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Attending

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Attending

Puddles collected on the pavement, glistening in the light from the 7-Eleven against the backdrop of this rainy October night. A man stood outside, staring at the reflections with his hood up and a gun in his hand. The rain splashing down caused the red and green glow from the sign to dance and sparkle like Christmas tree lights. Nate shifted his gaze from the scene to the focus of his visit.

Through the plate glass, he could see Staci behind the counter. She was perched on a tall chair, her elbows resting on the red counter top, hands cupping her chin. She looked bored, but in an elegant way that was juxtaposed with the cheap surroundings of the convenience store. Her long, chocolate brown hair framed the delicate features of her face. Her large dark eyes were a little wide set, giving her a perpetual look of wonder. Her nose was ever so slightly upturned, cute in an All-American, girl-next-door way. And those lips, which Nate thought of as strawberry lips ever since he'd tasted her lip gloss during their first kiss.

Now those lips smiled at an elderly woman who stopped at the counter, and Staci pointed at a cooler in the back of the store in answer to a question. A handful of other people milled about the aisles, but Nate only had eyes for Staci. He had loved her for years. At first it was from a distance, admiring her beauty, the graceful way she moved and talked. The easy way she laughed and flirted, constantly smiling, a ray of sunshine in Nate's dark life. He'd finally worked up the courage to speak to her and, to his surprise, she knew his name. She had noticed him in a class they had together, in fact.

Nate was not exactly handsome, but he was big and tough looking. Even more, he exuded the dark, brooding magnetism that seemed to attract girls that had a taste for danger and boys of whom their parents would disapprove. Staci had that streak. They had been dating for nearly a year, a wildly passionate whirlwind of romance, arguments, and tearful reunions. But lately Nate, ever the jealous boyfriend, had begun to grow suspicious.

It was difficult to name what bothered him. Perhaps it was the way that Staci looked from time to time, a little more mascara, a little more time spent attending to her hair. Maybe it was a couple of times when she didn't respond to his texts for an hour or two. Whatever it was, Nate's mood had darkened to the point where he was



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convinced Staci was cheating on him. He had taken to shadowing her to her evening shifts at the 7-Eleven, watching her in the hope and dread of confirming his suspicions. Finally, last night he thought he'd caught her. She had refused to let him pick her up after her shift, saying she was going out with her friends. He'd waited until the end of her shift at 10:00pm to stop by and watch her, but she was nowhere to be seen. He guessed she'd never even worked that night, but the next morning when he stopped by her place, she'd said that work was boring as usual, and she and the girls had hung out until late. It was a Friday night, after all, she had said, coldly.

As the cold rain beat down on the hood of his black raincoat, he clicked the safety of the Glock off and on, off and on, in his deep front pocket. The gun belonged to his father, a cop with the Minneapolis PD, now drunk and asleep on his Saturday night off.

A battered F-150 growled up to the convenience store, and a guy Nate recognized jumped out. Lawrence, or Lewis, or something, he thought. Lawrence hurried through the rain and into the store. Nate saw Staci look up as the doors opened, and saw a surprised smile appear on her lips. Those strawberry lips. Nate fumed. He took a few steps toward the 7-Eleven, still watching.

Lawrence made a beeline for the counter. Staci leaned forward enticingly over the counter top toward him. Good Old Lawrence must have made a joke because Staci tossed her head back in a laugh, her chocolate curls cascading over her shoulders. Nate clicked the safety off again. He felt the rage building up in his chest, choking him.

After their little chuckle, Staci reached over the counter and took Good Old Lawrence's hand, pulling him toward her, and appeared to whisper in his ear. That was it for Nate. His vision blurred with tears and a muted sob burst from his throat like an angry animal. His face was a twisted mask of fury as he stepped out of the shadows toward the doors.

Sue Greene was exhausted but happy. She was nearing the end of her shift in the Emergency Department at Hennepin County Hospital. The day had been extra tiring because the residents were all away on their Fall Retreat for the weekend, so the attending physicians had to cover more ground with less staff. In some ways, though, it was easier. When working with her residents, Dr. Greene had to take extra time with each one to review the patients' cases and make sure proper care was administered, sometimes spending nearly as long with the residents' patients as she would if they were her own. But well-trained future doctors had to be crafted by top-notch residencies, and Sue had a gift for mentoring. She was a petite brunette, with a light dusting

of freckles that gave her a youthful appearance. Combined with her sarcastic humor and patience in teaching, she was the most beloved attending physician of the residents on her service.

