

PRAISE FOR *THE BONE CURSE* BY CARRIE RUBIN

“A tense, perceptive tale of an investigation into a terrifying threat.”

—*Kirkus Reviews*

“A teeth-grinding story of ancient curses and mystical remedies... *The Bone Curse* will keep even the most skeptical reader awake long past midnight.”

—**Andra Watkins**, *New York Times* bestselling author of *Not Without My Father* and the *Nowhere Series*

“From the first page to the last, the tensions never let up ... Bravo to Rubin for creating another fast-paced medical thriller that both keeps you turning pages and opens a window into a world most of us have never considered.”

—**Audrey Kalman**, author of *What Remains Unsaid* and *Dance of Souls*

“A sizzling slice of Vodou served alongside methodical medical science. What's not to love? Unique characters, a plot that galloped along, and some damn fine writing, too.”

—**G.M. Barlean**, author of *The Rosewood Series*

PRAISE FOR *EATING BULL*

“A deftly crafted novel of suspense and a compelling read from beginning to end...Very highly recommended.”—*Midwest Book Review*

“...bought the book, read the book, loved the book...”

—**Larry Brooks**, *USA Today* bestselling author

“A solid thriller that manages to infuse one boy's coming-of-age with a whole lot of murder.” —*Kirkus Reviews*

“Each of Rubin's characters is carefully developed and believable.”

—*Akron Beacon Journal*

“Rubin is a masterful storyteller who weaves her medical knowledge into a gripping thriller, diving head-first into a meaty subject that has been ignored for far too long. *Eating Bull* paints a disturbing portrait of a society in denial and delivers characters that get under your skin and stay there.”

—**Dianne Gray**, award-winning Australian author of *Soul's Child* and *The Everything Theory*

PRAISE FOR *THE SENECA SCOURGE*

“Rubin masterfully blends medical thriller, mystery, and sci-fi into a thoroughly enjoyable read.”

—**Audrey Kalman, author of *Dance of Souls***

“This fast-paced, beautifully written medical thriller glues you between its covers and will not set you free until the final page!”

—**Frederick Anderson, author of *I Am Cara*, *The Butterfly Man*, and *Hallbury Summer***

“*The Seneca Scourge* grabs you by the throat and doesn’t let go until the last page.”

—**Elizabeth Hein, author of *How to Climb the Eiffel Tower* and *Overlook***

THE BONE CURSE

ALSO BY CARRIE RUBIN

The Seneca Scourge

Eating Bull

THE BONE CURSE

CARRIE RUBIN



SCIENCE**THRILLERS** MEDIA



This is a work of fiction. All of the characters, organizations, and events portrayed in this novel are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

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For my sons, who brighten my day with laughter

“Ah, foolish one! Why thinkest thou that thou shalt live long,
when thou art not sure of a single day?”
—Thomas à Kempis, inscribed on the Imitation Pillar, Paris Catacombs

PARIS
TUESDAY, JUNE 23
10:40 A.M.

Within the suffocating stairwell of the catacombs, something happened to Ben. He'd expected dizziness. Distress, even. The pragmatic med student had battled claustrophobia before. But this feeling? This was more like despair. Seeing millions of bones two hundred feet below Paris no longer seemed worth the agony.

He gripped the railing and focused on his spiral descent, counting the steps to distract himself. The rest of the tourists were far ahead, and though his friend Laurette was only a few feet behind, he felt utterly alone.

“Eighty-seven, eighty-eight, eighty-nine.”

An invisible hand squeezed his throat. The shock of it threw him off balance, and he stumbled several steps before regaining his footing. He pressed his body close to the stone wall and willed himself to calm down. Just keep counting, he thought. You'll be at the bottom soon.

“Ninety-six, ninety-seven, ninety-eight.”

Ghost arms cinched his chest, and air rushed from his lungs. He faltered a few more steps. Behind him Laurette's Caribbean accent surfaced. “Are you okay? Something is not right. I feel it too. Please, Ben, *arrêtez*.” As a native

of Haiti who spoke more French than Haitian Creole, Laurette was telling him to stop.

