathed in weeks.

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

Yes, the life of a dermatologist is very glamorous.

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

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

I try to back away, giving myself a little distance between me and the fungus, but I slam into a wall. Our examining rooms are tiny. Minuscule. Several of my coworkers have

complained to Roger, our boss, that we can't work in such tiny spaces, but tiny spaces mean more examining rooms to stuff patients into, which means we can see them faster. It's all about the bottom line with Roger.

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

I purse my lips together and glance over at Jessica. "He gave you *what*?" I ask.

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

I can tell that Jessica is struggling not to laugh.

"You mean *fungicide*?" she asks.

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

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

I write Mr. Leroy a prescription for a tube of high-potency fungicide and explain to him how to use it. I also say a few words about hygiene, certain that they will be forgotten the second he leaves the room. He could probably also use some counseling on getting his diabetes under control, but I'm not a miracle worker. Besides, I've been told by Roger that I've got a ten-minute quota for each patient, and I've already used up nine of those minutes.

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

It's not like patients don't cry in here. I've had to hand over more than a few cancer diagnoses in my time, and I've got a box of tissues in the corner of the room that gets replaced on a regular basis. It's something they teach you in medical school: how to comfort a crying patient. Except the first time you actually see it, you panic. You don't know what to do aside from patting their shoulder and saying, "There, there."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Mr. Leroy snorts.

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

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

"I *promise*," I say.

I hold my hand out to Mr. Leroy, and he shakes it. His hand is big and warm. In spite of the fungus, Mr. Leroy isn't an unattractive man. He's clearly going through a hard time, but he has warm brown eyes and a nice smile.

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

I feel my cheeks color. "Thank you."

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

I'm already behind schedule as I bring up the chart for my next patient on one of the computers in the hallway. As quickly as I can, I scan the details. Clark Douglas. Thirty-eight years old. Here to have a suspicious mole checked out. I'm just relieved that it's not another teenage acne patient. Not that I mind teenage acne... Raging teenage hormones definitely help pay the bills. But when

it gets to be August, it seems like that's all I see. The kids want their skin to be clear before school starts up again.

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

Let me just say that I may be a doctor, but I'm only human. And sometimes when a patient strips down in front of me for a mole check, even though I am a complete professional in my behavior, I can't help but react. For example, if the patient sitting in front of me has the most perfect body I've ever seen. In my life.

Clark Douglas is gorgeous. I'm not sure I've ever used that word before to refer to a man, certainly not in my adult life, but it really does seem appropriate in this case. He is *gorgeous*. And also, he's topless. Topless on my examining table, his pecs and deltoids perfectly toned—he is *definitely* doing enough upper-body work. I can make out the bulge of a six-pack on his slim abdomen. This is not a man who's got fungus hidden in the folds of his groin, that's for sure.

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

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

I've got to get myself under control.

"Mr. Douglas?" I ask. I strip my voice of any sort of emotion.

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

"I'm Dr. McKenna," I tell him. I hold out my hand to him and he shakes it. His hand is broad and warm, perfectly enveloping my smaller, plumper hand. "Didn't Jessica give you a gown?" I ask him. I know very well she did. I see it lying unused next to him on the examining table.

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

"It's for modesty," I explain.

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

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

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

This guy is really scrambling my brain. Jesus.

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

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

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

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

"Do you have any other questions or concerns?"

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

Ha-ha, very funny.

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

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

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

"No exceptions?" he asks, turning the full effect of his Pacific Ocean blue eyes on me. And how does a *man* end up with such beautiful eyelashes? I would have to empty half a bottle of mascara onto my pale lashes to have that effect.

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

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

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

"What if I stopped being your patient?" he offers. "I can find another dermatologist."

"I'm afraid not."

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

I sigh. "Fine. Maybe if it were ten years ago."

"How about five years ago?"

I shake my head again, but I can't help crack a smile. I know he's still just flirting harmlessly, but he's so freaking charming. It's hard not to fall under his spell, just a little bit. "Maybe."

"Now we're talking..." He nods thoughtfully. "What would you say to...three months ago? What if I ask you out again in three months?"

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

Mr. Douglas pumps his fist. "All right!" He winks at me again. "I'll see you in three months, Dr. Charlotte McKenna."

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

CHAPTER 2

AFTER

The light feels like a knife.

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

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

"No pupillary response," a voice announces.

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

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

It happens again. My eyelid is yanked open, and I see the blurry outline of a face before the light floods my field of vision again. The pain came slower before, but this time

it is immediate. I've never been a religious person, but I find myself praying that the light will go away.

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

"She had pretty eyes," a voice comments.

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

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

"I didn't see it."

That light again. It's so painful, I can barely stand it. It seems to go on for an eternity as the two voices talk. Finally, I reach out an arm and swat at the source, hoping to make it stop. Anything to make it stop.

Whatever I did works. There's a sharp inhale of air, and then the light goes out once again. Thank you, God.

"Did you see that?" says the second voice. "She was responding to us. A *purposeful* movement. She's in there!"

