

## CHAPTER ONE

They make him take off his socks in exchange for a blanket. Don pulls them off one at a time from the toe. The hospital gown rises up his opposite thigh as he shifts in the bed. She takes her husband's warm socks by the cuffs and drops them into his backpack. The nurse hands him a bundled blanket.

"Don't you trust us?" The nurse asks, pointing out the initials DF, for Don Fritz, which Patrice scribbled in ink a hand above his left knee. The skin outlining the letters is white from the scratching of a half dry pen.

Don's eyes widen and he stammers over his words. "The other nurse-"

"Ignore me. I'm just pulling your knee," says the nurse and Don smiles like he's not sure if he's supposed to. "The anesthesiologist will be in shortly," she says. The professional demeanor dropping like a theater curtain before she bustles out in her squeaky sneakers.

Don shakes out the blanket and Patrice helps tuck it around his toes.

"How are you doing?" She asks, rubbing his hand. His skin wrinkles with the movement. He lifts her hand up to his lips and bites her wrists. His bottom teeth poke her like fingernails. She laughs and snaps her hand away.

"Hey," she says.

"I can't help it. I'm hella *jagged* for you," says Don. He picks up slang from his students that Patrice never hears and has to wonder if uses it right.

"Keep it in your pants. They're coming for you, baby. Any moment," she says, nodding towards the nurses station, from which people come in and out so quickly they leave streaks like chattering ghost.

"First surgery. Memory for the scrapbook?" Asks Don.

“We should make a scrapbook for first experiences. I like that,” says Patrice. Backing away, she takes out her phone.

Don sucks in his bottom lip and drops his throat like a frog. She takes the picture then throws the blanket off his knee and photographs the initials on his shaved leg.

“What else would go in this scrapbook? Travel?” Don asks, tossing the blanket back over his legs.

“No, I think that should be separate.”

“So what then?” Don asks.

“Foods. Like tongues or scorpions.”

“You’re never going to eat a tongue,” says Don.

“No, you will. I’ll take the photo.”

“So it’s just a book of my first experiences?” Don asks with a laugh.

“I’ll eat the scorpion.”

“I’m holding you to that,” he says, pointing a finger in a way that makes her feel chosen from the crowd.

“It could also be activities. We could put a photo from when we zipped lined. When we finally go skydiving we could add that,” says Patrice.

Don scratches the back of his head.

Patrice says, “I know you’re afraid of heights but zip lining was fun, right?”

“Once the piss dried,” he says and Patrice snorts.

“You did not,” she says.

With a chipmunk voice, he says, “You’ll never know.”

“I’ll make you tell me,” she says with puckered lips then pecks him on the cheek. “No. Keep your pee pants story to yourself. I’ll let you have that secret.”

Don reaches for her shoulders and pulls her into a hug. Her side crunches together until she drops her butt on the bed. A man with his face in a clipboard shuffles between the doorframe. He flips a page then walks away.

"I thought that was the anesthesiologist," says Patrice.

"Did you know that before anesthesia, surgeons would knock their patients out with a sock in their mouth?" Don asks.

Patrice gags.

Don laughs, "Probably a clean one."

"Better a new one," says Patrice.

"You know the Dentist that made anesthesia was hated in his time for trying to get it patented. His contemporaries called him greedy and he ended up dying broke and alone."

"Sounds like he'd be happier alive today," says Patrice.

"Better for me he isn't. Otherwise they might still be using the sock. You don't want to know the worse options." But he says it like she does. Don is a natural teacher. Nothing enlivens him more than bringing history alive. His whole body lifts with air. She feeds off his energy and amplifies it.

"Can I guess?" Patrice asks.

Don nods quickly.

"Biting on wood, opium," she says like there's more to the list, but there isn't. "I've seen it in movies."

"Yes. Both those really happened," says Don.

"What am I missing?"

"A little known one is rubbing irritants."

"What's that?"

"Something uncomfortable, maybe even painful to distract from the pain of surgery. Surgeons rubbed it on your skin," says Don.

“Fight pain with pain. Interesting method,” says Patrice.

“So you see why anesthesia was such an advancement.”

“Truly,” she says.

Don’s eyes fall on Patrice’s oversized bag. “Did you bring the guitalele?”

“Ha,” says Patrice. As if she brings it anywhere. Even the idea of playing in front of a distracted hospital staff, moving like ants on a mission, is embarrassing.

