



**SUSANN CAMUS**

# SEE ME

A JEANNIE JOHAL THRILLER

## Chapter 1

In her first three weeks in Vancouver, Canada, Jeannie Johal enjoyed blending into the crowds without having to look around to see if someone was watching her. She smiled at strangers without fearing that her husband would accuse her of wanting to sleep with them.

Since her arrival, she'd rented a townhouse, found a new job, and obtained her local driver's license. On her first day of work, she skipped down the steps leading from her townhouse, enjoying the fifteen-minute walk to Broadway & Commercial Skytrain Station. It was towards the end of October and, for Vancouver, unusually warm and sunny. Jeannie had heard how the maple leaves changed shades in the fall, and she now understood why tourists flocked to see the kaleidoscope of colors. She watched the leaves swirl in the air like tiny ballerinas and land softly at her feet. Her hand reached up for a vermillion leaf as it floated downward.

The blue sky brought back memories of Jeannie's childhood and Ranikhet, the tea farm and hill station in North India where her family went to escape the heat and smog of Mumbai. The air in Vancouver felt similarly crisp. She let out a deep breath and smiled, letting go of some of the stress she'd been feeling since leaving Mumbai. To Jeannie, the new job represented a new beginning. She recognized there would be challenges working in a different culture and position from what she had been used to, but was relieved to have left behind all traces of her previous life.

She felt even more at home walking into the plaza and seeing the small shops crowded around the entrance to the skytrain station. A convenience store sold snacks and lottery tickets, a barbershop offered a hot shave and a haircut for \$15, a pizzeria announced

it was under new management, and a take-out counter advertised two samosas for \$3. The cook took his gaze off the grill, gazed at her, and smiled. The people here are so friendly! And I can be, too. In the past, I wouldn't have made eye contact with a stranger. I'd have pulled my shoulders back, looked down at the ground, and pretended no one was there.

Her husband would never have tolerated tardiness on her part, much less her smiling at another man. The new Jeannie made eye contact and offered a tentative smile while continuing to walk through the station towards the trains. She wondered what her husband was thinking now. She shuddered, remembering how he demanded she account for every moment outside of their home. She was free now. He couldn't hurt her any longer.

Jeannie boarded the skytrain at ground level and felt her heart flutter as the train quickly arced upwards, giving her views of treetops and a peek into the backyards of families living along the route. She gazed in awe at the panoramic views of the Fraser River as the skytrain traveled southeast across the river from New Westminster to Surrey. Her final destination was a high-rise that connected to a shopping center.

As she walked into the office complex, a security guard beckoned her.

She put aside the pang of anxiety she felt and smiled at him. "This is my first day of work."

"Miss, you need to show your ID to access the elevator," he said.

She gave herself a mental scolding. New life, new beginning. Of course, he wasn't there to report on her. "Would you give me directions on how to get to the health authority's reception desk? They're expecting me."

The elevator took her to the fifth floor. Moments later, her supervisor, Kathleen Jones, stepped through the doors. Jeannie observed Kathleen's auburn hair, scraped into a bun, and her deep blue eyes. Jeannie wondered if Vancouver's rainy, habitually overcast climate contributed to Kathleen's porcelain complexion and wrinkle-free skin.

"Jeannie, I'm so pleased to welcome you to From Sea to Mountain Health Authority. You come highly recommended, and I am very impressed with your resume."

"I appreciate the opportunity. This is a new beginning for me," she said.

She listened to Kathleen describe the job requirements. "The role of quality improvement consultant is a senior position. You'll be dealing with executives, surgeons, nurses, patients, and sometimes the work you do will be subject to public scrutiny. The job requires a master's degree. Your medical degree is actually an undergraduate degree, but your master's in epidemiology takes care of the advanced degree requirement. I worry, though, that you may find the role not challenging enough."

Jeannie leaned forward and her eyes widened. She spoke in a low, urgent tone. "You are very direct, Kathleen. Canada is my adopted country. I know I cannot legally work as a physician here, and I accept that. In five years, I may decide that I want to qualify to work as a physician. But honestly, my goal right now is to work in healthcare, and this position allows me to do that. I am grateful that the health authority is willing to give me a chance, and I promise you that I will not abuse that trust."

She glanced around, taking in the carved wooden murals lining the walls of the entrance to the offices. She gingerly ran the tips of her fingers along a curve. "These carvings are beautiful!"

“Yes, they are. They are original carvings the health authority commissioned to commemorate the opening of the new offices and to remind us that the communities we provide service to are in the traditional, ancestral and unceded territories of the Coast Salish and Nlaka’pamux Nations.”

“The health authority rents the office building from the Coast Salish and the Nlaka’pamux Nations? Is this a local property management group?”