"Fine, maybe she's not gone," says the first voice. "But you and I both know how poor her chances of a meaningful recovery are."

"If she goes to rehab..."

"Her prognosis is still terrible." The owner of the voice sounds angry, although I don't know why. "So go ahead and try to rehabilitate her. Keep her alive in a vegetative state for the next decade instead of giving her organs to somebody who isn't practically brain-dead."

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

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

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

"Well, she's not dead yet."

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

Yet.

CHAPTER 3

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

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

Charlotte? Who is Charlotte?

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

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

I look down and see there is a plate in front of me. On the plate, there are three mounds of food. They all sort of look like mashed potatoes, but one is gray, one is

white, and one is yellow. Multicolored mashed potatoes. I wonder how they do that.

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

"Open your mouth, Charlotte," the girl says.

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

"Come on, Charly," she says to me. Amy. Her blue eyes are wide and hopeful. "Open your mouth for me." She demonstrates by opening her own mouth. She has a little pink tongue.

I really want to make Amy happy, so I do what she did. I open my mouth.

Amy's face lights up like a Christmas tree. She's even prettier when she's happy, although I'm not entirely sure why opening my mouth made her so happy. "Great job!" she tells me.

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

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

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

“You’re doing amazing today, Charlotte,” she says. Amy’s standards for “amazing” seem ridiculously low too.

“Now I need you to swallow.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

Amy just sighs and shakes her head.

CHAPTER 4

BEFORE

My long, exhausting day ended with a funeral.

It was for one of my patients. It isn’t often that I lose patients, but when I am extended an invitation to a funeral, I always attend if at all possible.

I wasn’t specifically invited to today’s funeral, but I went anyway. My patient was an elderly man named Harold Branham, and I was the one who diagnosed him with melanoma after he came to me with a suspicious mole. He didn’t have much in the way of family support, so I tried to get him in for appointments at the end of the day so I could spend extra time with him without the clock getting in the way. He fought hard against the cancer, but in the end, he lost the battle.

I was practically the only person who attended the sparse ceremony. Branham was an only child who never married or had children of his own. The only people who attended were a couple of friends and some former work colleagues from before he retired. As I sat in the nearly

empty church, I couldn't help but wonder about what my own funeral would be like someday. After all, I am *also* an only child who has, as yet, not married or had children. I don't have many friends either, since my work consumes my life.

As I shed a few tears for Harold Branham, I wondered if I was also shedding them for my own future.

Because of the funeral, it's quite late by the time I finally get home to my apartment near Central Park. My feet are aching, and I have an inexplicable stain that appeared on my blouse at some point during the afternoon, so I nearly collapse with relief when I reach my own apartment.

This apartment is my one indulgence, and I can barely afford it. I have a great view, a spacious living room, a beautifully furnished kitchen, and two bedrooms—and I pay for it through the teeth. People seem to think physicians are rolling in dough, but I'm here to tell you that's just not so. I finished my education with half a million dollars in debt, between the medical school and college loans. Then I started a four-year residency, where I calculated my hourly salary to be approximately half the minimum wage in New York. I'm doing much better now, but I'm still scraping my way out of a very large hole.

Still, when I saw this apartment, I knew I had to have it. For a while, I was holding off on buying anything until I was engaged or married, but then I realized that might never happen, so why shouldn't I have my dream apartment?

The one thing I do wish we had is a doorman. We have a buzzer to enter the building, and it always makes me a little nervous. You know, being a single woman living

all alone and all. Everyone just lets everyone in behind them even if they don't know them—it's like a free-for-all. But I've got a padlock on my door, which the locksmith assured me not even the best spy in the CIA would be able to jimmy open. So hopefully, I won't be murdered.

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

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

The weird cat lady isn't just a terrible stereotype. I honestly believe it's a real thing. Up to 50 percent of cats carry an infection known as toxoplasmosis, which is the reason pregnant women shouldn't change litter boxes. I've read that toxoplasmosis can theoretically infect the brain of the owner, effectively causing psychosis. So the weird cat lady might not just be weird because she's got twenty cats in her home...it might be because of toxoplasmosis. That's a *real thing*. I didn't want to end up with toxoplasmosis psychosis.

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

I open up a can of cat food for Kitty, who refuses to eat

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

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

I hear my phone buzzing inside my purse and contemplate whether I should answer. It could be my best friend Brigid (well, best friend after Kitty), but more likely, it's my mother. Ever since my father passed on, she's been checking up on me on a daily basis. And our conversations always touch on the exact same topics: the fact that I live alone and the fact that I don't have a boyfriend. I'm not in the mood right now, but I pick up anyway.

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

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

"What are you making!"

"Salmon with a salad," I say as I pull a head of lettuce

out of the fridge. Since I read that prepackaged lettuce is dangerously unhealthy, I've been cutting my own, so I have to balance the phone precariously between my chin and my neck as I slice. I miss the days of ignorance.

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

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

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

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

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

"No."

"But if you could just meet him and—"

"No."

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

I think back to Harold Branham's desolate funeral and feel a brief jab of foreboding. But that's no reason to go on a horrible date set up by my mother.