



BLURRED LINES



KD WILLIAMSON

CHAPTER 1

Kelli McCabe blinked her eyes rapidly, trying to see through the gray haze that filled her vision. There was a coppery taste in her mouth. Kelli swallowed and realized it was her own blood. She beat down panic and clung to consciousness with both hands. Her own special brand of stubbornness kept the darkness at bay. This wasn't the first time that trait had served her well, and it sure as fuck wasn't going to be the last. The sound of gunfire echoed in her ears, but the roar of her own heartbeat took precedence, blocking out everything else. It reminded her that those assholes had failed. She had to live. Pure and simple. It was the best sort of *fuck you* to send out to the universe and the gunmen who had shot her.

Gradually, Kelli focused on the medical personnel. They were making too much goddamned noise so she didn't really have a choice. Two EMTs prodded her at the same time, seemingly everywhere at once. They spoke to her and each other, but Kelli couldn't understand a word. The one thing she knew for sure was this shit hurt. Pain twisted her insides, and she fought against it. Kelli smacked away the hands that poked at her. "Stop...no fucking touching." She growled, impressed that she could speak through the crapload of pain.

"She's coming out of it," one of the EMTs said.

"What's she saying?"

"Uh, I think she's cursing at us." He paused. "Listen, we're trying to help you," he said slowly.

"Then...stop poking...your fingers in me...shit," Kelli countered even slower.

"I know it hurts. You've been shot. We're almost at the hospital."

Everything came back to her in a rush of jumbled images. The gray haze turned to blood-red anger, and it left her tired as hell.

“Travis.” Kelli screamed his name, but all that came out was a raspy whisper.

“What?” the EMT asked.

“Travis,” she mumbled, a little louder than before.

“I think she said Travis, but I’m not sure. She’s fading.”

“Doesn’t matter. We’re here.”

The doors to the ambulance opened with a loud creak, drowning out Kelli’s next attempt to speak. They moved her abruptly and jostled her, causing a burst of pain to jolt through her chest. She groaned. Bright light and a tangle of voices flooded her senses, and put her in overload. Kelli flinched. Everything already hurt, and all that other shit was just too much.

“What do we have?”

“White female. GSW to the chest and right thigh. Diminished breath sounds. BP is seventy over fifty-five and falling,” a familiar voice answered.

She had to get them to listen. Kelli’s pain and desperation fueled her. “Travis!” She tried to sit up but was pushed back down.

“Weak my ass! There is no way she should be awake. Let’s get her to trauma one.”

An eternity later, Kelli was lifted and moved to a different bed. Pain slapped her in the face. She cried out, “Dammit.”

“Miss? Can you tell me your name?”

It was getting harder to breathe, but Kelli held on. The room began to swim, turning the person looking down at her into a blur. “Shit.”

“Let’s try it again.”

“Fuck...Kel-li.”

“Okay, I’m Dr. Rader, Kelli. You’re at Seattle Memorial. We’re trying to take care of you. Is Travis your husband?”

“Partner.”

“I’m sure he’s being taken care of,” Dr. Rader said dismissively.

It pissed her off all over again. “Fuck you. I need to know. Go check on him.”

“Kelli, I need you to calm down. Let us do our job.”

Kelli wanted to scream. Why wouldn’t these dumbasses listen to her? She was alive. She knew that because she hurt everywhere, but she had no idea what happened to Travis. “Fuck that. He wasn’t moving. Go fix him.”

“Kel? Kelli?”

Kelli turned toward the sound of her name. She blinked, bringing her brother into focus. She couldn't remember ever feeling that relieved.

"Sean...Travis...he..."

Sean moved closer. She wanted to reach out to him. "Let them take care of you. I'll find out what's going on with him."

"Sir, you can't be in here. Family—"

"She's my sister." Sean cut him off.

"Sorry. If you can calm her down..."

Ignoring the others around her, Kelli concentrated on her brother. "They got him in the back, Sean. He...wasn't moving. Please—"

"I've got this. Mom's on her way. I'm sure Bruce will be here soon too."

His voice was soft. It soothed her.

"Just do what they say. I got this," he repeated.

Kelli wanted to believe him. A crushing pain fluttered through her chest, making it even harder to breathe. Kelli gasped as everything went dim.

* * *

"What do we have?" Dr. Nora Whitmore asked as she entered.

Dr. Rader stiffened visibly. "Dr. Whitmore, there was no need—"

"What do we have?" Nora stared at Rader, demanding his cooperation. He remained still and silent as the rest of his team worked diligently. Nora lost her patience. "You can urinate all over your territory later if that's what you need to do, Dr. Rader. For now, though, I don't communicate telepathically so..." She paused for a few seconds to give herself a moment to calm down and assess the patient for herself. "GSW to the leg and chest." She glanced at a nurse. "Breath sounds?"

"Some, but they are wet and decreasing."

"Get her to surgery before she bleeds out," Dr. Whitmore ordered. "I'm going to go check on our other gunshot victim."

Rader nodded as he helped to wheel Kelli from the room.

Nora glanced at the remaining occupant as she made her exit.

He followed her. "I'm Kelli's brother, Sean. I think you were talking about her partner, Gerald Travis Jr. Is he okay?"

She walked briskly toward the next patient's room. "I'm not sure who it is, but I'll know more about his prognosis momentarily."

Sean nodded and stepped away as she entered another trauma room. She looked over her shoulder. Sean was still there, looking through the window. This was obviously his friend.

The heart monitor beeped loudly in concert with the IV pump. The sounds centered Nora and brought her patient's needs into focus. The cervical collar around his neck inhibited movement to prevent any additional injury. She had taught her residents well.