“The owner built the offices to our specifications. The Coast Salish and Nlaka’pamux Nations are Indigenous peoples who were among the first to settle on the West Coast. This is their ancestral land. Our health authority has twelve hospitals that provide care to British Columbians living between Burnaby and the Fraser Canyon, in other words, from the Pacific Ocean to the Cascade Mountains. The carvings are one of many ways we recognize and celebrate West Coast Indigenous peoples for sharing their land with us.”

“Kathleen, may I ask you a question about the job?”

“Absolutely.”

“The person who offered me the job told me there would be a three-month orientation. That sounds like a long time, especially since I have a medical background.”

“It may be possible to accelerate your training. You’ll be reading documentation about quality-improvement initiatives, learning how to access patient records and enter information into the patient information safety system. I will introduce you to the health authority and hospital leaders so that you can assign a face to a name once you start going into the field.

“You’ll be job shadowing with me or Ray Klassen while we carry out investigations. The job shadowing will give you the opportunity to get your feet wet while also getting to know the hospital leaders.”

“I’m accustomed to working autonomously. I can’t imagine it will take me more than a couple of weeks to get through the documentation and learn how to access electronic files and generate reports.”

Kathleen shook her head in disagreement. “Nevertheless.” She paused. “I was thrown to the lions on my first day on the job. I was told to go out and investigate an incident, even though I’d never been to that hospital, didn’t know anyone there, and didn’t know what quality-improvement tools were available to do a proper investigation. I got through it, but it was nerve-racking and I don’t ever want to put anyone in that position.”

“I think you’ll find I’m a quick study. I’m here on my own, I have all the time in the world, and I don’t mind bringing work home with me.”

“There’ll be times when you have to work late, so enjoy your evenings while you can. I’m confident that you have the clinical issues covered, but I’m worried that workplace culture may confound you. Every workplace has its own culture – how we think things should be done. Here, there are invisible boundaries that set the doctors apart from the nurses, and the administrators from the clinicians. We are also aware that we need to move beyond our colonial past. That is particularly difficult for some employees. We are trying to build a partnership with our Indigenous partners, but we have a long way to go.”

“As a surgeon, I never gave much thought to my patients’ ethnic backgrounds. Ours was a non-profit clinic. I was assigned patients and carried out the surgeries they needed. As

surgeons, we were trained that we had the last word.” She paused and smiled at her new supervisor. Then she continued. “We were also trained to recognize that the knowledge and experience of five or ten persons in the room sometimes outweighs the knowledge and experience of one surgeon.”

“So true,” said Kathleen. “We also have a small number of older physicians – the number is getting smaller every day, thank goodness – who seem to believe their powers come from God and they do not have to follow the rules. Mostly, though, we try to respect each other’s differences. You’ll have to let me know if you run into any roadblocks that I can help you navigate.”

“Will do, Boss.”

Jeannie ran into a significant roadblock sooner than she expected. Even though she’d left her husband behind in India, her senses went on high alert when she was introduced to Ray. Try as she might, Jeannie was unable to suppress a shudder of revulsion during her initial encounter with her new colleague.

He was a slim, well-dressed man in his late thirties. His short blond hair was parted on one side, and his dark grey suit jacket contrasted with his black pants and jaunty John Fluevog derby shoes. But the only thing Jeannie could think of was that Ray wore Axe, the same cologne as her husband. Her entire body stiffened as she sprang into self-defense mode.

Kathleen gestured to Ray. “I’d like you to meet the newest addition to our team. Jeannie, meet Ray.”

Jeannie wanted to recoil. She hesitated for a moment before taking his outstretched hand and shaking it. “Hello, Ray. Kathleen tells me you’re very knowledgeable. I’m looking forward to learning from you.” Except I’m not, I don’t want anything to do with you. She hoped her expression hid her true feelings.

Ray mimicked Jeannie’s formal greeting. “Hello, Jeannie. Kathleen tells me you’re very knowledgeable, so much so that the funding freeze that was in effect for six months was lifted to accommodate your skills. I’m sure your selection has nothing to do with your being Brown and a female. I’m glad you’re here because I’m looking forward to a lighter workload now that you’ve joined us.”

Jeannie froze, wondering how she was supposed to respond to the racist taunt. This guy is one of the most hostile men I’ve met. I wonder what his real problem is. “Yes, I’m Brown and I’m a woman. I’m also a healthcare professional. I hope to become even more knowledgeable as I work with you,” she said.

Kathleen hissed at him. “Ray, remember our conversation about being respectful.”

Ray gave Kathleen a baleful look. He picked up a folder and walked away from both women, leaving them to continue the orientation.

