

Introducing Alan – a brief, out-of-sequence teaser

written by Holly

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This segment introduces the hero, Alan MacKerrie, just as he's left the ER where he tried – and failed – to save the first of the killer's victims. This is his first contact with his next-door neighbor, Phoebe.

Alan left the emergency department with a sense of overwhelming relief. A five-day weekend stretched before him, and thanks to the hell in the ED, no one had realized he'd just finished working through the dreaded anniversary of his wife's and daughter's death. First time. He'd made it. He was putting the past behind him, getting the pain under control.

He drove home with his head pounding from the tension – not from the tension of the ED, which he usually enjoyed – but from the tension of waiting all night for someone to mention Janet or Chick. He'd had a lot to keep his mind busy in the ED; it had been awful, but nowhere near as bad as the two anniversaries in which he'd sat at home and allowed himself to think. Working had been the right thing to do.

The morning traffic heading east on Commercial was brutal – but he was heading west. No sunlight in his eyes, almost no one else on the road with him, the brief but unquestionable pleasure of watching half a million poor shmucks coming the other way, enduring the dreadful commute to their cubicles when he was on his way home to sleep. That drive home was one of the few real benefits of having the night shift in the emergency department; Fort Lauderdale traffic rarely got better.

He drove through the nest of side streets that led to the development where he lived and pulled into his numbered slot in the communal parking lot. The place looked better in the long-shadowed light of dawn. The sun gave the peculiar flamingo pink of his townhouse – that shade so loved by Florida developers – a beautiful rosy glow, and made the palm trees and the coarse grass look like they'd been made of emeralds.

He took a deep breath as he got out of the car and consciously shook off the night and everything associated with it. In the next five days, he intended to treat himself to some long-planned self-therapy; this time he would succeed in coming to grips with the past. He walked around the corner of his privacy fence rubbing his eyes and yawning, and ran right into the girl with the cane.

She went over backwards with a yelp and a cry of pain, and his first ungallant thought was, *Shit, my malpractice insurance.* But he dropped to one knee beside her. "Christ, I'm sorry. I wasn't paying attention to where I was going. Are you hurt?"

She closed her eyes and took a slow, deep breath, and with her eyes still closed, said, "I'll be fine." She looked at him then, realized she recognized him, and managed a strained smile. "You're the guy next door. The doctor."

He nodded. "Alan MacKerrie. Sorry to meet you this way."

Her pained smile got a little broader, but he noticed that she did not offer her name.

"If you were going to get pasted on the sidewalk, I guess you got pasted by the right guy." She was pretty in a fragile, helpless sort of way. Long, curly dark hair worn loose, large dark eyes, a pointed chin, the undeveloped build of a teenager who might one day fill out and be gorgeous – but this girl wasn't a teenager, he realized. If he looked at the

first ghosts of smile lines in the corners of her eyes, he'd have to guess early thirties – he could be off as much as six or eight years either way, if she were a smoker, say, or if she took really good care of herself.

He'd only seen her in passing before and had never paid much attention – too-thin women had never shown up on his radar. He asked her, "So where do you hurt?"

"My butt. My knee. The palms of my hands." She held them up and looked at them. Dirt embedded in the skin, a few scrapes and flecks of blood, nothing major.

"Any pain in your wrists?"

She wiggled them. "They're fine. My knee's the only thing that really hurts, and it already hurt."

"You feel a pop or a snap when you fell?"

"No. The pain just got worse, but it was already pretty bad."

"Let me take a look, okay?"

"I'd . . . rather you . . ." She sighed and shrugged. "Sure. Take a look. I don't think it's any worse than it was, but if it is, I'd rather know now." She tugged up the leg of her jeans, and for an instant he thought she had really pretty legs, which sort of made up for the flat chest, and then he saw the scar and it was everything he could do to keep the shock from showing on his face.

He put his hands on either side of the knee and made a show of palpating and gently moving the joint to hide his reaction. Her right knee bore the scars of half a dozen surgeries; the square outlines of two grafts, one white and relatively old, the other pink and a bit puffy; a dozen black circles buried in the skin and scarred over; a missing chunk that had healed hard and red and ugly. "What happened?" he asked, keeping his voice neutral and not looking at her

face.

"Shotgun." She put no emotion into the word. He looked into her eyes and saw nothing there. A wall. She said, "I've had a bit of work done on it."

"I see that." He said, "I don't see any new damage, but if you want, I'll take you to the ED and get it x-rayed for you. I'll cover the cost – I did knock you down."

She smiled and shook her head, and he marveled that her expression could convey absolutely nothing of what she was thinking. "I'll see if I can stand on it. It doesn't feel any different now than it did when I walked out the door. I think it just twisted a little when I fell."

He stood and gave her his hand and said, "I'd still feel better if you'd have it x-rayed." He leaned back and pulled, and she rose to her feet without much difficulty. He guessed that she weighed less than a hundred pounds, and that she was about 5'1" or 5'2". But there'd been a sinewy strength to her grip that surprised him, and a grace to her movements that changed his first impression of fragility. She was tougher than she looked at first glance.

"I've seen more of the insides of hospitals than I ever wanted to; if I never have to go through the doors of one again, that will be just fine." She scooped up her cane and tested the leg, putting her full weight on it and taking it off several times. Her face remained impassive, but Alan caught the flicker of suppressed pain in her eyes. She wiped her palms on her jeans and slung her bag – a small canvas backpack that looked heavy to him – over her shoulder again. "Good as new," she said, then with a shrug added, "or at least good as slightly used."

"Let me know if it gives you any trouble," he said.

She smiled, moved away from him. "I'll do that. Thanks."

Thanks for being so nice.” She turned and walked toward the parking lot. He watched her for a moment, wondering about her, about the scars, about her polite but carefully-maintained distance, and the fact that she didn’t offer her name. As she moved out of sight, he turned to his townhouse – corner unit, one of four on the side and eight in the building, and for just an instant he was conscious of those other people in those other units, with their separate lives kept apart from his by only the thinnest of walls – but walls that might as well have been acres wide. He didn’t know any of them by name, only a couple of them by sight. They were neighbors only in the physical sense, in that they inhabited the same building.

We all keep our secrets, he thought.

That’s it for now. The writing so far today is going better. I walked beforehand, which helped my mood, and consequently, my focus.

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