"Dr. Simmons should be here momentarily. I'm here to help. Talk to me," Nora said. The staff looked her way.

"GSW, probably trauma to the spine, plus significant blood loss. Abdomen is rigid indicating an internal bleed. His extremities aren't responding to stimulation, and his blood pressure is dropping." Dr. Fuller, a third-year resident, responded immediately, and Nora was surprised that she was the resident to take lead. Dr. Fuller's performance had been subpar recently, but Nora approved of her initiative.

The electrocardiograph whined. The patient's blood pressure bottomed out, and he went into ventricular fibrillation.

"He's coding."

"You know what to do." Nora disliked giving unnecessary direction.

Dr. Fuller placed the defibrillator pads on his chest.

The door to the trauma room banged against the wall and the young police officer entered. "Gerry!"

"Someone escort him out." Nora maintained her focus. "Twenty joules."

"Charging."

The defibrillator beeped in readiness.

"Clear," Nora said.

Infused with electrical current, Gerald Travis arched upward.

Nora stared at the monitor, mentally ordering it to respond. When it didn't, she changed tactics. He was her patient. She refused to give up easily and was confident she could stabilize his vitals. "Push an amp of epi and bump it to forty joules."

Nora waited patiently for the defibrillator.

“Clear.”

The patient was shocked again, and seconds later, his heart returned to a normal sinus rhythm. *Perfect*. Now, she could focus on the other challenges his battered body faced.

Nora peeled the defibrillator pads from the patient’s chest.

“Vitals are stabilizing.” Dr. Fuller stated the obvious.

The door burst open as Dr. Simmons entered. He bent over slightly as he tried to catch his breath. “Sorry,” he muttered. “Sorry.”

Instead of responding to his apologies, Nora relayed information on Gerald Travis Jr.

Dr. Simmons stood, nodded, and asked for forgiveness once more.

“Get him to an OR.” Nora removed her gloves and stepped to the side.

Last to leave, Nora walked out behind the gurney. Sean McCabe met her at the door. His police uniform was wrinkled, and he held his hat in a white knuckled grip. He watched as they wheeled his friend down the hall.

“This is so messed up. It’s hard to see him like this. He’s usually smirking or saying something stupid.” Sean turned toward Nora. “Thank you for what you did in there.”

Uncomfortable with being praised for doing her job, Nora nodded and chose her words carefully, intent on ending the interaction as soon as possible. “He’s sta—”

“I know. I get it.” Sean nodded, looking dejected.

“I’m sorry, officer. I know this is difficult.” Platitudes were easy. She had plenty of them on standby. Nora used them so she would appear to care while still remaining detached. She did her best to comfort the young man, but it was time to move on. “If you’ll excuse me, I need to get to a previously scheduled surgery. Another surgeon will be operating on your friend. They’ll contact you as soon as they know more.”

She nodded stiffly and started down the corridor. This scenario was her least favorite part of being a doctor. She hated not having answers for loved ones. She hated that the most she could do was imitate empathy. Most of all, she hated handing off patient care to another surgeon because of prior

obligations. It prevented her from being able to offer assurances about the quality of care a patient would receive. Not that the other surgeons weren't capable. They were all fine doctors. They just weren't Nora Whitmore. And she may be a lot of things that weren't desirable, but she was the best at her job. None of her peers could compete with her success rates.

As she moved quickly toward the elevator, she justified leaving the officer without the comfort he so clearly needed. Any time she spent consoling him was time taken away from saving lives. That wasn't a sacrifice she would make.

"I fucking hate hospitals," Sean whispered.

Despite his lowered volume, Nora overheard every word as the elevator doors slid shut.

CHAPTER 2

Kelli pushed through her grogginess, and bit by bit, she became more aware.

The first thing she felt was white-hot pain. It was a shitty way to wake up, but there wasn't a damn thing she could do about it.

Second, her nose felt weird. There was a tube forcing air into her nostrils. That moved things even higher on the weird scale, even though it made breathing easier. Some machine hissed in the background. Momentary anxiety grabbed hold of her, but the feeling passed quickly when she figured out that the tubes didn't reach her throat.

Third, Kelli did her best to case the environment. She strained to hear over the noise of the hospital equipment, but finally, her mother's and brother's voices became clearer. She forced her heavy eyelids to open. The room came in to blurry focus, but she could see people moving around her. When she blinked again, Kelli saw a nurse walking out of the room. The effort to concentrate took just about everything she had. She could barely keep her eyes open. So, she didn't fight it. This sucked *hard*. Fuck it. At least she could hear what was going on. That was better than nothing.

"She doesn't even look like herself. I've never seen her like this."

"I know it's scary, Mom, but she's here."

"I know. You're right." Her mother sighed. "Why isn't Antony here? He should be here."

"I tried to call him, but his phone was disconnected," Sean said.

"I don't understand that boy. I'll never understand him." Carina sounded tired. More tired than Kelli could remember hearing before.

"I don't either, Mom." Sean sounded almost as weary as their mother.

A warm, soft hand stroked Kelli's cheek. It felt good to be touched, especially by her mother. Kelli didn't allow it often, but if this wasn't a

fucking exception, she didn't know what was. She leaned into the caress and whispered, "Mom."

Her mother sobbed loudly. "Kelli? Baby?"

Kelli swallowed thickly. Her throat felt like it was lined with glass, but she kept trying. "Mom?" She opened her eyes again and was determined to hang on. It was time for her second wind, whether it wanted to come or not.

"I'm here Kelli. Sean is too." Her mother's fingers tangled with her own.

"Hey, sis." Sean grasped the other hand.