“Too bad.”

“I’ll play you something new when we get home,” says Patrice.

“Can’t wait,” he says, eyes drifting to the doorway.

The hospital waiting room looks like a 90’s throwbacks cafe. Patrice takes a seat on a plasticity, faux leather cushion at one of the high round tables. The small space is mashed with dull blues, reds and yellow. She takes a selfie and sends it to the group chat with Rumiko and Berkeley.

Patrice: And the waiting begins

They send good thoughts and emojis of hearts and four leaf clovers.

Her emails alert her to sales and she falls into a rabbit hole of online shopping. Before she knows it, the face of Don’s surgeon, Dr. Heather Freeman pops into the window of the grey swinging doors. Behind her, Patrice glimpses the white hallway and turquoise protective gear.

“How’s Don?” Patrice asks, springing from the table.

“He’s doing well, now. He’s still asleep. He had such nice things to say about “Patty cake” when he was drifting off. I assume that’s you?” Doctor Freeman says with a laugh. The doctor’s teeth are a light against her dark skin. Patrice is a moth, drawn into the growing smile. What is it about the smile that bothers her? The smile falls off her face as if caught by gravity. “I do have one serious thing to tell you.”

The arteries in Patrice's neck swell with pressure, the ligaments stiffen. "What is it?" She asks.

It only takes a fraction of a second for Dr. Freeman to answer, yet it feels like Patrice's life just cut to commercial break.

"His heart stopped for 67 seconds," says Dr. Freeman and the rest of her words fade away.

It's strange. The first thing she thinks when she hears the news, isn't exactly a memory of her and Don. She remembers peeking into his classroom and seeing him place a hand on the shoulder of a student struggling with a speech impediment. Her progress had made Don proud.

Dr. Freeman waits for her response.

"Can I see him?" Patrice asks.

"Soon. The nurse will be out to grab you," says Dr. Freeman before leaving her to wait.

The doors swing behind the doctor. Through the boxy window, Patrice sees her springy ponytail bob.

Behind the swinging door could have been a kitchen for all the consideration Patrice gave them when she first sat down. She hadn't thought about what was really behind those doors- Don's unconscious body, and above him, a surgeon, who looks young enough to still be in residency, slicing into him.

The plasticity, faux leather cushion squeaks as she sits. She bobs her knee until the metal base screeches. A silver haired man the age of Don's dad looks over.

Patrice believed it would be an easy surgery. During the consultation, Dr. Freeman had been nonchalant, pointing out his health; he kite surfs in the bay every weekend.

"I expect everything to go smoothly," she said, waving off any potential for worry.

Patrice had no reason to doubt her. In her twenty-seven years of life and Don's thirty-seven, neither had had surgery. She hadn't been exposed to all the potential complications, the potential for death.

At twenty-seven, Patrice is lucky to have her parents and both sets of grandparents alive. The idea of death feels like a novelty, relegated to the news, which Don watches and to long finished Halloween games. For fun in elementary school, Patrice and the friend living on the edge of a graveyard had seances. Death is something she giggled at. Today, the delicacy of life is exposed and death is made real by the feel of its weight. Love is being terrified of losing someone and having to live a life without them. Patrice and Don hadn't seen it coming but they're given a second chance. She should be grateful, yet she's worried.

What else doesn't she see coming?

## CHAPTER TWO

There are many different versions of a person. Patrice doesn't mean the past or future versions nor the idyllic version, but versions of who they are today. There's Don on no sleep who somehow smells of drool and always has a bad hair day. There is a good mood Don with an unraveling tongue of factoids, flirty Don with a scrunched up face as if against glaring light, kite surfer Don with flippable hair and a second skin of wetsuit, serious Don with perfect posture and an open ear, professional Don, which is like serious Don only with more smiles.

As there are multitudes of Don, Patrice has all of her versions. Influencer Patrice, is part set designer, styling every object within the frame of her photos, and part engagement bot, emoting heart emojis and silent laughs. Appearing well traveled, dressed, and financed, Influencer Patrice may seem like the idyllic version. But her favorite is performer Patrice, this

easy going version where she just fits in the center of the circle. This shouldn't be confused with amateur songwriter and singer Patrice, who can only perform in front of Don. So strange how she can put her picture out there to be judged by the world but the idea of pulling out her guitele in front of a small crowd shakes her hands.

