

CHAPTER TWO

Daniel was at the hospital early on Friday; he had first week jitters and didn't want to chance being late. He loitered outside the conference room where his residency group was meeting, having already finished checking his patients. Dr. Udawatte and Dr. Trout seemed nice. It was just the three of them...rural residency programs were always smaller, so that's what he'd expected. Not as much funding for big programs, even though the need for doctors was greater than in the big metropolitan areas. He watched people moving around with the kind of paced intentionality he thought medical professionals possessed in greater measure than most people. Well, maybe moms of small children, too. They seemed to know it was a marathon. If only doctors could wear yoga pants all day, too.

"Excuse me." A tall blonde woman swept past him shouldering an oversized canvas bag that was stuffed to the brim, talking with a dark-haired woman next to her. Her hair was damp, and the scent of lavender lingered in the air behind her. Daniel Durand was too sensible to believe in love at first sight...but there was something about this woman. He couldn't begin to put his finger on it...her non-nonsense gait? Her curvy hips? The slight gravelly quality to her voice?

Daniel suddenly knew he had a soul for the first time, and its first order of business was declaring that it had found its mate. The pull toward her was planetary: he felt like a meteor drawn toward her by an immense gravity like he'd never felt before. She'd only said two words to him, but he had butterflies in his belly like they'd just stayed up all night talking. He felt itchy to somehow do just that; he wanted to talk to her so badly, he felt it like a hunger, like he hadn't eaten in days. And God help him if she smiled at him.

The woman and her friend paused near the elevators, and Daniel caught sight of his brother and waved him over.

"Who is that?"

"Who?"

"The blonde."

Kyle squinted down the hall. "Oh. That's Winnie. She's a midwife."

"Why haven't I seen her before?"

"I don't know," he said slowly, "do you need glasses?"

Daniel rolled his eyes. "I *have* glasses, as you already knew."

"Have you ever thought about laser..."

Daniel walked away while Kyle was still talking.

"Hi," he said, interrupting the other nurse she was talking to. "I'm Dr. Durand."

Her eyebrows made a deep V. "No, you're not. I've met Dr. Durand. Twice."

"I'm the older one's son and the younger one's brother, Daniel Durand. The other Dr. Durand," he said, smiling. He offered his hand, but she didn't take it.

She did not seem amused. "Well, Other Dr. Durand, you're interrupting my conversation with Nurse Lopez." She turned her back to her colleague. Rebuffed? Was he being rebuffed? Strange. And troubling...very troubling. He walked slowly back to where Kyle was watching him with silent amusement.

"You need water or something to put out those flames?"

He frowned, rubbing the back of his neck. "She said I was interrupting."

"Yeah, she's not interested in you, man. You're gonna have to change up your moves if you want Winnie Baker to like you."

"Baker? As in, related to Dr. Baker? My attending physician?" *That's not good.*

He nodded. "Her mother."

"I'm not sure 'mother' could really apply to Dr. Baker," Daniel said, lowering his voice. "I mean, 'mother' conjures up images of warm blankets and freshly-baked treats and lunch box loves notes."

"That doesn't seem like her thing."

“Whose thing?” Both brothers jumped. *I should've known better*, thought Daniel, turning to face their father.

“What are you doing here?” Kyle asked; he always recovered a little faster.

“Just checking on my boys,” Evan Durand grinned. “I was in the neighborhood.”

“Snooping, you mean,” said Daniel, nudging him with his shoulder. He could see in his peripheral vision that someone had unlocked the conference room door. “I should get back to my group.” He left them chatting in the hall, glad that his dad hadn't witnessed his apparently foolish intention to introduce himself to the lavender woman. Perhaps it was only foolish because he'd jumped in too quickly, as usual. A little reconnaissance, first...maybe that's what the situation called for. Then again, his attending's daughter? Was that a good idea?

Since he was in his second year of residency, he'd narrowed his focus to family medicine last year, even though he'd had to complete stints in different departments. It had taken a year longer than he'd wanted to get back to Timber Falls: he'd been at OHSU in Portland the year before. But thanks to his dad pulling some strings, he'd gotten Santiam for his second year of residency. There was a huge need for rural doctors, so this new rural residency program was a great way to give doctors a taste of what that might be like, as well as open up more spots. They'd just gotten a grant a few years ago.