Kelli wanted to cry. Their words rushed over her and settled in deep. She felt clear enough to recognize she was missing something, but didn't know what exactly. "Travis?" That's when it hit her. Bone rattling panic. She tried to sit up but the instant jolt of pain cut through her. "Shit."

"Whoa, Kelli. Calm down. You gotta calm down."

She heard Sean's words, but they didn't matter. Kelli had one goal, and it didn't involve calming down. No matter how crappy she felt, she needed to know about Travis. Sean tried to put his arms around her. She pushed them away. "Travis." Her brother and mother peered at each other. Warning bells went off like a siren in her head. "Dammit, no." Kelli managed to whisper. She was a goddamn lion. Lions roar. And all she could manage was a few words. Pathetic. Getting shot had made her pathetic.

"They had to take him back to surgery," Carina said.

Back to surgery. Yes, Travis was alive, but she was sure nothing good ever came from going *back* to surgery. Kelli couldn't stop fear from creeping over her, no matter how much she wanted to beat the shit out of it. To make matters worse, she was stuck here. Too weak. Too broken to do anything to help. She couldn't even go see him for herself. "Check on him. Please."

Sean nodded. Kelli didn't have to push hard because he was just as worried. Travis was family. She tracked Sean as he made his way out of the room and down the hall. After Sean left, Kelli felt her mother watching her. She turned her head slightly and met her gaze. Carina was upset and her distress was big enough to fill the whole room. It made it even harder for Kelli to breathe.

Kelli didn't look away. Her mom's eyes were filled with worry and relief.

"You can't leave me." Carina gripped Kelli's hand.

The weight of the words crashed down on Kelli's shoulders. Cheating death was a promise she wouldn't always keep—not in her line of work. She sure as hell was going to try. It was strange to be face to face with her own mortality. The possibility of dying brought up all kinds of emotions that she didn't want to name. Instead, Kelli pushed the feelings away.

"I'm fine, Mom. Not going anywhere." Her words were a lie, but it was a one of the good ones. The kind that made her mother smile.

It seemed like hours had passed in just a few minutes, and her body started to protest once more. Kelli's eyelids fluttered as the feeling of weightlessness took over.

"It's okay. Don't fight it. We'll be here when you wake up."

The words washed over her and provided her a sense of safety as she drifted back into sleep.

* * *

Nora studied her patient's peritoneum. There was enough blood filling it to be life threatening no matter how many units were transfused into him. With steady hands and a discerning eye, she searched. This is what she lived for—following clues and solving mysteries.

"Suction."

Dr. Sanford vacuumed out the fluid, but she didn't thank him. She didn't want to be thanked for doing her job, why would he? The music of Branford Marsalis surrounded her, swelling to a crescendo.

This part excited her the most. It was a combination of pure logic, science, and instinct. This man was dying. There was always a reason behind it, information to be collected, collated, and quantified, and *this* was where Nora excelled. She was the one who put all the pieces together. If she had been present for the first surgery, there would have been no need for a second. The sloppy work of the previous surgeon and his team continued to annoy her even though she had already discussed the incident with Dr. Simmons. Incompetence. She didn't tolerate it in herself and found it unforgivable in others. Unfortunately, Nora couldn't be everywhere at once.

"Suction."

Her team was quiet because they knew she preferred it that way. She disliked forced niceties and idle conversation under normal circumstances and even more so in her operating room. She worked with professionals who were very capable, and that created the level of trust needed to save lives.

Nora studied his spleen closely and saw only mild inflammation. She scanned his liver just as carefully. “Suct—there it is.”

Dr. Sanford cleansed the area.

“Clamp.” With quick, sure fingers, and the added help of other precise tools, Nora closed the tear. Well done. Dr. Sanford siphoned out the remaining blood and irrigated the surgical site. Nora examined the area for several seconds but knew she’d done the repair properly.

“Dr. Sanford?” Nora said.

His gaze met hers. He had been a quick, quiet resident who learned to anticipate her moves without instruction. “Yes ma’am?”

“You may close.” Without another word, she left the operating room. When she reached the prep area, Nora began her post-surgery ritual. She removed her gloves and surgical cap. Then, she loosened her habitual ponytail and let her hair hang freely. As she washed her hands, she watched Dr. Sanford engage the others. She heard laughter as the tension that held them in check just a few moments ago seemed to dissipate. For a second, Nora experienced a pang of longing in her chest. The feeling passed just as quickly as it came. Nora dried her hands and moved toward the exit.

The intercom buzzed as she walked by. “Dr. Whitmore? I’m sorry to bother you, but your surgical nurse told me you were done.”

Nora pressed the button. “Yes?”

“There is a Sean McCabe who’s demanding a report on Mr. Travis’s condition.”

“I’ll be there momentarily.” Sometimes people needed the truth delivered bluntly, no matter how uncomfortable it was. Sean McCabe struck her as one of those people. And Nora didn’t know any other way to say what needed to be said. She wasn’t one to pull her punches.

When Nora entered the waiting area, his back was to her. “Mr. McCabe?”

Sean spun around. A shock of sandy-brown hair fell over his forehead, and his features were stricken and drawn. It didn't distract from his boyish good looks. "H-how is he? You don't have to sugarcoat anything. I can take it."

Nora almost smiled. "The bullet caused swelling in his spinal column. As I hope you were informed earlier by his previous surgeon, true damage, if any, can't be assessed until the swelling subsides." She waited for him to acknowledge her, and he nodded. Nora continued, "Apparently, there was also damage to his liver, which I just repaired with no further complications." Since Mr. Travis was incapacitated and he had no other family present, Nora deemed it necessary to pass along pertinent information regarding his prognosis.

Sean's eyes widened. "That wasn't caught the first time?"

