

CHAPTER ONE

Naperville, Illinois

December 13, 2018

Amir bounded up the wooden stairwell to Sami's room and found her and Camille asleep. Though he was running late for his first case, he took a moment to study them from the door; the light from the hallway illuminated the darkened bedroom. Camille's arm was draped over their daughter, and their breathing was synchronized. He wondered what time she'd left their room to cuddle Sami in her "big girl bed," a present his parents shipped last week. The crib remained in the corner of the room. He knew disassembling it would be another bittersweet milestone for Camille and didn't want to rush her.

"My sleeping beauties," Amir said, as he stroked his wife's sandy blonde hair out of her eyes. He kissed her forehead. "Babe, it's already seven."

Camille didn't stir, so he turned on the bedside lamp. She rubbed her eyes and squinted.

"I have a first case start," Amir said. "You getting up?"

"*Des bisous,*" she murmured, asking for a kiss, and pulling him to her pillow.

He nuzzled her slender neck, inhaling the scent of her, then reached over to kiss their daughter's head, full of hair as black as his, only baby-fine. "I'm hopping in the shower. *Yallah,* time to get up, love."

There was no light coming from the master bathroom skylight, and in an hour, the black sky would turn gray in the heart of Chicago's winter. As the water streamed onto Amir's face, he was startled by a sound. He turned his head to the right. It was a voice. A male voice. He looked through the foggy glass door at the vacant bathroom.

He was motionless as his naturally slow heart rate surged. A man was speaking, the words muffled as if something was covering his mouth.

I can't rest.

He cut off the water and listened with intent, but except for the sound of the furnace pumping heat through the ducts, the house was silent. He stepped out of the shower, grabbed a towel off the rack, and went to the kitchen. He confirmed the house alarm was on and bolted upstairs to find his girls both still asleep.

He looked out the window and studied the backyard. He could see his grandmother's apartment on Sunrise's top floor, the assisted living community she lived in across the way. Her lights were off. The Naperville Fire Department, next door to her, was dark as well. He peered out the front window from the landing and viewed the cove. Christmas lights flickered in the neighborhood, but there were none in his yard. He recognized his neighbor by his gait, bundled in a ski jacket and earmuffs, his unleashed terrier in front of him. It was probably "Limping Liam" calling out after the dog; his imagination had conjured up crazy sounds.

He looked again in Sami's bedroom and quietly shut the door, convinced there was no intruder. He wouldn't wake Camille again. Another day at home wouldn't hurt.

Amir preferred to jog the route to the hospital, cutting through North Central College and onto the path along the DuPage River, but not when the ground was thick with snow and ice. And not when he was late. He drove past the hospital's "Wings of Hope Angel Garden" and turned into the physician parking garage. He waved to Jade as she got out of her Camry.

"You're running late, too, Dr. Price," Amir said as they walked through the sliding glass doors together. "Hopefully, no one will notice us."

“Around here, they wiretap,” she laughed, referring to the hospital’s scandalous past when their CEO worked with the FBI on an extortion case against the governor. “I’m certain we’re on video as we speak. You, me, and my Afro.” She patted the thick curls on her head.

“That sounds like a song.” Amir pushed the elevator button up.

“Miss Dee will see if we get off the elevator now,” she said and tugged at his winter coat sleeve. “Let’s take the stairs, future Chairman.”

They climbed the three flights, and Jade scanned her badge to enter the radiology suite. She waved goodbye and went into the ladies’ locker room. Amir hung his coat on a hook in the empty doctor’s lounge and went to interventional radiology’s pre-operative holding.

“Look what drifted in,” Lexi said. “It’s John-John’s lost twin.”

Dubbed “Sexy Lexi” by his male cohorts, Lexi, an interventional radiology nurse with a pin-up girl figure, was new to the hospital. Her scrubs were not the standard hospital issue. She bought the high-end kind, slim fit with multiple pockets, and tailored them to fit her ample backside. Today, in bright pink, she walked toward him. “Your patient’s ready, Dr. Hadad. And your pre-med student’s changing into scrubs.”

Amir was accustomed to comparisons to the late John F. Kennedy Jr., as well as the female attention they entailed. Now that he was married, he’d learned to dodge suggestive curveballs and lived by his father’s motto, “Keep your hands in your pockets.” He pulled the floppy hair off his forehead and tucked it into a surgical cap before greeting his patient, Mrs. Amber Trim. Seated next to her stretcher was Mr. Trim, who was anything but.

“Any questions about the procedure?” Amir smiled and rested his hands on the stretcher’s railing.

“How long will she hurt afterwards?” the husband said, clutching his wife’s purse on his lap.

“Usually, some ibuprofen and one or two Percocet are all you need for the uterine cramping.”

Mrs. Trim, with a petite hand, patted Amir’s firm one. “You do whatever it takes to stop the bleeding. I can handle a little pain, but I can’t take another month of soaked pads.”

“Let’s head to the procedure room,” he said and motioned to Lexi. “We’ll give you some relaxation medicine.”

As Lexi wheeled the stretcher into the suite, Amir went to the control room and pulled up MRI images. He’d studied them last night on his home station, and confirmed his approach now. His patient had one transmural fibroid causing her dysfunctional uterine bleeding. He looked into the suite, through the control room’s leaded glass wall that allowed a view, and saw the patient lying on the imaging table. Mrs. Hunter prepped her right groin with chlorhexidine. Lexi, at the head of the table, crouched to avoid the ceiling-mounted imaging arm.

Amir pressed the speaker button and leaned closer to the microphone. “Lexi, please give two and two. I’ll go scrub.”

He put on the lead apron with his name embroidered on the front, securing the Velcro across his waist. As he was looking for his thyroid shield, the student from North Central entered the room wearing it around his neck. “Welcome,” Amir said as he found one in the anesthesia department’s stash.

“I’m Boaz.” The eager student reminded Amir of himself at that age.

“Boaz, that,” he said, pointing to the fibroid on the MRI image, “is today’s enemy. The uterine artery that feeds this fibroid will be my target. Once I embolize it, the fibroid starves, shrinks, and dies. Her uterus will slough off the invader and be healthy again.” An image of Camille in the ICU, hysterical and crying, came to him.

“You can scrub and stand next to me,” Amir said. “Just don’t touch anything or Mrs. Hunter will bark at us.”

When the procedure was underway, the patient under sterile blue drapes, and her right groin exposed, Amir threaded a metal guidewire into her femoral artery. Using the fluoroscopy imaging, he snaked it further into the uterine artery. As he placed the catheter, he heard a whisper.

Jaysus. Ever kill a man?

“Excuse me?” Amir looked at Boaz.

“The plastic you’ll inject inside the artery, is that permanent?”

Amir pivoted, squinting to see inside the control room. “Is someone in there?”

“No,” Lexi said, still at the head of the bed. Mrs. Trim was snoring. “Why?”

Amir looked again at Boaz; did he think this was some joke? This patient’s life was in his hands, it wasn’t a time for whispering crazy shit in his ear. “Go watch from the control room. You’re distracting me.”

Boaz’s ears turned bright pink as he stepped away from the procedure table. “Yes sir, I didn’t mean to interrupt.” He walked out of the room.

“Lexi, her vitals okay?”

“One hundred percent on two-liter nasal cannula, and sleeping like a teenager. Are *you* okay?”

He watched the fluoroscopy monitor as he injected the vessel. He’d be sure to comment on Boaz’s student evaluation form.