Sue felt good because she'd already seen more than twenty patients that day and was really in the groove. It was much more efficient, working on your own with competent, pleasant nurses like Quinn and Marco. Since beginning her shift, she had seen some straightforward cases of strep throat, the usual gamut of abdominal pains, sewn up a couple of lacerations, drained one particularly disgusting abscess, and saved the life of a man having a heart attack. She had to admit, it was fulfilling, meaningful work. Even though it was draining, she never tired of the pace of the emergency room. It was the fierce joy of saving lives, the rush of adrenaline making lightning-fast decisions during emergencies that fed her spirit.

Now, she was crammed into an exam room, speaking to a Hmong man, his wife, and their five children through an interpreter about follow up care for his concussion. They were making slow progress when Quinn poked her blonde head into the crowded room.

"Sorry to interrupt, Dr. Greene," Quinn said, "but you're going to be needed in the trauma bay." She looked meaningfully at Sue.

"I'll be right there," Sue replied. She finished her instructions to the interpreter, smiled politely at the Hmong family and excused herself. She squeezed out of the room and caught up to Quinn at the nurses' station. "What's going on?"

Quinn looked up, her blue eyes wide with horror, "Something terrible has happened."

Staci's coy grin melted into dismay as Nate swept into the 7-Eleven, his raincoat spreading open, billowing out like Batman's cape as he drew the Glock from his pocket. His hood was still up for the security cameras, but Staci could see the rage contorting his features. Good Old Lawrence hadn't seen him come in, still had his back to him in fact. But he saw Staci's expression change and began to turn around.

He was too slow. Nate raised the pistol high as he stepped in and brought it crashing down, catching him just behind the left ear. He went down hard, his head bouncing off the shiny, red counter top on his way to the floor.

Staci screamed, "Lance! No! Oh my God!"

Lance, not Good Old Lawrence, Nate registered. Well, it's

not going to matter for much longer anyway. He stared down at Lance. Blood coated the side of his face from a long tear in his scalp, but he was moving. Nate looked back at Staci, suddenly ice cold.

"Nate! What have you done?" Staci screamed at him; her hands now hooked into her hair like talons on either side of her head. Tears had begun to stream down her face.

"You cheating bitch," Nate said. He pointed his gun down at Lance who was now trying to pull himself up, hanging onto the gum and candy rack on the front of the counter. "How long have you been running around with this bastard behind my back?"

Staci didn't reply except to sob in terror.

"Nate?" asked a voice from a side aisle.

Nate whirled to see who had recognized him. He had planned to dash in, disguised from the security cameras, hurt these cheaters like they had hurt him, then snatch some cash from the register so it would look like a robbery instead of a murder. But then the cheating whore had gone and screamed out his name! When he spun around, his heart dropped into his gut. There next to the beer cooler, stood his father's partner, Dante. Not just some guy out picking up a case for the poker buddies, an off-duty cop. An off-duty cop who knew him! This plan was quickly turning to shit.

"Nate, put down the gun and let's talk about this," Dante urged.

I can still do this, Nate thought. It's just going to get a whole lot messier.

"Dante?" he asked, buying time.

"Yeah, Nate. It's me. Look, I know you don't want to do this, you don't want to hurt anybody."

"Oh, you're wrong about that," Nate replied. His gun hand whipped up and he fired twice. The first round hit Dante in the chest, but the second went wide, shattering the glass of the beer cooler. Dante was knocked backward off his feet and into the cooler sending glass and beer foaming out onto the floor. The store suddenly filled with the malt odor of Grain Belt.

Nate turned back to see Staci ducking behind the counter, iPhone pressed to her ear. Lance was trying to get to his feet. Now there were several people screaming, crouched in the aisles. This was turning into a real shitstorm.

"Nobody move!" Nate roared. When Lance lunged weakly forward, Nate easily side stepped him and shot him point blank in the chest. Lance collapsed on the dirty tiles, blood soaking the front of his Minnesota Vikings hoodie. Nate noticed that the bullet had gone right through the logo on

his chest. It looked like he had just assassinated Viktor the Viking with a shot through the temple.

Staci screamed again from behind the counter. He was about to jump over and finish this business when someone made a dash for the door. Without thinking, Nate fired three shots at the fleeing back. The person stumbled and fell, thudding off the door. At first Nate couldn't process what he was seeing. The person looked like they were bleeding rainbows. And then he realized, the floor was covered with Skittles. He'd just shot a kid, a little black girl with beaded braids in a pink jacket who was running scared, and he'd shot her right in the Skittles.

Nate let out a horrified laugh. He hadn't come here to kill a kid. But those damn Skittles, so brightly colored, rolling all over the floor. It was just funny somehow. Here he was, coming for his cheating girlfriend, and now he'd killed his father's cop partner, Good Old Lance the Vikings fan, and now this kid bleeding rainbows. Time to get out of here. But first he had to attend to his revenge. Where has that cheating bitch, Staci, gone?