Jeannie had left India in a hurry, fleeing her abusive husband after domestic terrorists bombed the clinic where she worked. Although her new job as a healthcare quality improvement consultant lacked the cachet of her previous career, she reminded herself that she was lucky to be alive, unlike her fellow surgeon and best friend. Jeannie was now part of a team focused on improving patient care in British Columbia’s hospitals.



When she arrived in Vancouver, her long, flowing midnight-black hair had been cut short and styled into a face-framing bob. She wore extended-wear contact lenses that changed her umber irises to green with hazel brown flecks. Soon after she arrived in British Columbia, a dentist closed the distinctive gap between her two front teeth. She did not want to draw attention to herself.

She moved to Vancouver because the culturally diverse city had a large Indian population.

“Vancouver’s a beautiful city, Jeannie. There’s lots to do, and I’m sure you’ll settle in. You’ve found a place to live,” said Kathleen.

“Yes, not far from the Broadway/Commercial Skytrain Station.”

“Well, that’s a bustling neighborhood.”

“Yes, it seems to be.”

“This is a bit unusual, but I know what it’s like to move to a new city and not know anyone. I wouldn’t mind being a tourist in my own backyard. Would you like to join me on a city bus tour of Vancouver this weekend?”

Jeannie smiled, showing a row of small, perfectly spaced pearly white teeth. “I’d love to do that!”

Kathleen smiled in return. “Now then, let me show you where you’re sitting. I’ve placed an orientation binder on your desk. It describes the processes we use to gather information and conduct investigations. There are sample simulations. This is your quality improvement Bible, and I’d like you to read through it.”

Jeannie glanced at the four-inch-thick binder, itching to dive into it and prove to Kathleen that she was quick to master new material.

Kathleen's eyes focused on Ray, sitting at the adjacent desk. "I'm counting on you to show Jeannie the ropes. Take her with you to meetings, introduce her to other staff, help her get her bearings."

"It'll be my pleasure."

"She has to familiarize herself with our policies and procedures, as well as the databases we use to store information. I'll review the policies with her. Please show her how to use the databases once she gets access to them."

"It could be difficult for her to accompany me to morning hospital meetings since I usually drive directly from home to work," he said.

"Yes, she can do the same and meet you at the hospital."

He scowled. "I doubt she wants to attend meetings scheduled at 6:30 in the morning."

Jeannie had been looking down at her hands. Now she raised her head and smiled sweetly. "I'm a lark. That won't be a problem."

Ray gave his new colleague a sharp glance. "You're not required to sing."

Momentarily taken aback, Jeannie's mouth formed an 'O' shape. Then she grinned. "I meant that I'm a lark, not a night owl. I'm an early riser."

"Not me," said Kathleen. "Larks and owls. I've never heard the phrase. But if I had my druthers, I'd be an owl."

"Me, too," said Ray. "But Kathleen insists I take these early morning meetings."

In a cajoling voice, Kathleen turned her attention back to Ray. “Over time, Jeannie can share the load, and you won’t have as many early morning meetings. Until then, she can act as a note-taker for you at meetings where you’re interviewing staff and when you’re facilitating formal investigatory meetings.”

The offer somewhat mollified Ray. “That will be helpful. Typing is outside my wheelhouse. I trained to become a nurse, not a typist.”

Kathleen’s expression was wry. “I think the same can be said for all of us. But documentation is essential for discovering how a patient experienced an adverse event, and our records need to be detailed.”

“Jeannie, when Kathleen says ‘adverse event,’ she means that the patient was harmed in some way while in our care. It’s politer than saying that we screwed up,” said Ray.

Kathleen was quick to clarify. “Actually, an adverse event could refer to the patient getting an infection or falling or any number of things. We’re not perfect. But screw-ups, as Ray so inelegantly puts it, are relatively uncommon. We try to identify any factors that contribute to these adverse events so that we can prevent them from happening in the future.”

Ray gave Jeannie a cold stare. “A screw-up could also refer to a person who is unfit to do the job they’re hired for. I had no input into your selection, so time will tell whether you are a screw-up or not,” he said.

Kathleen gasped. “Ray, that was uncalled for. Jeannie is highly qualified.”

He blasted back a retort. “I’ve worked in quality improvement longer than you, so I know who would have been the most qualified candidate.”

“If you want to continue working here, you’ll be respectful to me, to Jeannie, and to our clients. Do you understand what I’m saying,” said Kathleen.

“Yes, Boss.”

“I sure hope that’s the case because I don’t want to have to inform the director of quality improvement that you’re refusing to be a team player.”

“Yes, ma’am, I don’t think you have to say anything to our director.”

