

TILL MEDICINE DO
US PART



CHRISTIANA JONES



*To all the women in medicine who sacrifice every day in service to
their patients.*

Medicine is as close to love as it is to science, and its relationships matter even at the edge of life itself.

— RACHEL NAOMI REMEN

CHAPTER 1



MAKAYLA

OH NO! NO, NO, NO, NO!

I stared at the faint line on the pregnancy test I'd just taken in the bathroom at work. I tilted the stick and looked at it from a different angle. And then another. The blue vertical line remained visible.

Damn.

I gripped the pedestal sink hard as the reality of the situation hit me like a sucker punch to the gut. The possibility that I might be pregnant had entered my mind about a week ago, even though I was on the pill and hadn't missed my period yet. A woman who's been pregnant before knows such things, never mind a doctor.

But this was not supposed to happen. Not now. This was *not* part of the plan.

"Damn it, Makayla," I whispered accusingly to my reflection.

You can do this, she shot back.

I wasn't so sure I could, but I had no doubt *she* could. The woman in the mirror was formidable. With her flawless makeup, expensive ivory silk blouse, tailored black skirt, and

high heels she'd be wearing for at least the next eleven hours, she would handle this as if it were nothing more than a tiny hindrance designed to challenge her. She loved challenges. She *ate* challenges for breakfast. Even her wild mane of curly black hair had been tamed into a low bun with no more than twelve pins and four combs. Determined dark-brown eyes in a rich caramel face stared back, reminding me of how much we had already come through, and I exhaled. We could do this. We *would* do this.

I let go of the sink and straightened up, pausing a moment to let the wave of nausea pass. I wrapped the pregnancy test in a paper towel, but before I could toss it into the trash can, I felt my phone vibrate where I'd clipped it to my skirt. I unclipped it and, glancing at the screen, saw a message from my husband, Jason.

Jason: Hi, hon, I hope you haven't forgotten about Kiara's belt test. Are you coming home first or meeting us at the dojang?

Instantly annoyed, I threw out the pregnancy test and typed a quick reply. There was nothing wrong with my memory. If I had missed Kiara's last two tae kwon do belt tests, it was because I was busy with work.

Me: I blocked off my last appointment slot to make sure I finish on time. I'll meet you there.

I returned the phone to its clip. I left the bathroom and walked to the break room where I poured the rest of my coffee into the sink. I couldn't stomach the pungent smell, and it tasted like cardboard.

"Dr. Jackson, this is your medical student, Elizabeth."

I whirled around, instantly putting on my professional

face as my receptionist, Jessica, ushered a young woman into the room and then promptly returned to her duties. The student appeared to be in her early twenties. She wore a black sweater dress under her short white student-doctor coat and clutched a large black doctor's bag. The bag gave her away as a first-year student. As students progressed in their training and increased their knowledge and confidence, they clung to fewer and fewer manuals and cheat sheets until their tools fit around their neck and in their pockets.

One of my many duties as an assistant professor of medicine at Harvard Medical School was teaching students as they shadowed me in my office. Teaching was key to my career goals, and I normally enjoyed it, but given how I felt and the shocking confirmation of my pregnancy, I feared today might require extra patience.

"It's nice to meet you, Elizabeth." I summoned a smile and stepped forward to shake her hand. "Please have a seat." I indicated one of the chairs at the small round table in the middle of the break room and then sat myself.

"Would you like a doughnut?" I asked, gesturing toward the box on the table. I always picked up treats on Monday mornings for the staff, but today I had been unable to stomach the glazed doughnuts.

Elizabeth declined. Was that a disapproving look? She looked fit. Probably ran five miles every day and was likely wondering why a doctor, someone charged with preserving health, had doughnuts in her office. She had no clue yet what it took to get through a day in a medical office.

"How about coffee? Tea? Water?" I offered, praying she wouldn't choose coffee.

"Nothing, thank you." She seemed quite nervous. It was May, so she'd been in medical school for nine months already, but this was likely her first venture outside the classroom.

“So, tell me a little about yourself, Elizabeth.” I forced thoughts of my unexpected pregnancy to the back of my mind and looked my newest trainee over.

Elizabeth shifted in her seat. “I’m in my first year at Harvard, and I’m starting to explore various fields in medicine before I have to select my clinical rotations next year,” she said. “Thank you for letting me spend the month in your office. My housemate, Aya, really enjoyed working with you last year.”