He wanted to. Dear Jesus he wanted to. Especially for the woman who'd given him this free trip to Paris when her brother had backed out last minute. But something wouldn't let him. Something drove him onward, his shoes smacking the concrete steps as though he were a marionette. Losing control troubled him on a good day. Losing it in an underground graveyard terrified him.

He tried to call out to Laurette, but his jaw snapped shut. Only a wheeze whistled through. On his second attempt, fingers seized his brain. They squeezed and pressed and jumbled his thoughts. Reasoning slipped away and time lost all meaning. No more counting steps. No more efforts to turn back. Whenever a snippet of rationality surfaced, some unseen force pushed it back down.

When his body finally reached the quarry, the dank tunnels of the catacombs welcomed him. Though aware of his surroundings, compelled by them really, he slipped further away from his cognitive self and shuffled through the earthy corridors, their limestone walls and pebbly pathways a cumin haze of dust. By the time he reached the first burial site, the bones took over completely.

Reaching as high as the ceilings, organized piles of abandoned tibias and femurs supported rows of human skulls. Some of the ossuaries were narrow and musty, barely clearing his six-foot frame. Others were roomier. Save for a few sconces, all of the chambers were dark.

Empty eye sockets, browned and desiccated with time, stared out at Ben at chest level. You're almost there, they whispered.

Cool water plopped onto his hair and dripped down his stubbled cheek. With the mindlessness of a robot, he wiped the moisture away and zipped his hoodie higher. With each step his urgency grew. At times he was aware of Laurette's growing concern, her pleas to turn back, her insistence that a dark presence was controlling him, but he was incapable of responding. Instead he kept winding through the ossuaries. The deeper he weaved into their shadowy maze, the calmer he became. When he tried to reason why that was, the dead air hushed him. At last he spilled into a spacious room with a stone altar. His body halted and his power of speech returned. Any lingering fear vanished.

“We’re here,” he said, excitement buzzing inside him.

To his left lay a collection of bones. Engraved in stone next to the osseous pile were the words: *OSSEMENTS DU CIMETIÈRE DES INNOCENTS DÉPOSÉS EN AVRIL 1786*.

“No. We must keep going.” Spirals of ebony hair coiled around Laurette’s cheekbones, her expression a tight mask. One hand grasped a limestone pillar, the other clutched her bronze locket.

“It’s just another pile of bones. You saw worse as a nurse in Haiti.”

“We must not stop here. I feel something *mal*, something bad. Let us catch up with the others.” She released the pillar and grabbed his arm, trying to lead him onward.

He pulled away and approached the billboard-sized heap of bones.

You are very close now, they whispered.

Chilly, underground air crept inside his sweatshirt and enveloped his clammy skin. Water dripped softly in the corner. He barely noticed. He had to see these bones.

“I remember this room from your guidebook.”

“Please, Ben, your voice. It is scaring me. I fear something evil wants you.”

“These were the first bones transferred to the catacombs, back in 1786.”

From his peripheral vision he saw Laurette trembling.

Do not worry about her.

“Your book said patients who died at the *Hotel-Dieu* hospital were taken to the Holy Innocents’ Cemetery and dumped into mass graves.” He spoke mechanically, an unknown presence demanding he voice the ossuary’s pain.

“Please. We must go.”

“But the cemetery got so crowded, the bones were exhumed and moved to the catacombs.” He shuffled closer to the skulls. “Just think. All those people sick with disease, suffering, getting terrible treatment in an overcrowded hospital, only to be dumped in a mass grave when they died, as if they were no better than the rats and fleas that infected them.”

“This is not you talking. I am frightened. Let us—”

“Give me a minute.” His rebuke made her jump. She pressed her body against the stone pillar, hands shaking, locket clutched to her fleece jacket.

