

# Chapter 1

## *Maggie*

The large delivery room is dim and quiet, except for the whooshing sounds of waves over the speakers and the steady beep of the heart monitor above the bed.

An overwhelming smell of musky patchouli oil makes me gag, but I breathe deep and keep a professional smile on my face.

The first rule of the maternity ward is whatever a birthing mom wants, a birthing mom gets. And, kind of like *Fight Club*, the second rule of the maternity ward is there is no second rule. Okay, just kidding, there's a crap ton of rules.

I shut the door gently and grab the patient's chart from the wall. "How are we doing, Avery?"

"Doctor Maggie is tha-oh!" Avery grips the handrail of the bed, her face corkscrewing tight with pain, breathing through another brutal contraction. When the contraction passes, she opens her eyes and gives me a pitiful look. "Tell me I'm progressing. I can't stand these contractions anymore."

Grabbing gloves off the table next to the bed, I say supportively, "you're doing great. First babies always take longer."

"Really?" Avery asks, the worry in her voice thicker than the patchouli.

"Ninety-five percent of the time," I say matter-of-factly, reaching under her white and blue hospital gown.

Avery puts her heavily tattooed hands over her eyes. "Make it stop," she says before whimpering under her breath. "I can't do this."

I step back and strip off my gloves. "Don't worry."

"No!" Avery shouts. Her voice suddenly grows frantic. "No, I can't...this wasn't..." Avery tries to sit up and grabs for the wires attached to her chest.

"Whoa, hey!"

But before she can get anywhere, Avery groans and rolls to the side as another contraction builds and crests.

"I did it for him," Avery mutters into the pillow after it passes. "He wanted this. And then he..." She looks up, and a tear slides down the red flush on her cheeks. "I'm all alone."

A powerful wave of protectiveness sweeps through my body, and I have to beat back the bitter surge of resentment by breathing deep.

Two in. Two out. Count to five.

Reaching out, I cover her hand with mine. "You're not alone, okay? We'll be with you every step of the way. We got the best nurses and doctors in San Antonio."

Avery gives me a shaky nod of her head. "Thank you, Maggie."

I let go of her hand to make a couple of notes in her chart. "You're seven centimeters. At this rate, you'll be ready to push in an hour or so." Avery nods quickly and closes her eyes. I stand and head for the door. "Rosa Maria will check on you in a bit."

When I reach the metal handle, I stop and look back at her, frustrated by the sight of yet another woman alone and in pain. I clench my hand tight as she squeezes her eyes shut. "Are you sure I can't call someone?"

Avery thrashes her head back and forth. Even though the light from the hallway blinds me, I can see her jaw set and a stream of fresh tears run down her cheek.

\*\*\*\*

"Double up rotations to Ms. Pattison," I say, leaning against the cool wooden countertop of the nurses' station. "She needs it."

Under the person to contact section of her admission paperwork, Avery listed the phone number 867-5309.

Somehow, I don't think Tommy Tutone was responsible for this baby.

"You got it," Deanne, the charge nurse, says attentively, typing instructions into the computer.

"And check on room 202," I add, tightening the back of my blonde ponytail. "The baby hasn't pooped yet, and they can't go until it does."

"Already done," a singsong voice says behind me. I turn around and spot one of my two best friends in the world, Rosa Maria, tossing a pair of gloves in the trash. "Gave him the ol' pinky tip in the tush and hit an oil geyser."

"Gross," I laugh.

Rosa Maria shrugs, rubbing sanitizer into her hands. "The parents were anxious to go home." Rosa Maria makes a pouty face. "Maggie, he was soooooo cute."

"Easy there," I say, noting the heart monitor of the baby in room 203 on the television screen on the wall. "Deanne might have to call a code blue on you."

A code blue was a thing we never wanted to report.

Baby abduction.

"I'm just kidding," she says with her syrupy Latin accent. "The only babies I'm taking out of here are my own."

"Which will be what, ten, eleven months from now?" I ask, my tongue firmly planted in my cheek and a sarcastic smile on my lips.