“You’re welcome. It’s no hardship at all working with such bright students.” I glanced at my watch. “We’d better get going. It’s almost time to see the first patient.”

I led Elizabeth out of the break room and down the hall to my office.

“Here we are.” I sat in my chair, directing Elizabeth to the seat on the other side of the desk. “We have a full day today: twenty-two patients scheduled and room for sick patients to schedule same-day visits. Monday is usually our busiest day.”

Elizabeth nodded and glanced around my office. “You have a beautiful office,” she said.

“Thank you.”

I had invested time and money to decorate my office and make it comfortable given how much time I spent in it. During a light week, I only spent about sixty hours at the office. But in the last two months since the dean of students at Harvard Medical School had mentioned that three associate professor positions had become vacant, I had doubled the time I spent teaching students and writing about my asthma research for publication in peer-reviewed journals. I served as chair of the Student Clinical Rotations committee at Boston General Hospital, a Harvard teaching hospital. Now I was averaging about seventy hours a week at work, to my husband’s great displeasure.

I looked around the office now and tried to see it through

Elizabeth's eyes. I'd chosen an African theme, inspired by a rotation I did as a medical student at the Albert Schweitzer Hospital in Gabon in central Africa. Beige zebra-pattern curtains hung at the single window, and were currently pulled back to let in the spring sunshine and the soft sounds of distant cars. A beautiful desk lamp with an African-inspired base sat on my desk. I had also picked up a few sculptures made by a local Gabonese artist, and these now stood scattered between my "vintage" medical textbooks on the bookshelf. I'd hung my framed medical license on the wall directly across from my desk where I could see it every day and so I would never forget what it had taken to get it and what it would take to forget the shame and humiliation that came with it.

I leaned toward Elizabeth, hands clasped on my desk. "Before we start, I want to make two important points about doctoring that I make to all medical students." I paused as Elizabeth shifted her gaze from the artwork around my office to give me her full attention.

"Tell me," I asked, "what's a doctor's most important tool?"

Elizabeth answered quickly. "Her stethoscope."

I shook my head. "Try again."

"Her brain?"

"An intelligent doctor is a given. You don't graduate from medical school and residency without a high level of intelligence. And, of course, a stethoscope is an important tool, but it's not the most important one."

She waited for me to reveal the answer.

"Show me your hands."

She raised them up dutifully. She'd been blessed with solid, utilitarian hands. Maybe a future orthopedic surgeon, I thought.

"*Those* are your most important tools." I looked intently at

Elizabeth. "Touch is a vital thing. Babies die without it. Your patients and your career as a doctor will not thrive without it. Touch heals," I continued. "I'm not talking about anything supernatural. You just have to touch your patients. It might be a handshake, or a hand on a knee or shoulder. A medical exam involves a patient letting you into their personal space, even though you're often a stranger to them. You must reassure them that you'll take care of them." I paused. "Does that make sense?"

Elizabeth nodded.

I stood and came around the desk to sit in the chair beside her. The touchy-feely part was over. My gaze and voice became hard.

"The second point is this: Medicine is hard. Not hard like you have to stay up late studying complicated physiology and pathology until your head feels like it's going to explode. Not hard like you'll have to work ridiculously long hours when you start on the wards, and you won't get enough sleep, or exercise, or see your friends and family." Elizabeth's eyes were growing wider as I spoke, but I pressed on. "Medicine is hard because people will *die* if you mess up. It's your job to study hard and work your tail off." *Because it'll be your fault if they die because you didn't do your job.* My daily self-reminder did double duty today, also making a point to the medical student.

There was silence. I felt bad. My words had come out harsher than I'd meant, but it was my duty as Elizabeth's teacher to instill this important mindset. And if she couldn't handle it, if she wasn't tough enough, then now was the time to walk away. I had learned that the medical field did not tolerate weakness.

Before I could say anything else, my nurse appeared at the door. "Mr. Pierce is ready," he informed me.

"Thank you, Oscar."

He nodded and left.

I returned to my chair and pulled up Mr. Pierce's electronic chart on my computer. "Mr. Pierce has had recurrent bladder infections," I explained to Elizabeth after quickly skimming the notes from his last visit. "That's not normal at any age for a man and is especially concerning given that he's in his sixties, so I sent him to a urologist. Let's go see how he's doing."

I grabbed my white coat and stethoscope from the hook behind the door, slipped the coat on, and draped the stethoscope around my neck.