A flash of reason blipped in his brain. *What’s happening? Go to her. She needs you.*

We need you, the bones sang, and like a siren and a thief, they stole his attention back. He wanted only to be in their presence. To look at their porous marrow. To smell their earthiness.

And to touch one. A special one.

A bone on the right seemed to signal him. He shifted his stance. Behind him Laurette called out, her cry a million miles away. A tug on his hood tried to pull him back, but his feet were bricks.

He lifted his arm.

A bone. A femur. Brownish and old, its osseous surface cracked and nicked over the centuries, buried with a tale it could never tell.

His hand reached up.

“Ben, no!”

Like finally scratching a relentless itch, he wrapped his fingers around the femur.

For a moment time stood still, the air as dead as the human remains around them. Then pain stabbed his palm, and an electric current shot through his body. His back arched, and his jaw jutted forward, as if being wrenched from his face.

Laurette shrieked and wrapped her arms around him. The shrillness of her cry and the immediacy of her touch broke Ben’s rigor. His muscles relaxed, and his stupor ended.

He snatched his hand away from the bone and blinked at the blood flowing from his palm. Crimson drops plopped onto his heavy-toed shoes and the chalky ground around them.

His heart raced and his chest heaved, but his mind recovered. He returned Laurette’s embrace with his uninjured arm. “Oh, thank God,” he said. She gulped air and cast an anxious glance his way. “Shh, shh, it’s okay. I’m okay now.” Aside from his bleeding palm and dizziness, he was.

After a moment’s hesitation, she grabbed his chin and stared into his eyes, as if needing reassurance.

“I promise I’m okay. I’m so sorry. I don’t know what came over me.”

Once she calmed down he looked back at the offending femur but saw nothing to explain the cut. No spur, no sharp edge, no barbed border.

Pressing his bloody palm against his jeans to stanch the flow, he couldn’t understand what had happened. Couldn’t sort out his bizarre and

uncharacteristic behavior. So it wasn't long before the thirty-year-old pragmatist in him resurfaced.

Just a severe reaction to claustrophobia, he decided. Like that panic attack when he got trapped in a service elevator years ago.

Bleeding hand pressed against his thigh, he gently guided Laurette into the next tunnel. "Let's get out of here. I owe you better than this on our last day in Paris."

Her high-arched brows wrinkled with worry as she kneaded her locket, a protective amulet given to her by her brother before she'd left Haiti for Philadelphia. "But do you not see? Something now runs in your blood. I don't know what, but I feel it. I—"

"It's just a little cut. I'll be fine." And by the time they exited the catacombs and reemerged in the blinding sunlight, he truly believed that.

Because the only things running in Benjamin Oris's blood were practicality, logic, and reason.

1

PHILADELPHIA
THURSDAY, JULY 9
6:15 A.M.

Growing up, Ben had only wanted to be one of two things: a carpenter or an orthopedic surgeon. Both jobs pounded and sawed hard surfaces. Both jobs mastered mechanical forces. But only orthopedics nourished his love of science.

At six fifteen in the morning, with his landlady's cat in his lap, Ben ate breakfast and reviewed an article on infective endocarditis. Toast crumbs littered its pages and coffee stained its corner. If he didn't get the disease's criteria down pat before rounds, Dr. Smith would crucify him. Then it would be a life of carpentry after all.

He stroked the tabby's fur. "What are those painful lesions on the hand and feet called?" The cat didn't answer. Neither did the kitchen's 1970s appliances or pea-green cabinets. He grabbed the article and flipped through it. "Osler's nodes, Izzy. Osler's nodes."

Izzy purred and blinked. Ben nuzzled her to his face, her whiskers tickling and smelling of tuna. "At least I'll still have you if Dr. Smith gives me the boot."

The cat jumped off his lap and slunk to the open basement door, heading back upstairs to her mistress.

Et tu, Brute? Ben thought.