He jumped up on the counter and looked behind it. No Staci. He scanned the store wildly and caught a flash of red, her 7-Eleven polo shirt. She had skirted the end of the counter and was crawling down the far aisle. Nate stormed the length of the store shouting her name. He rounded the corner and saw her crouched next to Dante in a puddle of beer and glass shards. The shocking thing was that Dante was sitting up. And even though his shirt was soaked with blood, in his hands was his police-issue Glock, pointing at Nate.

When the bullet hit him, Nate was surprised because there was no pain. It felt like someone had kicked him in the stomach and knocked the wind from his lungs, sure, but no real pain. He sank to his knees, trying to gasp for air without success. He tried to lift his gun, but it felt much heavier than before. In fact, everything felt heavy. Not just the pistol, but his arms, his head, even his eyelids felt like they weighed a thousand pounds. He got the gun halfway up, looking into Staci's dark eyes, her upturned nose, those strawberry lips...

The second round hit him in the right cheek, just below the eye. Nate fell backwards, crashing into a display of potato chips, and went sprawling on the floor. Staci buried her face against Dante's shoulder and sobbed. Dante held his firing position a moment longer, then dropped his shaking hands into his lap with a groan of pain from the effort. In the sudden silence they heard sirens approaching.

"Where's Keysha?" Dante gasped to Staci. "Where's my daughter?"

"Your daughter?" Staci tried to pull herself together. "What's she look like?"

"She's twelve... pink coat..." Dante swooned. "...name is Keysha...Keysha Greene."

"There's been a shooting, some kid trying to rob a 7-Eleven on Como Avenue in Falcon Heights," Quinn explained as she and Sue hurried to the trauma bay.

That's my neighborhood, thought Sue. "How many injured?"

"There are four GSW's coming in by squad. They should be here in just a few minutes. It doesn't sound good though. Three of them are kids."

"Someone was shooting kids during a robbery?" That didn't make sense to Sue. Sometimes one of these thugs freaked out during a hold-up and shot a gas station attendant or witness, but it was more rare than you might think. On the other hand, desperate people were unpredictable. She was suddenly glad that her husband had the night off. He was a Minneapolis PD officer, and with the location of this shooting, he would have probably been one of the first to respond.

"It sounds like the shooter was one of the kids," Quinn answered. "But of course, they couldn't say too much over the radio."

They stepped into Trauma 2. Marco, the other nurse on Dr. Greene's team, was already there and helped them into the yellow paper gowns that covered their scrubs. Three other teams were rushing in as well, making the trauma bay quite congested. Sue noticed Anna Nielsen, one of the trauma surgeons, heading her way. She was glad. Anna was just a year out of residency, but she was talented and compassionate. Unlike the stereotypical surgeon, Anna didn't wield her ego like a club, beating everyone over the head with a surgical superiority complex. She didn't have to; she was good at her job, and everyone knew it.

"Dr. Nielsen, are you with me for this one?" Sue asked.

Anna nodded. "I was glad to hear you were on this shift, Dr. Greene. It's always a pleasure to work with you and your team. Sounds like this is an especially tragic case tonight though. Do you know what happened?"

"We're not clear on the details, just that there was a shooting and three of the patients are kids. One of the patients may be the shooter, I'm told."

Anna raised an eyebrow at this but didn't say anything. Just then, the trauma bay doors burst open, and the first squad rushed in with a large African American man strapped to a gurney.

As they rolled into Trauma 1, the paramedic was spouting a cascade of information to the other emergency team, "Forty-two-year-old male with a single gunshot wound to the right chest."

Sue caught a glimpse of bloody jeans and a torso packed with bandages as they hurried past, but nothing else. The patient's face was half covered by an oxygen mask and the medical team obscured most of her view. Still, something unsettling nagged at her, begging her attention.

"BP is eighty over fifty, but that's up from where it was, we pushed fluids in route. Heart rate is one-forty, his sats are ninety-five, temp is ninety-six," the paramedic continued. They were about to shift the patient from the gurney onto the hospital bed when Sue's attention was diverted to the bay doors again. The next squad rolled in accompanied by a police officer that Sue only vaguely recognized. She thought he was from a different precinct than her husband's. The paramedic was shouting out information and pushing a gurney where a tall, dark-haired young man lay. This was her patient.

"Seventeen-year-old male, two gunshot wounds, one to the head and one to the abdomen. Heart rate one-fifty, BP seventy over forty-six, pulse is thready, sats at ninety-nine," the paramedic called to Dr. Greene. "Half his face is missing, Doc, but he's still breathing."