Jeannie watched as Kathleen and Ray parried with each other. In India, Ray’s cheekiness would be checked immediately. He would never be permitted to speak so disrespectfully to his supervisor. Jeannie hoped she would maintain the higher ground if Ray tried to bait her.

## Chapter 2

Cammy Vasquez pirouetted in front of a full-length mirror in the bedroom she shared with her mother. Her nursing salary did not extend to haute couture, but she had scored a Carolyn Herrera knockoff that could pass for the real thing. The Swarovski AB crystals embedded in the spaghetti straps sparkled in the light. The cream dress fell to midway above her knees.

“I don’t know why you are telling me to return this dress. I saved the money to buy it, and I’m going to wear it when Peter and I celebrate our first anniversary together,” said Cammy. She picked up a silver clutch and air-kissed her reflection, flinging her waist-length jet-black hair over her shoulder. “Beautiful, you’re beautiful!” she intoned.

“Camille, yes, you are beautiful,” agreed her mother. “But you shouldn’t be going out with a married man.”

Cammy referred to her mother with the title she’d used when she was a child. “Nanay, Peter says I’m petite with just the right amount of curves. He promised he’d leave her. He says she’s old, that there’s no spark.”

“Camille, stop it.”

“He stayed with her for the good of their daughter. He didn’t want her growing up with divided loyalties. But she’s all grown up now.

“His wife is dumpy. She’s a hag, and she’s lazy. He tells me that she sleeps in while he rises early every morning. She doesn’t even make breakfast for him before he leaves.”

“Camille, don’t be disrespectful!”

“He said she dips her fingers in the family Foundation.”

“He used those words?”

“He said she has a very capable administrator.”

“Hmmm.”

“I bought this dress to celebrate our first year together. I’m going to charm Peter.

And then I’ll ask him to set a date for when he leaves her.”

Her mother pursed her lips.

Before she could say anything, her daughter pre-empted her protests. “I know you and Tatay came here with just a few dollars in your pockets. You’ve told me how you both had to work multiple jobs to give us a roof over our heads and food on the table.”

Her mother’s face clouded over, and the worry lines on her forehead became more pronounced. “Cammy, I want more for you than what we had. That’s all any parent wants for their child.”

“Why can’t you see that I want Peter?”

Her mother shook her head in dismay.

“You should be pleased that I graduated from university, the first in the family to get a degree.”

“I am.”

“You don’t harp on my sister. You don’t complain about her working as a cocktail waitress in a nightclub or being available two evenings a week to the man who pays for her apartment.”

“Cammy, I’m having this discussion with you, not your sister.”

“What about Daniel? He didn’t even finish high school. Now he’s working at a nightclub. When he comes home, all he does is eat and sleep and play video games. Why don’t you give him a hard time?”

Her mother defended her only son. “Daniel’s different. He’s like a child, and he doesn’t have your abilities. He’s trying to do the best he can.”

Cammy lowered her voice and wrung her hands together. “Nanay, I know you’d like me to marry someone my age. But love doesn’t always work that way. I love Peter, and he loves me.”

“Cammy, I know this is hard for you to hear. You love him, but he’s just using you.”

“Nanay, you don’t know him. He’s not like that. He is so kind. All you have to do is see him with one of his patients. They dote on him.”

“Having a good bedside manner does not mean that he is good with those close to him,” said her mother.

“He loves me. He told me he loves me. It’s his wife who’s hanging on to him.”

“Camille, no good ever comes from sleeping with another woman’s husband. Now take off that dress and stop pretending this will have a fairy-tale ending.”

### Chapter 3

Dr. Peter Peterson wondered why his wife, May Chan, had asked him to drive into Vancouver to meet her when they usually met close to his workplace. He pictured her dressed in a marine blue silk jacket with a mandarin collar, a black pencil skirt, and pumps with low heels. He knew that her clothes, hair, and makeup would be immaculate despite her working a full eight-hour day.

After finding a place to park his car, he walked toward a well-known building at the corner of East Pender, near the entrance to Chinatown. The public tenant on the lower floor, a real-estate office, had the ambiance of an old-time malt shop. He observed the bright red plastic swivel chairs rotated around a U-shaped counter behind which accountants and clerks conducted their transactions. He was glad that the interior design of the Chan Foundation's offices was more muted, reflecting the gravitas of their leaders.

The Foundation office resembled an elegant library. At one end, a hinged black ladder hung from rails, giving access to tiers of books bound in red and black leather. A receptionist's office fronted the books. A wall of terrariums provided lighting and moisture for bright yellow oncidiums dappled with deep red stripes and white-tipped burgundy odontoglossum orchids with six-inch blossoms.