He was enjoying the opportunity to see patients of all ages, but he liked kids especially; it was a little less intense than cardiac or emergency, a little more intense than podiatry or dermatology. Kyle and his dad both told him that he shouldn't have favorite patients. To his surprise, of his current rounds, he looked forward to seeing Mr. Helsing a little more than the others. For one thing, he was seventy-four, but he didn't let that keep him from hitting on all the nurses: respectfully, of course. It was how Daniel secretly imagined himself as an old man. You couldn't walk out of Perry Helsing's room without laughing, and he respected that he could keep a sense of humor while facing bronchitis. He'd be going home soon, and Daniel was going to miss him. His attending physician, Dr. Baker, walked in, her cool gaze surveying her interns, then straightened her black pencil skirt under her white coat. Now that he knew they were related, he could see the strong resemblance between Dr. Baker and her daughter, the soulmate who just gave him the brush-off.

“Mr. Helsing,” Dr. Baker greeted him, business-like as usual.

“Good morning, Dr. Baker, you're looking lovely today. What's the prognosis?” He winked at Dr. Udawatte. “Heard that on Diagnosis Murder once.” Tharushi grinned at him, but sobered when Dr. Baker placed the bell of her stethoscope against his chest and listened to his lungs. She motioned for all of them to do the same. Daniel was last in line.

“The prognosis is good,” Dr. Baker continued. “Your chest x-rays came back clean. We're going to start you on another round of antibiotics through your IV, just to be sure.”

“Well, with four doctors instead of one, it was bound to be good. Hey, send that nurse in here, will you?”

“Which nurse?” Daniel asked.

“The blonde one, the big girl. The baby catcher.” Everyone else had shuffled back toward the door, and he lengthened his steps to catch up with them.

“If I figure out which one that is, I'll do that.”

“Tell her I'm short on Vitamin U.”

Daniel grinned and shut the door quietly. Apparently, he wasn't the only one who wanted to talk to Winnie.

CHAPTER THREE

"I don't understand this, Winifred," her mother sighed from her bedroom doorway. "You'll save a considerable amount of money if you continue to live here." Winnie set her stack of neatly folded sweaters into a blue, hard-sided suitcase, then bent to retrieve a pair of flip-flops that had fallen off the bed, but her hands groped fruitlessly under the pinstriped pink dust ruffle.

"You're only going to be here until the fall. What's the point of moving now, just to move again?"

There was no point in responding, thought Winnie. It wasn't really a conversation, just another lecture she was required to attend. Still, she tried to listen politely instead of rolling her eyes...it only made the lecture longer, and she considered herself too old for such teenage antics now that she was over thirty. Feeling under her twin bed with no success for the shoes, she finally knelt and lifted the dust ruffle to look. Dusty, but otherwise fine, her sandals sat between her MCAT study prep book and the flute case she hadn't touched since senior year of high school. *No reason to take either of those.*

"I'll be closer to the hospital."

"The drive is exactly the same," her mother replied, her silk blouse rustling as she crossed her arms.

"Yes, but it's a shorter distance. Better for the environment."

Her mother owned a Prius, which was ridiculous considering the likelihood of snow in the foothills of the Cascades, but Winnie hoped it would distract her from asking about her motivations for moving again.

"How did you find this person, again?"

Winnie stood up and folded a pair of leggings that had gotten mused. "This person? Her name is Ainsley Buchanan, and she's an elementary school teacher. There was a post on the bulletin board at the library. I figure anyone who likes to read can't be too bad. From our phone conversations and emails, she sounds like someone I'd get along with."

"Well, you're always welcome here." *Translation: I think this is going to crash and burn like the Hindenburg.* But Winnie did appreciate her mother's willingness to back her up in the event that this was, in fact, a bad idea.

"Thanks, Mom." She gave her a kiss on the cheek as she went to get her shower stuff. "Do we have more boxes somewhere?"

Sandra Baker, unused to being defied, huffed her displeasure and went to the kitchen to brew herself another cup of coffee, Winnie assumed. *Whatever.* She was 31 now. She didn't have to listen to everything her mother said. Probably shouldn't, in fact. But Sandra Baker could be a force of nature when she wanted to be. It made her an excellent doctor.

When she finished packing mostly everything, she poked her head into the French doors of her mother's office. "Are you going to come to meet Ainsley?"