We walked to exam room one, and I pushed open the door, smiling at the thin, balding man who stood as we walked in.

"Hello, Frank," I said.

"Well, hello, Doctor. And how are you this morning?" he asked as he took the hand I extended and held it in both of his.

"I'm good, thanks. This is Elizabeth." I stepped aside to introduce her. "She's a medical student at Harvard. I hope it's alright with you if she shadows me."

"I don't mind one bit." To Elizabeth, he added, "I have to warn you. She's probably going to make me pull my pants down."

Elizabeth smiled, embarrassed, as he chuckled.

"Hush now, Frank, and have a seat," I said.

He opted to sit in one of the pair of chairs rather than on the exam table, and I took the stool by the computer stand but remained facing him. Elizabeth stood by the door.

"What did you think of the specialist I sent you to?" I asked Frank.

"He was a nice guy. He wasn't as gentle as you are when he checked my prostate."

I winced. “Your *prostate*,” I corrected absently. “Have you been back to see him for your biopsy results?”

“Nah, I just got back from Lowell. My son just had another boy.”

“Congratulations! What is it, his fourth?” I shook my head in wonder.

“That’s right. His wife quit her job with AT&T. It’s going to take all her time to keep up with those four boys.”

“Bless her heart. Is your son still with the pension administration plan?”

“Yes, he is. You got a good memory, Doc.”

“I listen, even when you try to talk my ear off.” I laughed.

Frank reached into a reusable grocery bag at his feet. “Judy baked banana bread this weekend. She made an extra loaf since she knew I was coming to see you today.” He pulled out something wrapped in a red-and-white-checked kitchen towel and handed it to me. I unwrapped a loaf of banana bread and got a whiff. Normally, I loved banana bread, but today my stomach revolted, and it took every ounce of self-control not to let it show on my face.

“Please tell your wife I said thank you,” I managed to respond.

I paused, bracing myself for what I had to say next. I hated this part of my job.

“I got a letter from the urologist, Frank. I’m afraid it’s not good news.” I rolled my stool closer and set a hand on Frank’s knee, at the same time as I handed the loaf to Elizabeth. “The biopsies show you have prostate cancer.”

In any other setting, it would have been comical how quickly and completely Frank’s expression changed.

“Wh-what?”

“It’s cancer, Frank.”

He still looked confused, even as his eyes began to tear

up. He took several deep breaths, trying to compose himself. "How bad is it?" he finally asked.

I chose my words carefully. "All prostate cancers aren't the same. Some get bad very quickly and spread, while others don't do much and eventually the patient dies of old age or something else. We try to make an educated guess about which way the cancer will go based on what we see on the biopsy. Yours has a low Gleason score, meaning we don't think it's going to be aggressive."

"But we're not sure."

"No, there's no way to know for sure."

"So, what should I do, Doc?"

I sighed. "I can't make that decision for you, Frank. You need to talk it over with Judy. But here's what you need to know. We have two main options. One, we can do surgery and remove your prostate, and this will virtually eliminate any chance that the cancer will spread, but the surgery often causes the bladder to leak and difficulty having an erection."

Frank's eyes widened, and he swallowed hard.

"Or two," I continued, "we can monitor you closely. I'll see you every three months to do a prostate exam and check your prostate antigen blood level. If everything holds steady, we continue monitoring. If the exam or your levels get worse, then you can go for surgery. But it's up to you."

He nodded. He was quiet for a while, and I let him process. After a minute or two, he asked some specific questions about the treatment options and I answered as best I could, given the inherent uncertainty.

When Frank seemed to run out of questions, I made a suggestion. "Why don't you come back later this week with Judy after you've had a chance to digest the news. We can all talk some more then."

He nodded once again. He took a big, shaky breath and visibly made himself sit taller. "We're gonna fight this, Doc."

“I’ll be right there with you. Come on, I’ll walk you to the front.” With a final pat on Frank’s knee, I stood and led him out of the exam room.

After seeing Frank off to the lobby, I glanced at my watch and realized we’d spent close to half an hour with him, a little over the twenty minutes I allotted for each appointment. My patients appreciated me taking my time with them, and in return, they didn’t mind waiting on occasion.