"No, it was not. Compared to the other internal damage, it was a small tear but still dangerous." Nora offered no further explanation. She knew to be cautious in a potential lawsuit situation.

He wiped a hand over his face. "God. So all the talk about possible paralysis was true?"

"Unfortunately, yes it is."

Sean sighed. "I knew it, but I was hoping—"

"I understand." Nora nodded, and in a way, she did. "Will there be anything else, Mr. McCabe?"

"Sean. Call me Sean. I kind of feel like we're old friends after all this." His smile was soft, crooked. His expression was sincere.

Nora cringed internally. She refused to engage in that level of familiarity. "While I understand your reasoning, I don't think that would be appropriate."

He deflated a bit, and his shoulders slumped.

"I can understand that. I'm a cop. We all have procedures. Professional boundaries."

The conversation had gone on long enough to make her uneasy. It was time to go. "Is there anything else—"

"Can you just come take a look at my sister? I know she's alive and all, but I just want to make sure—"

"Dr. Rader hasn't been in yet?"

"Not this morning, no."

The man was exasperating but well liked at Seattle Memorial and not just by the female staff. Nora couldn't figure out why. "Yes, I can do that."

Nora followed him even though she knew the way. As she entered the room, a petite, dark-haired woman stood to greet her. She looked to be in her mid fifties. "Good morning, doctor."

Nora nodded. "Whitmore. It's Dr. Whitmore. I'm the attending."

Though the woman looked confused, she continued to smile. "Carina McCabe."

In reply, Nora picked up Kelli McCabe's chart. She flipped through the pages and glanced at the woman in question. Kelli was sleeping soundly. It wasn't a pretty sight. Her mouth was open, and her features were pinched like she smelled something sour. It probably had more to do with discomfort caused by her injuries. Kelli's short auburn hair stuck up at odd angles but still fanned out on the stark white pillow, highlighting a slight paleness to her olive-toned skin which was similar to her mother's.

"She looks so weak right now. That's just not her."

"She suffered significant injuries and blood loss, but her pallor and strength will return with time," Nora said.

"That's not what she means. Kelli is a badass. Wait 'til she feels better. I guarantee she's going to be the worst patient you ever had."

Nora glanced from Sean to Carina, then she peered at Kelli and evaluated her carefully. The woman was tall, stocky yet covered in a lean layer of muscle. Her face was aesthetically pleasing, but she appeared to be nothing more than an average woman. There was nothing special about her. Nora looked at Sean skeptically.

"Trust me," he said.

Nora moved toward the head of the bed to check the surgical sites. She started with the most severe. Kelli's eyelashes flickered, and she groaned. "Fuck."

Well. *That* was unexpected. Nora was taken aback by the language. Kelli's voice was deep and gravelly, which somehow made the utterance more powerful.

Sean laughed suddenly, startling Nora. She turned to see mother and son smiling and holding hands.

So, it was obviously common for her to start every interaction with cursing. “Ms. McCabe? Can you hear me?”

“What?” Kelli mumbled.

“Can you hear me?” Nora asked once more.

“Yes, fuck. What do you want?”

She cursed twice in a matter of minutes. Nora definitely sensed a pattern. “I’m Dr. Whitmore. I’m going to check your surgical sites for signs of infection. This may be uncomfortable.”

Kelli opened her eyes completely. The telltale post-surgery haze cleared gradually until Kelli stared back at her with sharply focused green eyes.

“Okay.” Kelli rumbled. “Travis, my partner—”

“He’s in recovery. He has a significant spinal injury.”

“Fuck.”

That made three. Nora sighed internally. “Yes. When the inflammation recedes, we will know more.”

“Okay.”

Kelli’s green eyes darkened, and Nora was captivated by the intensity of her stare. She felt odd. Unnerved by the scrutiny, Nora continued with Kelli’s examination. When she glanced up again, Kelli’s eyes were thankfully closed.

Nora stepped back and turned to Sean and Carina McCabe. “Everything looks as it should. She will be in a fair amount of pain. The bullet to her leg didn’t hit bone, but some rehabilitation will be needed to return the muscle to full functionality.”

Carina smiled. “Thank you, Dr. Whitmore.”

Nora returned the smile. “You’re welcome.”

The McCabe family seemed to be genuinely kind, something they extended to everyone who came into their radius, and she didn’t understand why. Why be nice to someone who isn’t in return? Nora brushed the thought aside and left the room in pursuit of something less emotional and a lot safer. Surgery was the first thing—the *only* thing—to spring to mind, but it would have to wait.

Nora marched down the hall to the elevator and pushed the button to call it to her floor. After a few seconds, she heard laughter coming from inside. It stopped when the doors slid open.

Several of the occupants were part of the medical staff. They looked everywhere except at her. Nora stepped in anyway. She was used to the whispers and the stares from the residents and other hospital employees. Sometimes, they called her “iceberg princess.” Other times, it was “queen mean.” Nora refused to be bothered by it. Besides, any reaction would just be fodder for gossip, and Nora had no intentions of feeding that beast.

When the elevator reached her destination, Nora stepped out and left the others to continue their rumormongering. She made an educated guess as to Dr. Rader’s location, the senior resident’s lounge was where he usually spent his perceived downtime, mingling with the other residents. She pushed against the lounge door. Strangely, it was locked. Undeterred, Nora took out her keys and opened it.

Dr. Rader cursed and scrambled from the couch.

Dr. Reed, one of the residents, gasped and struggled to cover herself. As she quickly dressed and made her way to the door, she avoided eye contact completely.

Obviously, mingling was not a strong enough word.

“It’s not what it...” His voice trailed off.

Nora stared at him. He was more intelligent than that, but Nora knew pedigree wasn’t the same as having common sense. In most cases, it was a completely separate concept. “Shouldn’t you be making rounds?”