Today she meets a new Don, drugged up Don. Given the ten year age difference, she knows that one day she might meet a truly helpless Don. Preparing for that day starts today. Appreciate their new beginning and forgive him for his lack of filter, for what she hears him say as he's wheeled into the recovery room.

"You're really pretty." He's looking at the nurse, open mouthed and all jaw. For a moment Patrice thinks something more must be wrong.

Under normal mental faculties, Don masterfully hides his crooked teeth so well that it was a month into their relationship, before Patrice finally noticed. Now, on center stage are his lower teeth overlapped like staggered dancers. His upper lip covers the nicely aligned top teeth with the smallest gap between the front two. He'd hate to be seen like this. It's one of the few things he's self conscious about. She once asked him why he didn't get braces. The question embarrassed him, feeling it a knock on the fact that he grew up poor. His single mother sometimes skipped meals so he could eat. Patrice understood why he didn't have them growing up, but she pointed out that dental insurance would cover most of the expenses. She'd check her plan, which should be like his plan, given that the school district didn't give them options, and it wouldn't be much money at all. That fact only seemed to embarrass him more. For the next few days, she'd catch him staring at other's perfect teeth and hear him comment on them.

"Fake teeth aren't that straight."

"Never had braces? All natural? How lucky!"

"Here's Patty," says the young blonde nurse. Don is the only one she lets call her Patty. Dope him up a little and suddenly the name is spreading like wildfire.



"Why is he making that face?" Patrice asks.

"I'm sleepy," Don says and the nurse laughs rather than answer Patrice's question.

Once Don's bed stops moving, his jaw relaxes and he sleeps. Patrice pulls the metal chair closer to the bed and watches the strawberry blonde whiskers under his nostril shake from his breath. His beard is long enough to see the white patch on each side of his chin and the side by side spots along the jaw just below the left ear, giving him the look of a spotted puppy. Looking down at his slack face, she imagines a baby version of him and realizes she's never seen his baby photo before.

She brushes his hair back and to the side, tracing his scalp with her nails and leaving trails in hair, which is so blonde that the grey coming in lightens the color, rather than ages him. Her fingers hold skin contact as if he might disappear if she couldn't feel him.

When they first met three years ago, Don didn't have a single grey. Nothing about him made their age gap obvious. When she first started at Hillville Middle School, Don and Jeff, the humanities teacher invited her to Academy of Science one Thursday for their cocktail night and the whole night they flirted behind Jeff's back. Don rested his hand on her shoulder and it tingled her muscle in a way that skin contact never had before. Jeff was right in front of them, he could look back at any second. She knew she should step away, but she didn't. An hour later they were making out in the corner of a dark exhibit hiding from Jeff.

A strand falls back on his sun wrinkled forehead and she pushes it behind his pointed ear that sticks out just a little. Don's phone vibrates within the duffle bag at Patrice's feet. Her hand pushes between folds of clothes until everything is jumbled together. She finds the phone in the pocket of Don's jeans, which lay split legged and dangle from her lap. It's Don's mother.

"Hi, Wendy. Don's still asleep but he's doing great. He just got out," said Patrice.

"So it went well?"

"There was a little snag."

"What kind of snag?" Asked Wendy.

“His heart stopped for 67 seconds,” says Patrice.

Patrice heard a crack. It sounded like Wendy bite through a nail. “Are you sure he’s ok? Why isn’t he awake yet?”

“He woke up for a minute, but he went back to sleep. He’s still tired. Don’t worry. The doctor said he’s doing great.”

“Should I come out there?” Wendy asks.

“Wendy, it’s ok that you can’t get away right now. I’m going to take care of him.”

“I know, dear. I can always count on you to look after Donny,” said Wendy. It was one of the many nice things Wendy told her over the years, unlike his Dad. Donald, Sr. had been stationed in the Philippines. He once said that Filipino women were passionate, which was probably the nicest thing he’d ever said to Patrice, a half Filipino woman. She didn’t expect a call from Don’s dad today.

“I’ll have him call you when he’s up. Should be soon, ok?” Patrice says, noticing Don’s flapping eyelids. She wants a moment with him first.

“Ok, dear. As soon as he’s up,” says Wendy.

The pant leg falls on top of the duffle bag as Patrice nears Don.