Elizabeth and I walked back from the lobby to the work area in the center of the cluster of exam rooms. I stopped in front of my computer workstation and shook the mouse. My large monitor sat on a long counter, and I worked standing, which allowed me to move quickly between patients. Oscar worked directly across from me at a lower counter so he could sit and handle phone calls and paperwork. A few feet away was an identical setup for Soraya, the nurse practitioner, and her nurse, Cindy, although the area currently sat empty as Soraya was on vacation in India for the week making plans and purchases for her wedding in a few months.

Once my computer came on, I saw the next patient was ready for me. I opened her chart and read my previous notes on her.

The rest of the morning flew by in a blur of physicals, high blood pressure and diabetes checks, sinus infections, lab results, X-ray reports, and consult notes while fielding constant questions from my nurse and the front office staff regarding patient phone calls. Despite the busywork, the pregnancy was never far from my mind. I was distracted trying to figure out how to work it into my career plans, and, more than once, Oscar caught mistakes I almost made.

By one p.m., I was ready for a break. I sent Elizabeth to get herself some lunch, and after grabbing my salad bowl

from the refrigerator, I escaped to my office and shut the door.

The nausea had thankfully resolved by now. I took a bite of crispy greens, carrots, and nuts in a light sesame dressing and closed my eyes to enjoy it. I hoped that food would tame the relentless pounding that had started behind my right eye two hours ago. Since my residency training, I had suffered from frequent migraines. I didn't know if this headache was from the pregnancy, caffeine withdrawal, or just one of the many headaches that came from practicing medicine. There was always so much to do: patients to see, continuing medical education to do, families to support, careers to preserve and advance. I'd almost lost it all once before, and I couldn't let it happen again.

I opened my eyes and looked out my window. I'd jumped at the chance to work in this office after finishing residency four years ago at the age of twenty-eight. The handful of square miles that comprised the Longwood Medical and Academic Area arguably housed the greatest hub of scientific and medical centers of excellence in the world and the gifted individuals who worked there: Harvard Medical School, four teaching hospitals, a diabetes research center and clinic, several colleges and graduate schools, and biomedical firms. My office, located in the Fenway Park neighborhood, was one of a dozen in the area operating as Partners HealthCare, which was owned by Boston General Hospital, a large, prestigious tertiary care hospital.

I fished out a bottle of extra-strength acetaminophen from my purse. I took two pills and washed them down with a glass of water. Hopefully, the headache would be gone by the time I had to face screaming kids and their overzealous parents at the tae kwon do school.

In light of my frequent headaches, I had set up my office to be as relaxing as possible. Even now, I could smell the very

faint scent of gardenia oil gently diffusing throughout the small space. The overhead fluorescent light was too jarring, so the lamp on my desk was the only source of additional light beyond that which came through the window.

After a few minutes, the headache dimmed as a glimmer of a plan began to pierce the fog I'd been enveloped in all morning. If Jason knew about the pregnancy, he would undoubtedly try to stop me from going for the promotion. There was no doubt that becoming an associate professor would increase the demands on my time. It was a good thing Jason was a stay-at-home dad. He'd complain even more about me not being home enough, but I knew he could handle Kiara and the new baby.

Jason was a wonderful dad and a great spouse, even if he didn't fully understand what it took to have a successful career in medicine. Lately, we seemed to be arguing all the time about my work. I would spare us both another argument and tell him about the pregnancy *after* I had secured the promotion. And who knew? There might not be anything to tell. A number of pregnancies were lost within the first few weeks. I forcibly pushed back the morbid thought. I just couldn't pass up this opportunity.

I finished my salad and glanced at my watch. I really didn't have the time, but I needed to make a phone call.

After the usual automated message and a mercifully short wait, a customer service agent picked up the call.

"Thank you for calling FedLoan Servicing. This is Deepak. May I have your name please?"

I provided the necessary information to identify my student loan account.

"I'm calling regarding the last statement I received. I noticed I was assessed a fee of thirty-five dollars, and I'd like to figure out why."

"Ms. Jackson—"

“It’s ‘Doctor.’ This title is why I owe so much money.”

“I’m sorry, Dr. Jackson. You were assessed that fee because we didn’t receive a payment from you last month.”

“That can’t be.” I was meticulous when it came to all things financial. I handled all the household accounts and paid the bills myself. “I’ve paid every month on time for the last four years.”

“Except for last month. Now, I don’t see any previous penalties on your account, so as a courtesy, I will remove this charge. Would you like to go ahead and make the overdue payment?”