He gave up on the paper and tossed the rest of the toast in the trash. His appetite wasn't the same since he'd returned from Paris. Neither was his

energy level. He'd been suffering headaches too. Considering he'd started his first clinical rotation only nine days earlier, he wasn't surprised. Internal medicine was one of the toughest clerkships.

Especially when his attending blamed him for her stepson not getting into med school.

After making sure Izzy's tail was in the clear, he closed the basement door and stepped into the living room, its garish carpeting a burnt-orange shag nobody in their right mind would choose. Before he could retrieve his backpack from the tattered sofa, his phone buzzed in the pocket of his chinos. A text from Laurette: *You left yet?*

Soon. If don't get pre-rounds done before report Smith'll kill me, he replied.

Laurette typed back: *Sounds drastic. Give her a goat.*

Goats don't fix everything.

So I should not give Edith one?

Ben smiled and texted: *No she'd just cook it.*

Laurette was referring to Edith Sinclair, Ben's landlady of ten years, who'd only agreed to rent her brownstone's basement to him when he promised he kept to himself and didn't party. Though cordial to Laurette, the seventy-eight-year-old woman squirmed at the idea of Ben having a black girlfriend, and for that reason alone he never bothered to tell her their relationship was platonic. The same tight smile appeared whenever Ben mentioned he was raised by two dads.

But despite the fact Mrs. Sinclair and her decor were stuck in the seventies, he liked living there and was more than happy to repair her broken shutters or damaged drywall. He did his best to repair her loneliness as well, stopping by for visits whenever he could.

Lunch today? Laurette texted.

Ben's thumbs hovered over the phone. Their face-to-face interactions had been strained since they'd returned from Paris. Laurette was convinced something was wrong with him, and he didn't want to rehash it. He rotated his right palm and examined the spot where the bone had cut him. A purplish, rubbery papule the size of a baby pea had formed there.

Sure, he finally typed. Her text humor suggested she was getting back to herself, which was good because he missed her jokes. Though not his girlfriend, she was his best friend, and he remembered how quickly he'd

bonded to the public health student two years his senior when they met in epidemiology class a couple years before.

A glance at the time told him he'd better hurry. He typically biked to the hospital which, traveling from Wallace Street to downtown Chestnut, took anywhere from twelve to fifteen minutes. Though driving might be quicker, there was no point in wasting money on gas or parking. On the coldest days, he took public transit.

Grabbing the stuffed backpack off the couch, he heaved the bag over his shoulder and winced when the strap scraped his hand. He looked at his palm again. Red droplets sprouted around the lesion. Though the papule had occasionally itched and tingled, up until now it hadn't rebelled.

With no bandages in the medicine cabinet or elsewhere, he cursed and grabbed a wad of toilet paper to blot the area. A knock on the door interrupted him.

"Helloooooo. Are you in there?"

Ben closed his eyes. The sing-songy voice was unmistakable.

"It's Kate, sweetie. Hope I haven't missed you."

Shit.

Kate Naughton. Mrs. Sinclair's twice-divorced, forty-three-going-on-seventeen-year-old daughter. What was she doing there so early? Probably just coming in from a night of drinking, her mom's place a shorter drive from whatever bar she'd holed herself up in. But what did she want with him?

He never should have slept with the woman. Either time.

For an introvert, he really needed to learn to keep his pants on.



Eighty-proof breath accosted him the moment he opened the door. He stepped back, his eyes watering. "Hey, what's up? I have to get to the hospital."

The woman teetered in, closing first the door and then the distance between them. Her honey-wheat hair was matted on one side and poufed on the other. Smeared mascara rimmed her lower lids. Cleavage ballooned from her silky blouse, and a dark stain dotted the left shoulder.

Even drunk and disheveled, she looked ... tempting.

Ben backed up, images of an inflamed Dr. Smith realigning his priorities. When he reached the wall, the glassy-eyed woman had him trapped. The scent of his sandalwood body wash mixed with her boozy fumes.