Rosa Maria hands the chart to the nurses' assistant to start the discharge process. "Once that ring goes on next week, go ahead and place your bets."

Deanne smirks. "No honeymoon period? Straight to making babies?"

Rosa Maria puts a hand on her hip and rolls her eyes. "I'm 25, Latina, and childless. According to my mother, I'm already in the grave."

"Jeez, how many grandchildren does she need?" Deanne asks.

"More," Rosa Maria scoffs and then smiles.

"Well, however many you have," I say, stifling a yawn. "You and Rhys are going to make some beautiful babies."

Rosa Maria sighs and leans against the counter, her long, shapely frame stretching against her baby pink scrubs. Black hair, tied in a tight bun, complements her flawless brown skin perfectly.

No wonder Rhys set his sights on her the moment he walked in six months ago. Rhys himself was quite a catch, the topic de jour every time he came around, the only pharmaceutical rep that turned the nurses into a gaggle of tittering teenagers.

Those two were perfect for each other.

I sigh and look down at my own stumpy body in comparison. Five pounds past curvaceous, a spatter of freckles too dark to be cute.

Jealous? Absolutely. Rosa Maria looked like Jennifer Lopez's younger sister.

I *maybe* looked like Charlize Theron.

If she'd been squashed by a compactor.

And it was dark out.

And someone needed glasses.

"That's sweet," Rosa Maria says, reaching for my arm. "Now, what are you buttering me up for?"

I look at the clock on my smartwatch—twelve-thirty in the morning. *Six hours to go.* I yawn again. "A cat nap?"

"Of course," Rosa Maria says. "We've got everything handled." She looks at Deanne. "Right?"

Deanne smiles. "Everything will be fine."

I nod and tap the counter. "Thanks, ladies. Thirty minutes and I'll be good. Promise."

Rosa Maria giggles. "You're still going to make it to your birthday tomorrow, yes?"

"Of course!"

"Take thirty-five, Maggie. Consider it an early birthday present." The phone rings on the desk. Deanne picks it up and silently waves me towards the quiet room. "Maternity ward, this is Deanne."

I take off my stethoscope and stuff it in my pocket. Then, not hiding another yawn, I turn and head down the hall. As I take my first step, though, a realization rips through me like a bolt of lightning. "Oh my God, how could I forget!" I turn back to Deanne. "How did we do tonight? Please tell me we won? I can't stand those smug Los Angeles punks!"

Deanne covers the phone with her hand. "Toros won 5-1."

I smack the wall in celebration and clench my fist. "Yes! I knew it!"

Rosa Maria shakes her head, grabs Mrs. Pattison's chart, and heads towards her room.

Just as I had two best friends, I had two favorite things in this world: the queso at Valentina's Restaurant and the San Antonio Toros baseball team.

Admittedly, my love of the Toros was borderline unhealthy, but it had kept me sane through the last two years of my life, the darkest period I'd ever had.

It had also introduced me to my other best friend, Dinah.

So, hey, I can't complain.

"How did Brandon do?" I ask eagerly.

And just like having two best friends and two favorite things in the world, I had two hobbies.

One, following the Toros' sublime centerfielder, Brandon Taylor.

Two, Brandon Taylor.

Okay, I also liked photography, but I suddenly forgot about taking pictures once the Toros' season started.

"Didn't get a hit." Deanne shrugs. "He's weighing them down, which is a shame. They could make the playoffs this year."

"They will," I snap defensively.

Deanne waves me away. "Go take a nap. Before two sets of triplets show up."

I sigh. "Fine." I head towards the quiet room but shout back over my shoulder. "Don't put all the blame on Brandon! He's just in a slump!"

\*\*\*\*

The quiet room is cool and silent as I lock the door behind me.

It's nothing more than a twin bed and a small table and chairs, but it might as well be the Ritz Carlton.

I take off my white coat, hang my pager over the chair, and collapse onto the sheets. Outside the door, I hear something over the intercom, but it barely registers as sleep washes over me in a quick, heavy wave, and the world slips away.

Instantly, a vivid dream invades the darkness.