“Yes, I would.” While Deepak navigated to the payment page, I racked my brain for what could have happened. I had a fleeting recollection of a headache so bad a couple of Sundays ago, I’d had to abandon my paperwork and go to bed. The next morning, I’d forgotten about the bill I’d been in the process of paying but apparently never actually did.

Deepak’s voice penetrated my thoughts. “How would you like to pay?”

I gave him my bank details.

“Thank you, Dr. Jackson.” Deepak processed my payment. “Your remaining balance is now \$215,182.35.”

I winced. My income was good, but between the loan payments, a Boston mortgage, and being the sole breadwinner, I couldn’t afford to slack off at work. I thanked Deepak for his assistance and hung up.

A few minutes later, Elizabeth returned from her lunch break, and we got on with the afternoon session. By four forty, we were done seeing patients. I signed off on the last of the medication refill requests and set it in my outbox for Oscar with a sigh of relief. I sent Jason a text to let him know I was leaving the office. As I hung up my white coat behind my office door, the phone on my desk rang. I debated for a moment not answering. I really didn’t want to miss Kiara’s

belt test, but it was technically still business hours. I sighed, leaned over my desk, and picked up the receiver.

“Hello?”

“Dr. Jackson, Dr. Smith here.”

I groaned internally. The chief medical officer calling was never a good thing.

“I wanted to let you know that I’ve e-mailed you your metrics report for the month, and you’re not at target for several items,” he said. “Please have a look at the report. We’ll discuss it during our meeting tomorrow.”

I sighed. I had thought graduating from residency meant the end of getting grades, but I was wrong. Over the last several years, physician practices had been coming under increased oversight via measurements meant to ensure that physicians were practicing quality evidence-based medicine. Essentially, it was a way of micromanaging the doctor-patient relationship and left many physicians—myself included—frustrated. I was perfectly capable of providing excellent care to my patients without someone looking over my shoulder, ready to slap my knuckles with a plastic ruler for the slightest oversight or if I deviated from “guidelines.” I’d had enough of being supervised.

“I’ll take a look at the report,” I said reluctantly.

“See you tomorrow, then.” He hung up.

I came around my desk, sat back down, and fired up my computer. As I perused the report, I became increasingly embarrassed. I had been a straight-A student in college and had graduated *summa cum laude* from medical school. I’d gotten derailed during residency in spectacular fashion, and I had been working very hard since to make up for it. Failing to meet *all* the criteria for the quality metrics was unacceptable.

Before long, I was immersed in the report, analyzing where I had come up short, and making notes about how to

address the deficits. Rather than embarrassed and apologetic for my nonperformance, I intended to show up tomorrow at the meeting with Dr. Smith ready to prove to him just how committed I was to my work, my patients, and the organization. This meeting with Dr. Smith was an important one. In addition to discussing my annual bonus and salary increase, I needed to secure Dr. Smith's support. Without a strong recommendation from my department chief, my application for associate professor was dead in the water.

I became aware of a persistent vibrating sound coming from my purse. I pulled out my phone and noticed with a start that an hour had passed. There was a text message.

Jason: Where are you?

CHAPTER 2



JASON

COME ON, KIKI, YOU CAN DO IT.

I watched, helpless, as my five-year-old tried to break the board her instructor held with a front snap kick. Her striped green and white belt was coming untied around her white tae kwon do uniform. After her third try, she started to cry and rub the top of her foot. She looked to where I sat with the other parents off to the side and started to walk toward me, but the instructor pulled her back. I couldn't hear what he was saying to her. He demonstrated the kick again and then held the board once more in front of Kiara.

She sniffled and wiped her eyes with the long white sleeve of her uniform. At the instructor's command, she got into a fighting stance. She yelled and kicked the board, but it didn't break. She kicked it again a little harder. The other students began to shout encouragements. She kicked one more time and was startled when the instructor's hands flew apart with two pieces of wood. She jumped with her little fists in the air until she was bowled over by the other students eager to congratulate her. After a minute or two, she resurfaced and looked for me again, this time with a

massive grin. I cheered and clapped vigorously. She waved, retrieved her split board from the instructor, and skipped back to her place among the other students.

I couldn't have been prouder as I watched Kiara receive her purple-and-white-striped belt. She held her arms out at her sides as the instructor tied her new belt over her uniform. At his command, she bowed and then stepped in to hug him. At the end of the formalities, she was finally able to run to me. I scooped her into my arms.