"Aren't you a doctor yet, honey? You've been at this school thing a long time."

"I'm sorry, but you can't stay."

Kate's left hand plopped onto his pec and her right onto his bicep. His backpack fell off his shoulder and thumped to the floor. She gave his bicep a squeeze. "Money for tuition isn't the only thing construction work's given you."

She winked, and her hand slid down his chest and onto his abdomen. Her fingers danced their way to his belt. Despite his resistance he felt himself getting hard. Gently but firmly he pushed her away with his uninjured hand, the right one still clutched in a fist over the wad of now-bloody toilet paper.

"Kate, I have to go."

Her grabby hands flew back to his chest, where she kneaded his muscles. "And to think you came from gay fathers. Did Mike ... er ... Mark ... er, what's the dead one's name again?"

"Max." Ben's voice tightened and his erection fizzled.

"Yeah, that's it. Did Max ever finish that gene ... geneo ... oh, shoot, what's that thing called? Your mom mentioned it to me."

"A genealogy, and no." Ben guided her away, more forcefully this time. He picked up his backpack and opened the door, pulling her into the stairwell with him. One of the most regrettable moments of his life was when Kate had befriended Harmony, his mother (though that was using the term loosely). Harmony had showed up at the worst possible time: when Kate was still in his bed. Just thinking about Harmony made his head hurt.

"Oh, don't get all mad." Kate's tone became impish. "I know what'll make you feel better. It's been too long since we've, *you* know." Red acrylic fingernails tapped his tie.

Seven months to be exact. Seven months since he'd vowed it would never happen again. And it wasn't her age. It wasn't even his noncommittal relationship with Melissa, his ex-girlfriend. It was Kate's batshit craziness.

"Kate." Firm now. "Let me lock the door."

But before he could pull out his apartment key, she was all over him. Hands on his chest, his shoulders, his ass. Lips and tongue on his mouth.

"No, we're done with that." He pushed her away, and to keep her from charging again, he grabbed both her hands before they made it to his chest.

The bloodied tissue fell to the floor, and even in that heated moment he was surprised by how saturated it was.

Kate leaned in again, but then she too saw the blood. “Ooh, you’re bleeding, baby.” Swaying from inebriation, she held up her left hand, his blood leaving a moon-shaped smear on her palm.

“I’m sorry,” he said, his tone softer. “Let’s go up to your mom’s to wash it off. I need to bike to the hospital, and I’m already late.” As he turned to lock the door, Kate let out a whoop that made him jump.

“Well, that’s what I came to tell you, doctor man.” Her eyes seemed to float in their orbits, and she had to grab the handrail for support. “Your bike. I just crushed it with my car.”

2

THURSDAY, JULY 9
7:20 A.M.

Ben swerved his black '96 Mustang into the entrance of the visitor's parking garage and snatched a ticket from the dispenser. According to the fee board, he'd be twenty dollars poorer by the end of the day. But it was the closest lot to the hospital, and if he didn't get his ass moving, he'd have bigger problems than parking debt. Morning report started in ten minutes. He'd either have to skip pre-rounds to attend it, or skip morning report to pre-round. Though both options would piss off Dr. Smith, being ill-prepared on his patients would be the bigger sin.

Pre-rounds it was.

After finding a tight space on the sixth level, he sprinted down the stairwell to the second level walkway connecting the visitor's lot to the main building of Montgomery Hospital. His backpack thumped against his shoulder blade, and his shirt clung to his already perspiring chest. Another scorcher of a day ahead.

The medical complex consisted of a cluster of brick buildings covering three blocks of downtown Philadelphia. Some were connected via walkways on their second floors. Others required crossing the street. Most of the specialty clinics, research facilities, and academic offices had parking areas of their own.