The same fantastic, frustrating dream I have practically every night.

Standing in front of a curtain drawn around a hospital bed, I silence the pager hanging off my lab coat with a quick press of my thumb. Satisfied no one can reach me, I pull the curtain aside and look at my patient.

Brandon Taylor sits on the edge of the bed in a hospital gown. His bright blue eyes shine through the dirt and eyeblack smeared across his cheeks. Running a hand over his thick, dark hair, he gives me a wicked smile. "Hi, Doc."

With practiced precision, I sit down next to the computer attached to the wall. "My name is Maggie. I'll be your doctor today. Now, I understand you felt a pop in your ankle?"

"Yeah, trying to steal home," he says, his voice heavy with disappointment. "Caught it under me."

"Well, you're in good hands," I say professionally, rolling over to him on the stool. "Let's take a look." I grab his leg and move it side to side. A confused expression spreads across my face. "I'm sorry, you hurt your ankle?"

Without warning, Brandon grabs my hand, an eager lustfulness in his eyes. "I have a confession."

I sit there, unable to breathe. "What?" I whisper, looking down at Brandon's hand.

"I don't have an injury. I faked it."

I open my mouth to say something but then shake my head. "I don't understand," I say earnestly.

Brandon puts a hand on my cheek. "I have to have you, Doc." He glances down at his hospital gown. My gaze follows, and I understand what he means.

"I'm sorry," I say weakly. I stand up and back away. The distance cools me down. "You're mistaken. I'm your doctor. Nothing more."

Brandon gets out of bed, strips off his gown, and approaches me. "I can't think, Doc. I can't play ball, can't eat, can't sleep."

I stare directly into his sculpted chest, and then my eyes drift over to his large, round shoulders. I can smell the sweat and grass on him, the faint sulfurous residue of the fireworks during the seventh inning.

"I'm your doctor," I reiterate, my words lacking any conviction.

"And I'm your fantasy."

Brandon slides his rough fingertips across my cheek. Then, quick as a flash, he jams his lips against mine.

"Patient exhibits an insatiable sex drive," I gasp in between his kisses. I wrap my arms around his head, running my fingers through his hair. "Treatment required immediately."

Brandon stops for a second, a bemused smile on his face. "Really? Bad dialogue?"

I shove him backward. I grab the edges of my blue scrubs and pull them over my head, exposing a red and black bra with the number 23, Brandon's number, covering both cups. "You got a problem with that?"

Brandon thinks about it for a moment and then shrugs his shoulders. "Play ball."

*Paging Doctor Rogers.*

I look around the room in confusion.

*How did the pager turn on?*

I happily forget about the pager when Brandon brushes the soft skin on my shoulder with his lips. "You're so unbelievably beautiful," he whispers. The rough stubble on his face sends jolts of electricity down my body.

*Paging Doctor Rog-ers.*

"Don't answer that," Brandon whispers, his warm breath tickling the cool dampness on my skin.

"I'm not going to," I say, frustrated. "I want you. Now."

Brandon obliges wordlessly. In what feels like an instant, he strips me of the rest of my clothes, picks me up, and lays me down on the bed.

*Paging Doctor Rogers! Code red, damn it!*

Just as Brandon is about to have his way with me, the door to the hospital room bursts open, and a mariachi band stumbles through, the lead singer, my ex-husband, belting out a rapid tune.

My mother strides in behind the mariachi band, wearing a white yoga outfit with a golden cross embroidered over her breast. She takes one look at me and gives a disapproving sigh.

"Close your legs, Maggie," she says haughtily, "You look like a slut."

I scream and push at Brandon with the sudden strength of a superhero. Brandon flies across the room, crashes through the wall, and disappears into the San Antonio night.

Instantly, I'm off the bed, a camera around my neck, taking pictures as he plummets towards the Riverwalk, sirens wailing below.

Just before Brandon hits the water, I wake up, shrieking and gasping for breath, a sheen of sweat on my forehead.

A moment later, the door flies open, and Rosa Maria sticks her head in the room.

"Maggie! Ms. Pattison is crowning!"