A black lacquer conference table dominated the room. Dozens of orchid blossoms competed for attention with the table and a fifteen-foot-high, black-lacquered armoire against the opposite wall. The armoire, inlaid with a mother-of-pearl motif of swordplay among warriors, was a built-in safe that housed the family's papers.



After exiting the private elevator, he walked into the Chan Foundation and greeted his wife with air kisses on both cheeks.

“You know I don’t like driving in Vancouver. The pedestrians think they can cross the street any time they like. And it’s so hard to find parking. Why were you insisting I meet you here?”

“Peter, the Chan Foundation has decided to give a large gift to St. Barbara’s Hospital, and I wanted you to be the first to know about it. We usually eat in New Westminster, closer to where you work. I thought that for a change, it would be nice to eat near where I work.”

“You’re right, May. I’m glad you insisted.”

They walked to Tao, an upscale Chinese restaurant known for its quirky cocktails and sumptuous but small plates. Peter was struck by how Tao differed from the Chinese restaurants he’d frequented as a young man. He didn’t see any red lanterns with gold fringes hanging from the ceiling, or black velvet landscapes on red-painted walls. Instead, Tao’s décor was rustic. Dark oak ceiling beams covered a white shiplap ceiling. White meat cleavers adorned painted white walls.

The food differed from the rubbery eggrolls, chicken balls submerged in sticky red sweet sauce, and soggy MSG-laden vegetables of his childhood. Steamed rice was the only dish Tao shared with the Chinese restaurants of Peter’s youth.

The restaurant was half full, and Peter and May enjoyed their drinks while waiting for their tasting plates. They’d ordered marinated eggplant, sticky rice cakes, and crisp pork belly. Peter rotated his cocktail glass, peering over the rim as his wife sipped a glass of Merlot

from British Columbia's Okanagan Valley. Peter sipped his ten-grain flip, savoring the Santa Teresa Rum and Suntory Toki Whiskey while gazing fondly at his wife.

“Your Foundation has been giving generous donations to the hospital for many years. How is this one different?”

May expertly lifted a slice of pork belly to her lips with her chopsticks while her husband used a fork and knife to slice a section of eggplant.

He watched her graceful movements as she leaned in and slid her hand over his. “Well, this one is larger, and it's for a special purpose. We're giving away \$25 million and I wanted us to be near the Foundation office in Chinatown when I told you.”

He whistled. “Why is it important that we be near your office?”

“Because we're calling it the “People's Choice for Physician of the Year” and I've decided the award is going directly to you.”

“What do you mean, to me?”

“Peter, you've done everything for your patients all your life. They revere you. I thought this was a good way to recognize your good work.”

He was deeply touched. “May, my patients mean everything to me. I'm so glad you understand that.”

“Peter, it will be up to you to decide how to use the funds. I know you'll use them wisely.”

“This will help so many patients! My colleagues will be over the moon.”

A wizened Asian approached the table. He bowed first to May and then to Peter.

“Miss Chan, Mr. Chan, so nice to meet you.”

Peter bridled. He was unaccustomed to being greeted as May's husband.

"Miss Chan, your father and I worked in real estate for many years. I knew him well. Although we were rivals, I had great respect for the Foundation he set up. It warms my heart that you honor his name with the work you and Mr. Ko do on behalf of the Chinese community. Your father would be proud of you."

"Thank you. It is my honor to support the community." She stood up and bowed in his direction, watching as he returned to his table.

Peter was bemused. "Do you know him?"

"No, I've never met him before."

"But he knew you."

"The Chan Foundation was the first private charity to focus exclusively on the Chinese community in Vancouver. It provided interest-free loans to newcomers who needed a place to live or funds to study. As it grew, the Foundation provided scholarships to deserving Asian students. Over time, the Foundation expanded its reach beyond the Chinese community, but it's never forgotten its roots. Likewise, the community has never forgotten us."

"Peter," said May, drawing out his name. He wondered why she was hesitating. He soon had his answer.

"Peter, I hope you'll retire or at least slow down after you accept the award."

"Stop working?" He was incredulous. He felt as if he were being bribed.

“Peter, perhaps I stated that too strongly, but I don’t want to keep having this conversation with you. It’s time for you to hang up your scrubs. By all means, continue to see patients, but leave the surgery to someone younger.”

Peter felt his world shifting, as if his feet were sliding into quicksand. “Surgery is all I know. I’m sixty-one years old and have at least five more good years. If I’m not a surgeon, what am I?”

His eyes began to tear up at the thought of leaving behind everything comfortable.

May placed her hand over his. “You’re a damn fine doctor, and you can continue to be one. See patients during the day, write the articles you’ve said you always wanted to write but never had the time to prepare. Take on a bigger administrative role – help train new physicians to become the physicians you’d like them to be. There are ample opportunities out there, Peter. You have to be open to them.”