"Perhaps another time," her mother said, not looking up from whatever she was typing on her computer. Winnie told herself for the hundredth time that there was no profit in feeling hurt by it.

"But we're still having dinner on Sunday?"

Her mother nodded. "Your grandparents are looking forward to it."

"Me too." She shifted her bag higher on her shoulder. "I guess I'll see you then unless we cross paths at work. Love you."

She did look up then. "I love you, too, sweetheart." Her mother got up from her desk and wrapped Winnie in a tight hug. "Be careful, okay?"

"Always am," she said, smiling.

"And you need a haircut."

"Got one scheduled for Tuesday if I don't get called in."

Based on her light scowl and previous comments, Winnie knew her mother loved routine too much to ever live by a nurse-midwife's unpredictable schedule. That didn't matter much to her. Not when she could help someone make their family bigger, share their love with a brand new person. Make their arrival into this world as peaceful and joyful and empowered as possible.

"Just make sure it gets done. Your ends are looking frayed."

Winnie touched her hair self-consciously, then with a sigh, headed back up the stairs to grab the last of her boxes.



It was six o'clock by the time she finished unloading everything at the apartment. She trudged up the stairs with one last load, her quads burning from all the trips up and down and up and down...thank God for Ainsley's cheerful insistence that she help, or she'd probably have another hour of work ahead of her. Instead, she could order a pizza for both of them, take a long shower, put sheets on the bed and start organizing her clothes...

"Knock knock." A genial male voice behind her made her jump. *Who just yells "knock knock" instead of, you know, knocking? The door's already open.*

Ainsley's face lit. "Hey, you. Come on in. Winnie, this is my friend, Daniel." A nervous shock to her stomach had her thoughts of how the evening might go scattering. *No, it couldn't be...* she turned to see Daniel Durand, the obnoxious interrupter from the hospital. He was wearing another flirty grin, and Winnie glared at him before catching herself. Her new roommate was obviously friends with this man. She'd have to at least try to be civil to him.

She stuck out her hand. "We met at the hospital. I'm Winifred Baker."

"Well," he said slowly, "we didn't exactly meet, since you wouldn't even give me your name." He was still grinning, so it obviously didn't bother him too much. In fact, he seemed delighted by their interactions...how odd.

"I apologize," she said, smoothing her hair back. "I was in the middle of a conversation."

"And I probably should've waited until you were done. But when such a beautiful woman brushes by me, it's hard not to want to get her name and number immediately."

Winnie pinned him with a hard stare. "Does that work?"

His smile finally faltered. "Does what work?"

"That line."

"It's not a line, actually. It's just the truth." Now he was the one glaring, much to her surprise, his lips turned down, framed by a light, neatly-trimmed beard. She couldn't help but notice how long his eyelashes were; it was kind of unfair for a man that handsome to have such pretty eyes, too. The hair on top of his head was longer, pulled back into a top knot, the sides undercut in a way she recognized was fashionable. That was a good word for him: fashionable. Dressed in trendy clothes with a hairstyle that required effort, but also the kind of guy who would throw you away the moment he got bored: fashionable. Winnie glanced at her new roommate, who looked truly curious about what was happening here.

"Well," Ainsley said slowly, "I'm glad you've met now. Daniel, were you stopping by for a reason or just being friendly?"

His smile returned as his gaze fell on Ainsley. "Just being friendly, Slick. Unless you have brownies, in which case I'm here for a sugar hit." Winnie was having a hard time telling the exact nature of their relationship, but it was nothing she wanted to insert herself into. It appeared he would be around often, at any rate, and she couldn't pretend to be excited about that, but she didn't have to sulk over it.

Winnie started backing toward the hallway. "Well, I have a lot of unpacking to do..." It was the truth, after all.

He stepped forward, offering his hand. "Nice to meet you for real this time, Winifred Baker."

She glanced at Ainsley, who was trying to hide her reaction behind her fist; amusement. Pushing her shoulders back, Winnie took his hand and shook it firmly.

“You too, Dr. Durand.”

“Other Dr. Durand,” he corrected, grinning, releasing her hand, shoving his own deep into his dark-wash jeans pockets, like he didn’t know what to do with them now.

She shot him a double thumbs up, then turned and hurried down the hallway. *What on earth was that?* She’d never done that gesture before in her life, and she stared down at her hands, as if demanding an explanation for their strange behavior. *Lashes. That’s the explanation. His eyelashes.*