His face reddened. “I was. I—”

“Yes, I see.”

He glowered at her. “You really don’t care, do you?”

“About?” Nora asked.

“Us.”

“There is no—”

“Us! I know that. How can you not care? Do you know what you did to me?”

“This conversation is moot as well as redundant.” They were done. It was a simple fact, yet he refused to accept it.

“The hell it is. I had sex with you, and my whole life fell apart. I couldn’t think about anything else.” He walked toward her. He was a decidedly handsome

man. With blond hair and chiseled features, he was a prime representation of the male of the species. “And all you were doing was scratching an itch.”

Sex with him had been a mistake. Nora knew this, but he had been willing, presumably unattached, and had promised to be discreet. “Is there some reaction I can mimic that will satisfy you and end this?”

“My fiancé—”

Yes, that. If she’d known that a fiancé existed, none of this would have happened. Her lack of information concerning Rader’s relationship was a direct drawback of not being social. This was a lesson learned, and even though she dismissed a majority of gossip, Nora was more aware of the happenings inside the hospital now. Regardless, he was definitely not the man he pretended to be. Aggravated with his dramatics, Nora cut him off. “That was your doing, not mine.”

He closed his mouth, and a muscle ticked in his jaw. “What do you want, Nora?”

“You inspire incompetence all around you, James. The residents worship you, but that doesn’t equate to actual skill.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Gerald Travis Jr.”

“Dr. Simmons was there to assist, but Taylor was more than ready to do this on her own—”

“Was that according to you or your genitalia?”

He turned away without giving an answer.

“She missed the liver lac. It was small but enough to kill him.”

James turned his head fast enough to cause whiplash. “What? But, Simmons was there. You should be chewing him out too.”

“I discussed it with him, and now, because you’re chief resident, she is mainly your responsibility so I’m bringing it to your attention as well.” Nora didn’t elaborate further. It wasn’t unnecessary. “I trust that this won’t happen again?”

James’s face darkened to a deep red, and Nora assumed his expression was fueled by shame. He nodded.

As far as she was concerned, this discussion was over on every level. Not sparing him another glance, Nora exited the lounge. Rader didn't deserve any more of her time, and she refused to give it. She looked at the board detailing the surgical rotation, then at the clock. The tension drained from Nora's shoulders. She tingled with anticipation. There was nothing better than this. It was time to scrub in.

CHAPTER 3

Kelli tried to catch Sean's attention when he walked into her room. He glanced in her direction but didn't meet her gaze. There were no smirks, no jokes. Maybe she was reading too much into it because she was already on high alert because of their train wreck of a brother, Tony. He was the youngest of the three of them, and sometimes he acted like it. She hadn't really seen him much the last couple of weeks. His bulb never shined too brightly, but lately something was even more off than normal. Kelli didn't even want to think about what that meant.

So, to round everything out nicely, Sean was throwing off weird vibes too. He was hiding something. She felt it deep down in her gut. When they were kids, the only time he acted like this was when he lied or had taken something of hers. At the moment, she didn't have shit to take.

She studied him just like she did Antony a few minutes earlier. And just like Tony, Sean stood with his arms crossed and tried to pretend that she was invisible.

"Tony not here?" Sean asked.

Their mother smiled. "He could only stay for a minute. He had to get to work. He's starting a new job today." Carina shook her head. "I wish he would come work at the deli. It would be easier for him. I just don't understand it. I could change it to McCabe and Son. Your father would have loved that."

Kelli continued to watch her brother. Finally, he looked her in the eye. He grinned, but it was bogus as hell. He wasn't fooling anyone. She wanted to smack him in the back of the head. Maybe it would knock some sense into him. Tony deserved much of the same, but Kelli swallowed the impulse instead. She didn't have the energy to deal with his—or anybody else's—shit. She had a hole in her chest for fuck's sake.

Sean cleared his throat. “I have to get outta here too, but I have some news.”

He smiled for real this time, and Kelli wanted in on it. She needed the distraction. She hated being cooped up. “Good news? Because if it’s not, I won’t be held responsible,” Kelli informed him.

“Travis is awake.”

Kelli shifted her focus from Tony to Travis. “Really?”

“Yeah, went to see him after giving Tony your room number. Not a damn thing wrong with his mouth. He’s still a smartass.”

Kelli chuckled. “I have to find a way to go see him.”

“Or you could just call his room for right now until you’re able to get around better,” Sean said.

Kelli caught the worry in Sean’s eyes before he covered it with one of his phony-ass smiles.

“That’s a good idea,” Carina said.

Kelli stared at her brother, but his expression was unreadable. Hesitantly, she agreed. “Yeah, I can go with that for a while, I guess.”

Sean looked away, moved toward their mother, and kissed her on the cheek. Then he had the balls to lean over Kelli and pucker his lips.

Kelli glared.

He smirked and squeezed her shoulder instead. “Later, Big Red.”

“Really? That’s what you guys did? Come up with a pissy nickname for me?”

“Yep.” Sean pulled the door open.

“Asshole,” Kelli yelled after him. He didn’t even turn around, but she got the last word. That was all that mattered.

* * *

Mindful of her wounds, Kelli moved carefully as she tried to find a more comfortable position in the bed—if it could be called a bed. The thing felt more like she was lying on a box spring covered with blankets. She subtracted points just for that shit alone. It definitely wasn’t her mattress, so that was even more points deducted. The pillows, brought by her mother on the first day, were way too soft even though they were better than what the hospital had

to offer. Kelli had almost requested the bedding from her own place, but she hadn't wanted to get on her mother's nerves too soon. That ended up being an idiot move. Her comfort was way more important.