The main hospital with its arched entrance and expansive windows contained several floors of inpatient wards and the emergency room, or emergency department as Ben was learning to call it. To do otherwise was

to annoy Dr. Smith. Though Ben spent most of his time in that building, he still attended daily after-lunch lectures in the Southeast Pennsylvania College of Medicine, easily accessed via a detour through the Talcott Center, which housed the labor and delivery unit. Ben enjoyed seeing the swollen bellies and happy faces of the women in the waiting room. It was a nice break from the pain and disease on the internal medicine ward.

But there'd be no time to cross over to the medical school to retrieve his white coat from the student lounge that day, even if it meant a pile of hurt from Dr. Smith during rounds later on. "I expect you all to look like professionals," she had said the first day of his clerkship. "Men, that includes a tie and white coat. You're aspiring doctors, not vagrants."

Damn Kate.

How the woman had managed to mangle his bike when he'd chained it to a tree near the berm was a mystery. She'd dragged him outside to look at it, the Philadelphia street springing to life with people exiting their red-bricked row houses on their way to work or out walking their dogs. Given that his landlady frowned upon having a bike in the house, he always left it out on the berm. The thing was a piece of junk, so he'd never had trouble with anyone stealing it. Still, seeing its squashed front tire and twisted handlebars beneath Kate's Taurus had disheartened him. Piece of junk or not, it was his primary means of transportation.

Putting the morning's rough start behind him, he skidded into the main hospital complex, a large, open design with an atrium that reached nine stories above to a glass ceiling. Skipping the crowded foyer at the west bank of elevators, he darted toward the stairwell and galloped three steps at a time to the sixth floor. As soon as he got there, his cell phone buzzed in his front pocket.

Though Ben managed many things well, getting off schedule wasn't one of them. Pressure squeezed his chest, and acid reflux (a recent development, compliments of Dr. Smith's clerkship) burned his throat. He could hear his father's voice in his head: "Can't be so rigid in life, son. Things don't always go as planned."

Ignoring his phone, he hurried on. The closer he got to 6 West, the greater the antiseptic smell and the more crowded the hallway. A trio of surgical residents brushed past him, their white coats swishing against their scrubs. They barely acknowledged his lowly med-student presence, even though

he'd seen a couple of them on the ward for consults. He was probably older than all of them too.

Just as he was about to enter the unit, his phone vibrated again. With a grumble he checked it. A voice message from his dad. He wished Willy would text instead of call, but the day Willy sent a text message would be the day something was wrong.

Slipping into a small waiting room just off 6 West, Ben listened to the message, his gaze focused on a pile of tabloid magazines littering a central table. "Hey, Benny. The store had a little break-in. Nothing to worry about, I'm fine, but I could use your skills fixin' the window. I know you're busy. Hate to trouble you."

Sweat dripped between Ben's shoulder blades as he sank onto a maroon chair. Someone broke into Willy's Chocolate Chalet? Located on South Street, the store had never had any trouble in the past.

He closed his eyes. His body temperature rose even more. First the bike, now the shop window. When would he find time to repair them? He had five patients, two sets of rounds, a couple lectures, and a whole lot of studying ahead.

An elderly man with a cane and movements suggestive of Parkinson's disease shuffled into the waiting room. He gripped the armrest of a chair opposite Ben and struggled to sit. Ben jumped up. "Here, let me help you." He grabbed the man's arm to steady him.

Once comfortably positioned, the man said, "Thank you. Very kind of you."

Ben nodded and asked if he needed anything else. When the man assured him he didn't, Ben headed to the ward, whipping off a quick text to his father to let him know he'd stop by after work and seal the window until they could get new glass. Willy might not send texts, but at least he read them.

As for the bike, it would have to wait until the weekend. He'd pick up new parts and do the repairs himself.

In between his mountain of studies.

Ignoring the growing ache in his temples and the squeeze in his chest, Ben spent the next forty minutes checking in on his patients while the rest of the team was at morning report. The work distracted him, and he started to relax.

Maybe Hard-Ass Smith wouldn't even notice his absence.