"Look at my belt, Daddy!" she cried.

"You did it, Kiki. I'm so proud of you."

"Where's Mommy? I want to show her my belt." She twisted in my arms, searching.

I was careful to control my tone. "Mommy couldn't make it."

Her disappointed look hit me like a sledgehammer in the middle of my chest. She didn't respond, just wiggled out of my hold and went to retrieve her old belt where she'd left it lying on the ground. She stared at the other students talking excitedly with their parents. After a minute, she returned and without a word took hold of my hand as we walked out of the studio. I had put her shiny black hair into two thick ponytails with pink ribbons, but her somber expression made her look older than her five years. I racked my brain for a way to cheer her up.

"Why was the basketball court wet?" I asked.

"What?" Kiara looked up at me, puzzled by the random question.

"Because the kids were dribbling on it," I said, and snickered.

Her scowl deepened.

I quickly reached for another joke. "How about this one: Why was the sand wet?"

She hesitated. "Uh..."

“Because the seaweed,” I answered.

Kiara giggled, and my world was alright once again.

“How about we go get some cinnamon rolls?” I suggested as we got into the car.

“Yay!” she shrieked. Cinnamon rolls were her favorite.

We drove a scenic fifteen minutes down the west side of Charles River before turning left toward Brookline. We parked the car and walked the three blocks to the bakery. It was a beautiful late-spring evening. Fluffy clouds had given way to a serene gray-blue sky, illuminated by dozens of shops and restaurants lit up for the evening. After months of dreary skies, heavy snowfall, and bone-chilling cold, the sweet smell of new plants and the warm sun on my face were invigorating. We walked past restaurants with colorful flowers in window boxes, beyond which we could see animated diners chatting away. A trio of young women walked past us, laughing loudly.

As we approached the entrance to the bakery, we were assaulted by the heady aroma of freshly baked bread, almond, sugar, caramel, and cream cheese. My heart lifted as I took in Kiara’s face-splitting grin. Clear Flour Bakery was one of Boston’s gems. It was a small bakery on the corner of a side street and specialized in French and Italian pastries made daily by hand. It was a popular shop, and the line was frequently out the door. Today, though, we were lucky. On a Monday night close to dinnertime, the shop was relatively empty.

I chose a chocolate chunk cookie: soft and moist on the inside with generous chunks of delicious chocolate and crispy on the outside. I got an almond macaron for Makayla. She’d complain about the few invisible pounds she just couldn’t manage to lose, but she’d devour the macaron before I could offer to spare her the extra calories. After peering down the length of the display case, Kiara opted for

her usual: a cinnamon roll. I paid for our purchases and we returned home.

Home was in the historic neighborhood of Brookline, a young, vibrant, and culturally diverse city a few minutes from downtown Boston. Makayla and I had moved out of a tiny apartment in Brighton after we got married and purchased a slightly less tiny yet still pricey condo in Brookline five years ago just after Kiara was born.

I pulled into one of the two parking spots we rented in front of our condominium building and noticed Makayla's car wasn't there yet. Unable to resist the enticing smells coming from the bag of baked goods any longer, Kiara and I sat at the small kitchen table and devoured our treats. Makayla wasn't here to see me feed Kiara dessert before dinner. After much savoring and finger licking, I sent Kiara off to shower and headed to the kitchen to get dinner started.

An hour later, just as I pulled my phone from my pocket to check on Makayla, I heard the key turn in the front door. She walked in looking utterly exhausted, and my annoyance abated. Slightly.

"Hi, honey." I kissed her.

"Hi," she replied. Her movements were weary as she took off her light jacket and hung it in the closet. Unable to hold on to my anger, I pulled her into my arms. She was a little taller than average for a woman, but even in her heels, the top of her head tucked perfectly under my chin. We had been married for seven years, and I was still in love with this brilliant, driven, and...frustrating woman, even when her commitment to her job came at my and Kiki's expense.

The years since she'd graduated from medical school and had Kiki had only made Makayla more beautiful. Her thin, girlish figure had rounded out slightly into curves I knew intimately. Even though she hated her mass of curls because

they were difficult to tame, I loved her hair. That imperfection—if one could call it that—made her human. Everything else about her was so disciplined and focused. Plus, I loved how the state of her hair spoke volumes about her current mindset. Pinned up in a tight bun, she was all business. But, on the occasions she let her hair down...