Peter gave her a tremulous smile. “I’ve never really thought about what would happen after. My focus has been on the now.”

“Do you remember when we were first married? We had all these plans. You’d become the best surgeon ever, and we’d travel the world. Well, the award recognizes your skills. We’re still waiting to travel. Let’s take a vacation – a real one where we go somewhere, just the two of us – and see the world,” said May.

“Hmm, I could sink my toes into white sand and stroll beside you as the waves lap at our feet. Where were you thinking?”

“Peter, there’s a book I read as a child. I still remember the story. It was about a little girl growing up in Capri and discovering the Blue Grotto – a beautiful, magical place. I’d

love to see the Blue Grotto. We could rent a villa on the beach, snorkel, and admire the sun as it sets.”

“That sounds tempting,” he said. “I can book two weeks off. Let’s do it.”

May’s voice was tinged with disappointment. “That’s all the time you can take off?”

“I can ask for three. Would that be better?”

They raised their glasses. “To Capri.”

## Chapter 4

Peter Peterson was a happy man. After arriving home, he and May slowly and passionately made love. May had fallen asleep nestled in her husband's arms, a smile on her face. Because he usually slept on his side, it felt awkward to be lying on his back with his wife's head resting on his chest, but he wouldn't have it any other way. He marveled that she had been so aggressive in bed when she was usually quiet and self-contained. As he reviewed the previous evening, he thought he was the luckiest man in the world.

May murmured and nestled deeper under the blankets. Peter pivoted onto his right side and swung his legs out of bed. He gently extricated himself, aimed a kiss at his wife's mouth, and caught her cheek. He pumped his arms, impersonating a victorious sprinter at the end of a record-breaking race. "The People's Choice for Physician of the Year Award." He puffed out his chest and smacked it with both hands, doing his best to emulate an orangutan he'd seen at the zoo.

No response from his wife.

Sighing, he slid his knobby feet into his brown Garneau sheepskin slippers arranged six inches from the side of the sleigh bed. He raised his arms slowly and deliberately, linking the fingertips and stretching toward the sky, cracking each finger, each wrist, each elbow, shrugging his shoulders up and down 10 times, rolling his neck from side to side five times. He squeezed his hands together, rhythmically clenching and unclenching until the popping sounds stopped. His joints were still flexible, but his hips ached after hours of standing up. Not that he would ever admit to any aches or pain, not to his wife or his boss.

Most days, the surge of adrenaline that followed performing emergency surgery was enough to propel him through the night and into the next day. For now. In his field, some operations surpassed the three-hour mark, requiring a new infusion of antibiotics. Removing a gallbladder was important to the patient, but it was only a twelve-minute procedure. However, removing part of a patient's cancer-filled colon was a complex surgery that required patience and finesse. His knees and hips ached increasingly after standing on his feet spending hours performing these surgeries. He worried he might be on his way to becoming an orthopedic patient.

May rubbed the sleep from her eyes, put on a silk robe, and walked into the kitchen.

Peter's voice echoed down the hallway. "It's a recognition that my work matters, that I matter."

"Peter, of course you matter. You always have."

Peter changed into workout gear and joined May in the kitchen. She slid a mug of coffee towards him. He continued to tell her why the award meant so much. "When I was growing up, I thought I'd graduate from high school, maybe get a football scholarship to go to university, maybe get an office job when I graduated."

"You've come a long way, Peter."

"When Mom was dying, she told me I had it in me to do more. She believed in me before I believed in myself. I became a surgeon because I didn't want anyone else to watch their mother die like Mom did, all that suffering. I'm glad I've made a difference in people's lives."

May smiled at her husband. “You’ve made your mother proud. I remember when you and I first met. You were mopping the student-union floor when my coat fell off the back of the bar stool. You handed my coat to me. I asked if you would like to have coffee with me sometime. You stared at me and mumbled ‘yes,’ then went back to mopping the tiles as if we hadn’t talked.”

“You were like an exotic goddess. You were surrounded by your cool friends, while I was just the guy with the mop. I didn’t know what to say.”

“My father was once just the guy with the mop. He didn’t start as a real-estate titan. He had no money, but a fierce determination to succeed and a willingness to work hard. I saw those qualities in you, and that’s what made me want to get to know you.”

“I remember when you introduced me to him.”

“Victor Chan, former professor of economics at Harbin University in China, penniless immigrant whose first job in Vancouver was mopping floors in a steamy laundry. My father did well for himself,” she said.

“And for his community,” added Peter.

“Yes, he bought up decrepit properties that nobody else wanted. He restored and resold them for a hefty profit. As his fortunes grew, he started to think about his legacy. He established the Chan Foundation.”