Having finished informal team rounds with the senior resident two hours later, Ben waited near the central work station for his attending's arrival, his throat dry and his fingers fidgeting with the bandage he'd found in a supply cart and stuck on his injured palm. The staff area, a large square made up of three adjoining counters and a back wall fronting a supply closet and break room, had long since come alive with hospital personnel. Across from the work station, patient rooms lined the periphery, their numbers spanning from W664 to W684.

At nine thirty sharp, Dr. Taka Smith burst through the automatic doors and marched down the stark hallway, its monotony broken by oak wall guards, a red emergency phone, and an automated external defibrillator. A group of nursing students parted like the Red Sea for Moses when the diminutive attending barreled past them, her lab coat flapping around her tailored suit and her pumps clicking on the tile. Glossy, bobbed hair framed her delicate face.

To an outsider she might appear sweet—even docile—but Ben knew the Japanese-American was more samurai than geisha. One of the few people he'd seen her cater to was her stepson, Joel, and in her mind, if it weren't for Ben's deferment year to earn money for med school, Joel would have gotten the last spot in the class. Then he would be the one rounding on patients instead of toiling in the biochemistry lab a block away, working on his master's degree. It didn't seem to occur to them that maybe Ben was the better student, and maybe the admissions committee figured he was a good enough candidate to let him defer a year.

The un-Japanese name of Smith came from her neurosurgeon husband whom she married eighteen years before. Ben knew the details because the accomplished husband-and-wife-physician duo was the subject of the hospital's most recent quarterly newsletter.

Waiting with the gathering team members, he watched Dr. Smith stride toward them, her lined eyebrows raised and her lips a tight line. "How nice of you to join us, Benjamin. Hope you enjoyed your sleep-in while the rest of us were at morning report."

The rest of "us" included the senior resident, three interns, a diligent fourth-year student acting as an intern for her sub-I month, and two other

third-years besides Ben, including Melissa Horner, an athletic, pixie-haired blonde who happened to be his former girlfriend. Bonus stress in an already stressful rotation.

Ben swallowed. The burn in his throat returned, and before he could answer the attending, she continued. "Please, share with us what was so important."

What could he say? He was late because his bike got smashed? He was late because, unlike the others, he didn't have an unlimited gas allowance? He settled on, "Sorry. Transportation issues. It won't happen again."

Dr. Smith peered up at him, as if disappointed in having no better excuse to shred. She wrinkled her dew drop of a nose and glanced at his cheap, charcoal tie, and then his short-sleeved shirt. "I see donning a lab coat was too difficult a chore."

Ben said nothing. What was the point? The sooner they moved on, the better.

Sighing, the attending shifted her focus to Jamal Brooks, the senior resident. "Who's first?" she asked.

Like a school of fish, the group trailed after their two superiors to room W668, where a thirty-nine-year-old man with endocarditis lay febrile in bed. A repeat of *Friends* blared from the television, but when the rounding team shuffled in—their entrance order determined by hierarchy—the patient muted the TV and turned his flushed face to them.

Customarily the intern assigned to the patient presented to the attending, and the senior resident chimed in when needed. For the most part, the medical students were ignored, their input sought during informal rounds with the senior resident instead. That didn't stop Dr. Smith from "pimping" Ben though, an ugly term for aggressive quizzing of medical trainees. While Tim Cho, the intern, presented the endocarditis patient and the plan for the day, Ben braced himself for what would follow.

Sure enough, moments later Dr. Smith cut the intern off and homed in on Ben. "Based on what Tim presented, what Duke criteria, both major and minor, qualify this patient for a diagnosis of infective endocarditis?"

Ben cleared his throat. Lacking a tablet like the rest of the students, he gripped his clipboard of notes. "He has two major criteria: more than one blood culture positive for *Strep viridans* and an oscillating mass on his aortic valve. Although those two alone are enough for diagnosis, he also has the

minor criteria of fever and a positive rheumatoid factor.” He exhaled more loudly than he would’ve liked but held Dr. Smith’s stare.