This wasn't her space, and every day, that fact pissed her off more and more. This whole thing sucked ass, and she hated fucking hospitals. After seeing her father lying there lifeless in a bed just like this, it was easy to feel that way. She knew they helped people here. Hell, they'd saved her, but sometimes hospitals were like sponges. Places like this...they sucked the life out of people and left behind a shitload of misery. Mix that lingering funk with her boredom and loneliness and it resulted in her craptastic state of mind. *Craptastic*. Her picture needed to go in the urban dictionary right beside the definition.

A nurse entered, a stern-looking older woman who Kelli had seen way more than she wanted. The woman didn't smile. Kelli was sure they were supposed to at least *try* to look happy. A few butterflies and cartoon birds wouldn't hurt either. Maybe it would have helped Kelli's mood. Instead, she shoved a thermometer in Kelli's face. That took some fucking audacity—way, way too much of it. Kelli glared.

“Open, please.”

Kelli turned away.

The nurse sighed and rolled her eyes. “What are you? Two?”

“What are you? Eighty? Didn't you get the memo? Retirement age is sixty-five.” Kelli didn't have anything against folks working as long as they wanted, but she wasn't above taking the easy shot when it presented itself.

“I can do this anally. It's a more accurate reading anyway.” The nurse held the thermometer up, an evil smile on her face.

“Touch my ass, lady, and they will be fitting you for a prosthetic.” Kelli evaluated the nurse. Even laid up like this, she was pretty sure she could take her.

“Ms. McCabe, I need your vitals. That's all. It doesn't have to be difficult.”

“I'm alive. Can't you tell?” Kelli asked. “Maybe you should try coming in here with a smile on your face and treating me like a human.”

The nurse curled her lips upward in a garish attempt at a smile.

Kelli snorted. “No sale, lady.”

The nurse stared.

“What?” Kelli crossed her arms.

“We’re really doing this?”

“Well, you’re not doing anything at the moment, but if you want to bring me lunch, I’d be good with that.” Kelli grinned. She wasn’t going to sing show tunes, but Kelli was a little less irritated. Tormenting the nurse was fun.

The nurse’s mouth fell open.

“We can try this again later. Hopefully, you’ll come back with a better fucking attitude.” Kelli couldn’t help tossing out one last parting shot.

The woman’s face turned red, but instead of responding, she turned and left.

“Make sure you tell your friends.”

Alone again, Kelli flipped through TV channels. Unfortunately, there was nothing on. She sighed and decided that sleep was a better option anyway.

* * *

The sound of voices dragged Kelli from a deep sleep. She frowned and tried to tune them out.

“Patient’s name is Kelli McCabe. She had multiple GSWs. There was one to the chest and upper thigh.”

That voice sounded vaguely familiar. It was refined, dulcet, and a bit imperial.

“She’s healing rapidly, but complications can still occur. What might those entail?”

“Infection.” The young man sounded unsure. A few chuckles followed.

“I have a mosquito bite that is several days old. It could become infected as well, but why state the obvious?”

Somebody gasped.

“It was rhetorical, Dr. Simpson.”

“Dr. Whitmore?”

“Yes, Dr. Bridges?”

“There is a chance of total lung collapse or scarring. She is also a bit too muscular. Should we check for steroid usage?”

“Steroid usage would compromise the healing process.” Another voice added an opinion into the fray.

Kelli had heard enough. She opened her eyes. “Now that’s just rude. This isn’t the morgue. I’m a pretty light sleeper, and I could hear everything you were saying. I guarantee you this is all real.” She recognized a few of the doctors, including Dr. Whitmore.

Dr. Whitmore cleared her throat. “Now, Ms. McCabe—”

“Dr. Whitmore,” Kelli countered teasingly.

The doctor looked a bit frazzled. She tucked a strand of honey-blond hair behind her ear and continued. “This is a teaching hospital. While you may hear some indelicate things—”

“Like being a ’roidhead?”

“Yes, well, I assure you—”

“I have curves too. Nobody looks good in these shitty gowns.” Kelli plucked at the edges of the hospital gown.

The residents laughed again.

“Ms. McCabe!” Dr. Whitmore sounded pissed.

“Dr. Whitmore.” Kelli deliberately sang her name and grinned. Dr. Whitmore’s tawny-brown eyes flashed with irritation. Plus, there was something about the way the good doctor said her name as if she ate something that tasted bad. Kelli loved it.

“It seems your brother was correct in his assessment.”

Kelli narrowed her eyes. “I’m not sure what you’re talking about, but that sounded really close to an insult.”

“That is something you can discuss with him on his next visit.” Dr. Whitmore turned, seemingly intent on ending the conversation.

“Hold on! I was just kidding.” Kelli rolled her eyes. “I’m bored as shit. I need a little fun.”

“Ms. McCabe.” Dr. Whitmore pursed her full lips and red seeped into her cheeks. This just pushed Kelli further.

“Call me Kelli.” She grinned, but somehow she knew Dr. Whitmore wouldn’t use her first name. This day was getting better and better.

“I will not, that’s highly inappropriate.”

Kelli read the doctor's name tag. "Uh-huh. So what's the N stand for Dr. Whitmore?"

Except for the sound of whirring machines, things went quiet. Kelli looked around her. The students looked alarmed. Some of them even seemed afraid. "Okay," she muttered. "Party's over, huh?"

No one answered.

Dr. Whitmore addressed her students. "Wait in the hallway please. I'll be there shortly."

Kelli blinked. As the students filed out, she suddenly felt like she was in the principal's office. "Am I in trouble?" She raised a brow. "I really don't think you can expel me."