“What an uplifting story, from rags to riches,” said Peter.

“I remember seeing you lugging around books in your knapsack. You hugged them to you as if they were your most prized possessions.”

“That’s not far off. They were my tools to becoming a doctor.”



Peter leaned in and stroked her hair. “May, I couldn’t have done it without you. You supported me when we got married. You were always there for our daughter when I was delayed at work.”

“Sarah understood that your patients needed you. So much so that she became a doctor. Still, I’m happy you’ll be cutting back on your workload.”

He acknowledged her comment with a rueful shrug. “It is getting harder to be summoned to work at three in the morning. I could cut back on surgery and continue to be the physician lead for quality improvement across the health authority. Wouldn’t it be something if I could get a desk job? Better yet, become a traveling educator, teaching new doctors how to balance their work and personal lives.”

May took the opportunity to discuss their vacation plans. “Speaking of travel, let’s check our schedules today to see when we can book our trip to Capri.”

“You and Capri.”

She hugged him. “I’m going to get a few more minutes of beauty sleep.” She returned to the bedroom.

Peter went into their mini-gym. In his mind, he fast-forwarded to a meeting with his colleagues, picturing them congratulating him on the award and praising his skills.

He twisted his torso to the left and then to the right. Fifteen chin shrugs, point chin to ceiling, hold for ten seconds, relax. Whole body stretches on the total gym 9800, a twelve-minute cardio burst on the Precor stepper and cool down, finishing with left- and right-side planks and a series of standing-warrior stretches.

In the gleaming stainless-steel kitchen, he blended oatmeal, pea protein powder, chia seeds, raw almonds, blueberries, and non-fat milk in his Ninja blender. He glanced at his iPhone as he ate. There were no messages from the hospital.

But there was a text from Cammy Vasquez. “C U this evening, darling. Can’t wait to taste you.”

## Chapter 5

Peter's eyes narrowed when he saw the text. He placed the phone in his bag as quickly as if running barefoot on hot coals. He was careful to compartmentalize, keeping his work life separate from his life with May. But Cammy was testing her limits and becoming increasingly bold. Didn't she know that texts and emails on cell phones could be intercepted? He'd have to have a talk with her to make her understand that there were boundaries she could not cross. What he had with Cammy was harmless, a way to relax after a difficult day in the operating room.

She was a surgical nurse; he was a surgeon – that was all. Their paths first crossed when Cammy was assigned to his surgical rotation shortly after he became chief of surgery. She had laughed when he pinched her. The first time he touched her breasts, she leaned into his hand, which he took as a signal that she was a willing participant.

“No, Cammy, not this evening,” he texted.

“We need to talk. C U soon,” she replied.

After sliding the phone into his bag, he strode into the bathroom, reached for the remote, and turned on the stainless-steel shower tower. Preset to 102 degrees, soft blue chromatography, and five jets on a column, with an overhead rainfall. Rounds, the hospital redevelopment committee meeting where he'd tell his colleagues about the award, a meeting of the surgical chiefs, coffee with his mistress, a minor surgery, early arrival home, and dinner with his wife.

Life couldn't get any better. All he had to do was focus on the now.

He had almost finished showering when he heard the sound of breaking glass, followed by a wail. He stepped out of the shower and quickly dried himself. He ran into the kitchen. May was staring at a puddle of orange juice staining the floor. She looked up.

“How could you,” she screamed.

“May, what’s wrong? Let me help you clean that up.” He began to walk towards her.

She picked up a broken shard of glass and raised it in front of her. “Don’t come near me.”

Peter’s senses tingled. Just moments earlier, he and May had been chatting about the future and planning a trip to Capri. Now she was distraught. “What’s wrong, dear?”

May pointed to Peter’s shoulder bag. “How could you do that to me? To us?”

Peter stammered, “Wha-what do-do you mean?”

May’s eyes filled with tears. “Peter, last night was special. I woke up feeling as if the man I wed had returned. I dreamt that we were sailing to the Blue Grotto.”

“What’s changed,” he said.

“I saw your cell phone blinking, and I was going to bring the phone to you since I thought the hospital might be trying to contact you.”

Peter looked closely at his wife. “I do get calls from the nurses if they are worried that one of my patients needs more medication.”

His wife’s eyes were unblinking. “But it wasn’t the hospital, it was a woman named Cammy.”

“Cammy is a nurse in the OR. I think she has a crush on me.”

“A crush?”

“Yes, that’s all it is, an infatuation. It’s not unusual for some younger nurses to idealize the surgeons they work with.”

“If that’s all it is, why did she write that vulgar note to you,” asked May.