“How are you feeling?” She asks as he half pushes himself up. Patrice takes the bed’s remote and presses the incline button. Don relaxes back into the bed.

“Like a sponge,” he says and laughs while bending and straightening his elbows.

His movement is clumsy like a middle schooler after a lanky growth spurt.

“Whop,” he says with each bend. The anesthesia enhances Don’s propensity for cheerful goofiness, to laugh often and easily. Her favorite thing about Don is that his laughs are for fun and not a guise to cover up anger like guys she dated before she’d meet him. It didn’t escape her that she’s lucky to have him and lucky that he feels that way too.

He makes duck lips and Patrice leans in to give him a kiss. His lips encapsulate hers and her lips give his teeth a kiss. One of the lower ones poke her.

There's a knock on the open door and Dr. Freeman enters. She's exchanged her teal protective gear for a white coat. Her smile is back. "How are you feeling Don?" She asks.

"Like spaghetti," he says and Dr. Freeman laughs.

She says, "I referred him for 6 physical therapy sessions, and I sent a prescription for pain medicine to the pharmacy so he can pick that up on your way out. He's scheduled for a follow up two weeks from today. He'll get an email confirmation. I'll take a lot at how he's healing and we can reevaluate his rehabilitation if needed. Sound good, Don?"

Don's back to bending his elbows.

Vibrations from Don's phone tickles Patrice's butt. Wendy's photo fills the screen. Patrice passes the phone to Don. "It's you Mom," she says.

He tries to lift it to his ear and lands on his jaw instead. "Calls. Calls. So many calls," he says.

Patrice asks Dr. Freeman, "Is there anything I should watch for or be concerned about happening since what happened?"

"Just keep an eye out for anything out of the normal. Don's going to get a big packet of what to expect, stretches to do, the recovery timeline. If he has any questions he can always message me," says Dr. Freeman. She double taps the foot of the bed, swivels and glides out.

The hospital lends Don a wheelchair while he gathers his prescription. Both Patrice and Don's bag are piled in his lap, the crutches hooked over her shoulder as she pushes Don out to the car. She returns the wheelchair but when she gets home, she wishes she hadn't. Don looks like he might pass out and he trudges towards the front door. He reaches in his pocket and jingles his key ring. He's still looking for the right one when Patrice pushes her key into the lock.

The height difference between the front step and entry is small but it throws Don off. Behind him, Patrice's hands hover over each arm in case she needs to catch him. Though if he really dropped his weight on her, she couldn't keep either of them from falling. He hovers over the couch and Patrice puts a hand on his back.

“Just a little farther to bed,” she says and flips on the hallway light. It’s too small for them to walk side by side with the crutches, so she lets him go ahead. When he reaches the closed bedroom door she sticks her hand in the gap between the crutch and his waist and pushes it open.

Don and the crutches collapse on the bed. While he sleeps, she slides open the doors of the front room. Three blocks of light highlight the gathering dust in her makeshift home recording studio. Her finger scraps the grey gathering on the white panels lining the walls. She made them herself from Luan, Pine, Plywood, weed control fabric, formaldehyde free mineral wool and the help of a guy, self-described as a handyman on Tinder. That was years before she met Don. It took a full day of driving around in the handyman’s truck, where the bass made her ears itch, to collect all the material.

Between the acoustically challenging wardrobe and her beach wood desk with matching speakers is the area she attributes to the historical section from the Second Hand Music shop. A baroque guitar and a lute from Don sits in stands alongside a ukulele and guitalele. Small flaws speckle Don’s gifts - chipped wood on a lower fret of the baroque guitar, faded finish on the lute from the swiping motion of strumming. She picks up the guitalele, her preferred instrument. The wood in her hand and the strings under her fingers are cold. The light from the bay window warms her back as she plays. The song she’s been writing has a soft start, a low strumming paired with high pitched picking. Then the song picks up and Patrice bobs along to the beat. The sound is layered like emotions. An underlying sadness that makes happiness pop.

“How can you know what life is without death? How can you know happiness without sadness?” Asked her morbid cousin back when they were pubescent, as he drove the causeway in Auntie Eve’s stolen truck. He jerked the car across lanes towards the swamping waters on the edge. At the last moment, he pulled back. *How can you know what life is without death?* The idea reverberates throughout the years and ends up in her song.