Dr. Whitmore sighed, and her lips thinned. "I do apologize if you found this encounter rude. If you wish to lodge a complaint against me or—"

"What? No! Lady, I said I was just kidding. Jesus." Kelli interrupted.

"Nora?" Dr. Rader stepped into the room.

They both looked toward the door.

The tension went from a hundred to about a thousand really fast. Kelli was stunned, but at least it was interesting. She thought this lady had been mad before, but clearly that was wrong. Now, she wouldn't have been surprised if Dr. Whitmore's eyes started to glow and Dr. Rader's head exploded.

"Please wait in the hall with the rest of the residents, Dr. Rader."

Dr. Rader's expression morphed into the same silent, alarmed look as the other doctors.

"So...Nora, I like that."

"Ms.—"

"Kelli." She corrected Nora just to needle her. So far, the fallout had been fucking fascinating.

"No." Nora looked even more flustered.

"Well, I'm gonna call you Nora no matter what you call me."

"How nice for you."

"Especially if I know it aggravates you. Are you aggravated? Because you look that way." Kelli might have been enjoying this a little too much.

"Is that your aim?"

Kelli shook her head. "No, not when I woke up this morning."

“Then boredom changed your mind?”

“Exactly.” Kelli nodded sagely.

“Why am I participating in such nonsense?”

“Because I grow on people, Nora.”

“Like the proverbial fungus?” Nora didn’t wait for a reply. “No one enjoys fungus, Ms. McCabe.” She backed away from the bed. “Have a nice day.” Then, she was gone.

Kelli stared at the door. She wasn’t so bored anymore. She was intrigued and a little offended, but most importantly, she was amused. Kelli smirked. Dr. Nora Whitmore had been better entertainment than the nurse from earlier.

Then, she remembered. Travis was awake. She could call him. Damn medication. It made her drowsy and fucked with her memory. She could have talked to him hours ago. Instead, she’d fallen asleep.

She dialed his room. On the fourth ring, she was about to give up.

“Yeah?” Travis sounded even more tired than Kelli felt. She didn’t know that was possible.

“Yeah, yourself.” Kelli smiled. It was good to hear his voice.

“Kelli?”

“No, it’s Big Red,” she deadpanned.

Travis chuckled, but it was brief and pained. “You don’t like it?”

“No comment until you can see my face.”

He laughed again, followed by a groan.

“Take it easy.” The sounds he was making scared her.

“Stop.”

“Stop what?” She had an idea what he was alluding to, but she didn’t call for a pep talk.

“Kelli, you aren’t responsible for every single thing that goes wrong.”

Kelli sighed. “I didn’t say—”

“Listen to me.” Travis spoke slowly, clearly, leaving no room for misunderstanding. “Everything bad that happens isn’t because Kelli McCabe didn’t do something to stop it.”

“I don’t think that.”

“You do about the people you care about.” He knew her too damn well.

“I’m allowed.” She could be overprotective at times, and that was a fact. She couldn’t stop everything, but it never kept her from trying.

“Okay, tell me how this is your fault? Somehow you’re psychic? You just knew our perps would kill someone who was just a potential witness? We barely had any leads, Kelli. No one could have figured that shit out.”

Kelli pressed her lips together and breathed through her nose. “I really hate when people ask me a question and then answer it themselves.”

“Well, I hate those little sperm-like things attached to egg yolks. The universe can’t make every fucker happy.”

“Bitch.” Kelli shot back. Sometimes, he just made her ass itch.

“Twat waffle.” Apparently, Travis was ready for her.

“Are we having a moment?”

“Possibly. Mark it with ten seconds of silence and let it pass.”

Kelli smirked because it was easy to do with him. As she thought about all that had happened, all that could have happened, her smirk gave way to a frown. “I was really worried about you,” she said softly—seriously.

“Yeah, well ditto white girl. But it’s going to work out.”

“White girl? I think of myself as an ethnic mix. Irish and Italian. Now *that* is a potent combination.”

“I’m just as complicated...Korean and black. It shows just a little more on me. Don’t you think?” Travis countered.

“You could have a point there. By the way, Sean told me your Dad is stuck overseas? That’s shitty.”

Travis grunted. “Life of a civilian contractor, I guess. It took him a week to get back after mom’s car crash. He was in Saudi Arabia that time.”

“No offense, but I really don’t like that man. His priorities are screwed up.”

“I don’t like him sometimes myself.” Travis agreed.

“I’m here. You know that, right? *We’re* your family.” Kelli knew that Travis knew that already, but if ever there was a time to reinforce it, this was it.

“I know you are. Don’t get me wrong. I love my dad, but man, I miss my mom right now. I wish...” His voice trailed off.

“I know what you mean.” The loss of her father left a hole big enough for her to walk through. It didn’t seem to want to close anytime soon.

“She had this way of making all the bad shit go away. I was seven maybe eight when my dad found religion. He took us to an all-black church. Me and my mom stuck out. I mean, really. If you don’t look too close, I can pass for black. That wasn’t the case for my mom. I’ve never had anybody stare at us like that. She would pull me close and say something to make me laugh. Then, it was like nothing else mattered.” Travis sighed. “Damn.”

“Yeah.” This was some heavy shit, and for both their sakes, Kelli needed to lighten the mood. “Did you hear? One of the shooters is dead and the other is in pretty bad shape. Probably right here in the ICU.”

“I did. You’d be surprised what people say when they think you’re unconscious.” Travis sounded less hesitant and emotional.

Kelli smiled again. “No, I would not.” She paused. “We can find out his room number and drown him in his bedpan.”

“I’m not touching that thing.”

Kelli rolled her eyes. “Think of the imagery... a piece of shit dying in shit.”

“You can’t drown in that,” Travis said.

“God, never mind.”