Sue suppressed a shudder. Clamp down on it, she told herself, an echo of her advice to each resident she trained when they saw their first graphic trauma. You've seen worse. Keep calm and use your checklist.

"Let's get him on the bed," she directed. The boy was extremely pale, the white skin of his bare torso almost translucent. Quinn, Marco, and two techs took their positions around Nate and half lifted, half slid him onto the raised trauma bed. The techs began cutting his jeans off with sharp shears. Sue and Anna took their places at the head of the bed and began to unpack the bandages from his face, trying not to shift the oxygen mask over his nose and mouth.

"I see the entry wound just above the navel," Marco called out as he and Quinn unpacked the gauze from his abdomen. "We've got a fair amount of blood from the rectum, but I can't find an exit wound anywhere on his back. I think the bullet is still in there."

As he was speaking, Anna removed the last wad of gauze from Nate's face and gasped involuntarily. The right half of his jaw fell open toward his shoulder and his mouth seemed to extend from his left cheek to his right ear. Sue gritted her teeth and began to move quickly but methodically through the physical exam so that Anna could get her bearings for what the obviously necessary surgery would entail. She began a rapid-fire dictation to the medical scribe.

"GSW to the inferior right orbit. Catastrophic damage to the superior right maxilla. Multiple fractures to the right mandible. Right eye..."

Good Lord, she trailed off briefly because she couldn't even find the eyeball. She prodded the shattered orbit and found

the eyeball sunk down and into the hole where Nate's cheek had once been.

"Right eye... dislocated inferiorly, partially into the maxillary sinus. Carotid artery appears to be intact. Anna, look here," Sue pointed at the back of Nate's head. "It looks like the bullet exited just below his skull, missing his brain and spine."

Anna looked carefully at the wounds, taking note of the vascular structures that had been damaged. "Do we know what kind of bullet this was?" she asked the police officer.

"It was a nine-millimeter Glock round," he replied. "The guy that shot him is over in that other hospital bed. He's Minneapolis PD, too. He just happened to be in the 7-Eleven and was carrying his gun when this kid tried to come in and shoot his girlfriend."

At the words Minneapolis PD, Sue's ears perked up. She looked over at Trauma 1 and saw that several of the nurses were glancing at her nervously. As half-formed thoughts of horror began to fill her mind, the trauma bay doors burst open again and the final two squads rushed in together.

The first paramedic was shouting to the medical team in Trauma 3, "We've got a seventeen-year-old male here in asystole! He's full code. We've been bagging him since we arrived on site." Lance's Vikings hoodie had been cut away and a female paramedic was sitting astride his body on the gurney, doing chest compressions as they wheeled into the emergency room. An EMT ran alongside, squeezing an Ambu bag attached to a mask over Lance's grey face. The team jumped into action, but their grim faces betrayed their experienced knowledge of Lance's likely chance of survival.

The second squad was heading for the fourth trauma bay as Sue's attention was snatched away from the new arrival by the drawn out beeeeeep of her patient's cardiac monitor. Flatline.

"We're losing him!" Marco shouted as he began doing chest compressions on Nate.

Sue pushed aside her thoughts for the moment and tersely called to her nurses, "Defibrillator!" Quinn was already shoving the crash cart over to the bed.

From Trauma 4, Sue just registered a paramedic saying, "... twelve-year-old female...asystole...looks bad."

She looked across at Trauma 1 again, feeling the rising tide of fear in her chest. As a nurse stepped to the side Sue had just enough of a gap to see the patient's closed eyes over the oxygen mask. She would have known those eyes anywhere. After all, she often kissed them as she left Dante still asleep in their bed as she headed into the hospital for an early shift.

Quinn handed Sue the defibrillator paddles, who

absently accepted them as her gaze traveled to Trauma 4. A low moan escaped her lips. It can't be, she thought.

The trauma bay seemed to fall silent in her ears. Her vision became a narrow tunnel focused on the beaded braids poking out above an oxygen mask.

"Keysha..." was all she could whisper, through the emotion that tightened in her throat, choking her.

"Dr. Greene?" Quinn asked. "Our patient is flatlining!"

Anna, standing next to Sue, had heard her whisper, and the horror of realization dawned on her face as well.

"Sue..." said Anna.

Sue stood over Nate's body, defibrillator paddles shaking in her hands. She looked into the shattered face of the seventeen-year-old who had shot her husband and daughter.

"Dr. Greene, you are the attending physician! This is your patient!" Anna's voice sounded like it was coming from a thousand miles away. "Dr. Greene! What are you going to do?"