“Long day?” I asked, nuzzling into her hair.

She sighed heavily. “Yeah. And then Dr. Smith called about a report I needed to look at before my meeting with him tomorrow, and I lost track of time looking over it.”

Finally, she lifted her head and looked up at me. “How upset is Kiara?”

I reassured her. “Your absence at her belt test is forgotten thanks to the powerful amnestic effect of cinnamon rolls.”

She looked relieved.

“I do wish you could have seen Kiki, though. She was brilliant,” I added.

“I’m sure she was.”

I couldn’t let Makayla completely off the hook. “I understand the unpredictable nature of medical practice. But it’s one thing to be caught with a patient who needs you urgently and another to miss your daughter’s belt test—for the third time—because you’re doing paperwork.”

Makayla pushed back from my chest like it had suddenly caught on fire and glared.

“Paperwork? I am doing what I have to in order to do my job well, and to be successful in my career, so I can take care of my family.”

I took a deep breath to keep my frustration in check. Her words were like a broken record. This entire scenario was like a broken record. “You’re a good doctor, Makayla. Anyone can see that. But you work so much. You’re obsessed. It’s like you’ve got something to prove.”

“I *do* have something to prove.” Her hands were planted

on her hips now. Gone was the hint of vulnerability she'd displayed for a brief second, laying her head on my chest and allowing herself to be held.

I stepped closer to her and shook her gently by the upper arms. "No, you don't. What happened during residency is in the past. You've proven yourself by finishing the program and establishing a thriving medical practice."

The look of steel in her eyes showed I wasn't making a dent in her resolve. I sighed.

"Why don't you go get comfortable, and I'll finish getting dinner ready? Would you like a glass of wine?"

Something flashed in her eyes but was gone so quickly I thought I must be mistaken.

"No, thanks," she said. "I'm too tired. I'll fall asleep at the dinner table if I have any wine."

I gave her another kiss and watched her walk off to our bedroom.

A few minutes later, we were all seated around the table.

"How was your belt test, Kiki?" Makayla asked.

"Great. I got a new belt. See?" Kiara showed off her new belt, which she was wearing around her princess nightdress.

Makayla smiled. "Well done, darling."

"Why weren't you there?" Kiara asked.

"I had to take care of lots of hurt people."

"I'm hurt too. Look at my foot." She lifted her little foot to show the faint redness from her board break, nearly plopping it into her plate of pasta.

"Let me kiss it and make it better." Makayla took ahold of Kiara's foot and, instead of kissing it, started to tickle her.

"Stop, Mommy!" Kiara shrieked gleefully.

The rest of was dinner passed pleasantly as Kiara recounted the events of the belt test to Makayla.

After she put Kiara to bed, Makayla sat in an armchair in our bedroom drinking a cup of tea while reading one of her

medical journals and jotting notes in a small bound leather notebook.

She wore shorts and a T-shirt that left little of her unrestrained breasts to the imagination. I drank in the sight of my wife curled up in her chair, her beautiful curls loose around her face as she read her journal. I came up behind her and slid my fingers under her hair, gently massaging her neck and shoulders. After a minute or so, I felt the tension lessen. I bent and kissed her neck, lingering.

"I've still got work to do," she whispered, her husky voice betraying her desire.

My hands moved lower to cup her breasts, which seemed even fuller than normal, then slid beneath her T-shirt.

"I'm serious, Jason. Stop it." She swatted my hands away. "I need to finish reading this article and do the CME quiz."

Stung by the rejection, I straightened and removed my hands. I could see she wanted me. Her hardened nipples and increase in her breathing rate made it clear. "I thought you'd already gotten all your continuing medical education credits for the year."

She straightened her T-shirt and returned to her journal. "I want to get double the required credits. When the Boston General Hospital leadership meets next year to discuss my candidacy for partnership, I want them to have no doubt about my commitment to excellence. Partner physician with Partners HealthCare and associate professor of medicine. That's what I'm going for here. Simply meeting the requirements is not enough."

I came around her chair and knelt in front of her, but she didn't look up from her journal.

"What about me, Makayla?" I asked quietly.

"We had sex last week."

"It's been a month."

This time, she looked up. "Oh," she said. She seemed to

search her memory for the veracity of my statement. “Well, not tonight. I have work to do.” She turned back to her journal and flipped the page.

I knelt for another minute looking at my wife before standing and walking away, wondering just when her job had displaced me as her spouse.