Uncomfortable silence followed, and then the petite attending nodded and said, “Correct.”

After finalizing the treatment plan with Tim and Jamal, the team moved onto the rest of the patients. Dr. Smith seemed to forget about Ben, perhaps mollified by his endocarditis response, so he finally relaxed. While the interns presented their patients, Ben’s mind—and gaze—wandered to Melissa. When a portly man walked by with his buttocks exposed through his gown, Ben caught his ex-girlfriend’s eye and smiled. At first, the corner of her mouth lifted, but then she gave Ben a chilly look and redirected her attention to Dr. Smith, who was listening to the sub-intern present a patient with chronic *C. diff* infection.

She hates me, Ben thought.

Could he blame her? He’d known she wanted more than an occasional romp, and yet he couldn’t seem to give it to her. He kept ducking and deflecting until she finally gave up. A few weeks later she walked straight into the all-too-eager arms of Joel, Dr. Smith’s stepson.

Talk about a hospital soap opera.

Ben trailed the rounding group out of the *C. diff* patient’s room and followed them around the corner into another room.

He should’ve been honest with Melissa. Admitted how much he liked her, how much he *still* liked her. He should’ve confessed his reluctance to take it further was because he needed to focus on school. He’d worked too hard to get where he was to risk backsliding. Instead he’d clammed up, always leaving the discussion for another—

“How do you feel about her decision, Mr. Oris?”

Ben startled at the sound of his surname. The rounding team returned to the hallway, and Jamal pulled the patient’s door closed behind them. Dr. Smith crossed her arms and waited for Ben’s response. The air around them thickened, and his breath caught in his throat. “I’m sorry, what was that?”

“I asked how you feel about her decision.”

“Uh ... what decision is that?” Blood rushed behind his eardrums.

Dr. Smith assumed a staccato tone. “Her decision to forgo all future treatment for her colon cancer and her insinuation she’d like someone to help her die.”

Max popped into Ben's mind. His non-biological father, stage-four colon cancer, lying in a hospital bed, emaciated, feverish. Although Max's suffering had ripped Ben's heart in two, Ben had sought all last-resort treatments, anything to give him more time with his father.

Before Ben even realized he was responding, he said, "I think it's wrong." Behind Dr. Smith, Melissa's wide-eyed gaze finally caught his. In it he saw *shut the hell up*. And yet he didn't. Instead he remembered the trial drug he'd fought for that put Max in remission and gave Willy and Ben six more good months with the man. "I think people should fight 'til the end."

Dr. Smith drummed her fingers against her arms, the pen in her coat pocket jiggling from the motion. "Well, wouldn't it be nice to live in Benjamin's world where everything is so cut and dried? Where Western medicine has all the answers and any other avenues are wrong."

"Well, I didn't exactly say that."

"If you expect to make it as a doctor, you better expand your viewpoint. Learn that life isn't packaged into neat little boxes." His ears burned, but the attending wasn't finished. "Clearly you could use a brush-up on ethics, particularly on patients' rights to terminate care. I'll email you literature this afternoon. Tomorrow after rounds you'll grace us with a ten-minute talk on the subject." Leaving no room for discussion, Dr. Smith darted off, the rest of the fish swimming after her, no doubt grateful to be out of the flotsam.

Crap.

More papers to read. More research to do. A shattered window to repair. A bike to fix.

He scratched his palm, dropping his clipboard in the process. It ricocheted off the floor and flew three feet down the hall. Melissa left the group to retrieve it. When she handed it to him he snatched it back, ripping his bandage off and sending loose papers to the ground. He smashed the bandage back in place before the lesion had a chance to rebleed.

"Ben," she said, her head tilted in sympathy.

"Spare me your pity, princess." He bent down to rescue his patient notes, avoiding Melissa's eyes until she scampered away in her Jimmy Choo flats. He knew both his tone and his use of the label she detested had just severed their connection for good.

Crap.