Peter winced. Things were going so well. Why did Cammy have to ruin it by sending me a text message? “She doesn’t mean anything to me,” he insisted.

“She seems very comfortable contacting you. How long have you and she—?”

Peter moved towards May. “Not long. I love you, not her. She means nothing to me. Now let me pick up this glass before you hurt yourself.”

She numbly watched him take the piece of glass from her hand. He held her hand up to the light, looking for any sign of splinters. He then led her to the sink and rinsed off her hand.

“I’m sorry, May. I didn’t mean to hurt you. She threw herself at me. Weak man that I am, I couldn’t resist. I was wrong. I’ll stop it and make it up to you.”

She looked mutely at him.

He walked out of the kitchen and into his closet, reaching for his Armani suit arranged on a rosewood butler. He added a blue Oxford shirt with a button-down collar and a school tie.

He knew he’d hurt May. He searched for her in the kitchen but couldn’t find her. He entered the conservatory and found her sitting on the piano bench, fingers splayed on the ivory keys. He stood behind her. Will she let me touch her?

He gently placed his hands on her shoulders. She remained still. He began to gently knead the tense muscles, using his fingertips to make short, feathery strokes along the sides

of her neck. He pressed more firmly on her right scalene muscle, carefully rotating his fingers until he could feel the knot start to soften. She let out a tremulous sigh.

He pressed his head against hers. “May, I’ve always loved you, and always will. You’ve made me a better person. Let me prove to you that I can be the husband you want me to be. Please give me another chance.”

She turned toward him. “Peter, I know you love me, and I love you, too. I will forgive you, but it will take time for me to trust you again.”

“May, what can I do to make you happy? I could take a leave from work, and we could go to Capri and explore the Adriatic coast, just the two of us.”

“You said you couldn’t be away from your patients for more than two weeks.”

“May, I’ve taken you for granted for too long. I haven’t given much thought to your needs. I assumed you would always be available to take Sarah to her ballet lessons, meet with her teachers, and cheer her performances in school plays while I was working. And once she left for university, I assumed you would continue to make our meals or eat out with me near my workplace. I promise that will change.”

He kissed her head. He picked up his briefcase and then his shoulder bag, May’s gift to him on their first anniversary. She said the Buffalo Jackson Trading Company textured bison leather with antique nickel hardware reminded her of why she was attracted to him: distinctive, masculine, hard-working, and a little rugged. He wasn’t sure how she would describe him now.

Some things, such as the weather, were beyond his control, and he could either ruminate about how he’d hurt his wife or direct his energy to what he could change. He

knew May was angry with him, and he hoped she would forgive him. I'll break it off with Cammy today, for May's sake. And I'll book two months off to go to Capri.

The rain sounded like a soft hiss, a cat pitter-pattering on a scratchy cotton-covered sofa. Peter picked up his long-handled umbrella, testing it to confirm that it opened and closed smoothly. He absentmindedly returned it where he had picked it up.

He and May lived in a two-story colonial on a corner lot once surrounded by farmers' fields. Upscale residences with manicured lawns now lined the street. May joked that the house was her dowry. In fact, her father had told her that he bought the house and paid off Peter's student loans so that his son-in-law could focus on medicine. He was proud to have a doctor in the family and hoped May would have children to carry on the family line.

Peter's nine-mile drive from home to work could take 15 to 45 minutes, depending on traffic gridlock. In contrast, May only had to drive 15 minutes to her office. For some, negotiating the narrow, clogged streets of Chinatown in search of an elusive parking spot took more time than traveling into the city. But May's family owned the building, and she had a reserved parking spot.

Peter placed his bag over his shoulder cross-body style, carrying his briefcase in his non-dominant hand. His remote fob turned on the ignition of his Porsche, the prize he awarded himself when promoted to chief of surgery.

Two blocks from home, he directed Siri to play Samuel Barber's Adagio for Strings. The soulful music made Peter think about how he'd hurt his wife and could lose her. He hadn't taken his affair with Cammy seriously, but he now understood how serious it was to his wife. Peter vowed to do everything possible to restore her belief in him. He was so

preoccupied with his thoughts that he didn't notice the passenger in the back seat until it was too late.

As a thin wire looped around his head, Peter flung his hands towards his neck. He could feel red-hot daggers of pain shooting through his neck. He futilely tried to dig his fingers under the noose. The sharp wire dug into his digits. The car veered off the road, hitting a stop sign as he lost consciousness and slumped sideways. The driver's airbag deployed.

The passenger in the back seat opened Peter's briefcase. Seeing only a pair of pressed scrubs, a stethoscope and work ID, he left the case on the back seat. He picked up the leather shoulder bag and hopped out of the car, putting on an overcoat as he hiked across the intersection toward a bus stop.