“Something is seriously wrong with you.” Travis’s voice was weak.

“True. I’d like to hear your theories later.” Kelli continued the banter as long as possible. Even though she knew it would be short lived, it felt familiar.

As predicted, Travis yawned and went quiet.

“You need to go?” Kelli asked.

“Yeah, I probably should.” He already sounded half asleep.

“Okay.”

Kelli hung up the phone. She listened to the activity around her—beeping machines, low murmuring voices, and ringing telephones. Kelli didn’t mind being alone, but she hated the feeling of loneliness. If she wasn’t moving...if she wasn’t laughing...if she wasn’t working...it caught up with her, sneaking in from behind to almost overpower her. She didn’t like being overwhelmed, especially by her feelings. Emotions usually fucked things up all the way to hell and back. Kelli was a good detective because she was detached enough to see the big picture, but her love life was screwed up for that exact same reason. At least her friends were fellow cops, so they knew the score. Her

family was a different story. Things with them were always messy. All the time. Times ten.

Family. Maybe times ten wasn't strong enough.

Sean was hiding something and not very well. If she was up to full speed, she'd already know what it was. But she wasn't, and apparently he'd decided his balls had dropped enough to wear his big boy shorts now. Despite her irritation, she was almost proud. But it was shitty of him to keep things from her.

Then, there was Antony. Kelli closed her eyes. She wasn't ready to think about whatever mess he was in. She needed to move. She needed to laugh. Where was Dr. Nora Whitmore when she needed her?

* * *

The night was still and humid. Nora smoothed a hand over her pale silk blouse and unfastened another button to reveal more of her cleavage. The matching black Dolce and Gabbana skirt hugged her voluptuous curves, and the Louboutin's added to her five-foot-eight-inch frame. Her appearance was perfect, just as she wanted it to be. Nora handed her keys to the valet. Her heels tapped loudly against the stairs as she made her way up. She was flustered and exasperated. Her lack of professionalism today had been unnerving. Engaging with a patient like that was inappropriate. Her behavior was out of character, and she still did not understand how she let that McCabe woman get to her. She didn't have the answers, but she needed to start clean the next day. Then, there was James. He assumed a level of familiarity with her that he hadn't earned. It was very irritating. She was his superior, not only at the hospital, but in many other ways as well.

Throughout the rest of the day, she'd let work guide her. Now, she wanted sexual release. Sex was a necessity. The need for it—the oblivion it provided—was nothing to be ashamed of. Nora pursued it with the same single-mindedness that she used during surgery.

Tonight she craved a softer touch. A woman's touch.

She entered the building and walked briskly down the long hallway. A lone man stood at the end by the elevator. Nora nodded, and he stepped aside.

She'd been here several times, so it stood to reason that he recognized her from previous visits. The elevator moved quickly, preventing her from thinking about anything else. The doors opened, and semi-darkness and smooth jazz greeted her. This was an exclusive club that only catered to those who could afford it. She walked around the smattering of tables to the bar, aware of the gazes that followed her. Nora slid onto a stool. She flicked her hair over her shoulder as she waited for the bartender. She didn't have to wait long.

"Martini. Dirty."

The bartender nodded and smiled.

The gazes of the other patrons burned into her skin, teasing over her heightened senses. She studied her first suitor from the periphery. The woman was a compact brunette, and her hands shook as she shredded her napkin. She muttered to herself and wiped at her face. No, not this one. She didn't have the patience to deal with someone else's nerves. The brunette turned to finally speak, but Nora ignored her.

A few minutes later, another prospect appeared. Nora sipped her drink, aware of the other woman studying her. She was bold and had potential. Better. Much better. Nora turned slightly. The woman was tall and curvy, and blond hair spilled over her shoulders in waves.

"Tina." The woman's smile was slow and positively wicked. She held out a hand in greeting.

Nora took it. Her skin was soft, warm. Nora's anticipation grew. "Nora."

"That's so tragically plain. It doesn't fit you at all."

Nora smiled slightly.

Tina chuckled. "You're right that line really missed its mark. Should I try another?" She leaned forward, invading Nora's space. "Or should we just discuss all the things I'd like to do to you instead?"

* * *

Nora's back slammed against the door, and pleasure sharp enough to cut sliced through her. A moan rumbled in her chest, but she refused to make a sound. She controlled the venue. She controlled the pace. She controlled every aspect.

Nora glanced up at the hanging light fixtures that adorned her living room ceiling before she dropped her gaze to the woman between her thighs. Nora's skirt was bunched up around her waist, and her lingerie had been pushed aside to allow access. Nora tangled her hand in Tina's hair and encouraged each brush of Tina's tongue with a roll of her hips. The tension left her body with each thrust. Her final release was silent, unassuming. She pulled roughly at Tina, forcing her to stand.

Allowing a strategic meeting of lips, Nora walked them deeper into the living room. She stopped when they hit the arm of the couch. She spun Tina around, pushed her face first over the side of the sofa, and removed her underwear. Tina moaned as Nora plunged three fingers inside her. Phineas, her kunekune, ambled past them. Weighing over two hundred pounds, the pig made slow, but determined progress through the house. Nora smiled and rustled the fingers of her free hand through the black and white hairs covering his back. He paused and glanced at her for a moment before huffing and continuing his journey.

Tina gasped and looked at Phineas with confusion in her eyes. Nora twisted her fingers and burrowed deeper still, bringing Tina's attention back where it belonged.

TO CONTINUE READING,
PLEASE PURCHASE

BLURRED LINES

BY KD WILLIAMSON

This excerpt is offered by Ylva Publishing.
Its primary function is the orientation of interested readers.
Ylva Publishing | www.ylva-publishing.com