

THE DEARLY DEPARTED DATING SERVICE

CHAPTER 1

I turned my head this way and that, eying my image critically. “Tell me the truth—does my hair go with knives and scalpels?”

Barefoot and betoweled, I stood in front of the foggy bathroom mirror armed with a brush, hairpins, and my belief that a wonderful life was entirely the result of positive thinking and careful planning. At eight o’clock on a sparkling autumn morning, I had every reason to think so.

Craig cranked off the hot water in the shower and slowly emerged from a billow of swirling steam with a smile hovering on his lips. He lifted a towel from the rack and rubbed his dark curls as he sauntered up to examine me. “Oh, definitely. The perfect surgical coiffure. Neat and tidy . . .” He nuzzled my neck and loosened a few tendrils from the braided knot of blond hair at my nape. “. . . but compassionate.”

He trailed his fingers down my neck and shoulder, following the wing of my collarbone. When I shivered at his touch, his dark eyes crinkled in amusement and he lightly kissed my ear.

I pulled away. “No, really. Today could be the most important day of my professional life. How do I look? Not too . . . you know . . . ?”

“You look perfect, Joy. You *are* perfect.” He gave me a quick squeeze and reached for his blue jeans and favorite T-shirt.

In the mirror, I caught myself gnawing my lip. I stopped immediately—lip-gnawing, or gnawing of any kind, really, wasn’t a good image for a doctor—and especially a doctor-to-be. “That’s good. Surgeons don’t get much of a margin for error. And surgeons-in-training, even less so.”

He chuckled—a low, liquid sound that I loved, like slow water flowing over river rocks—and pulled on his once-red baseball jersey, now faded to a dull pink. “Just don’t forget me. I’ll be waiting with bated breath to hear how it went.” The hooded eyes that gazed at me in the steamy mirror hinted that he just might be waiting for something more.

I drew a finger down his perfect cheek. “Will you be here when I get home?”

“Of course I will. Wild horses couldn’t keep me away.”

I believed him, and it ended up as true, but not in the way that he’d meant. Definitely not in the way he’d meant.

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A few hours later, I stood inside the Memorial Hospital surgical suite fighting the butterflies in my stomach. I peeked into the chill, sterile sanctuary of stainless steel and pale-green enamel, where the sacrament of life was renewed daily with scalpels, clamps, and knives.

A scrub nurse cast me a wry look. “Scared?”

“I feel like a bird perched on the edge of its nest ready to spread its wings. I’ve waited for this moment my whole life. It’s my destiny.”

The nurse didn’t appreciate the moment in quite the same way. She squinted at my ID badge. “Yeah, well, Joy Abercrombie, if you don’t scrub in, you’ll be a few greasy feathers sticking out of a cat’s mouth. Before you flap those wings, you’re gonna have to prove you’re not a complete idiot.”

I made a mental note to leave the metaphors at the door. “Yes, absolutely. I’ll do whatever it takes.”

“Good. So here’s what it takes: you keep yourself—specifically, your hands—

sterile, don't get in the way of the nurses, and above all, *don't* draw the attention of the surgeon. Because the only way for you to draw attention—given your almost perfect state of surgical ignorance—is to do something stupid. You hear?"

"Understood. Keep sterile, stay away from the nurses, don't catch the surgeon's eye." Simple enough.

Especially today, when my only role would be as an observer. Later, presumably, when I had absorbed enough skill from merely watching, I would feel the solid heft of a scalpel slapped into my hand, and then I would perform, making an exquisite incision here, a perfect suture there. But for now, I would be a silent watcher, my only duty to extract every bit of knowledge out of the ensuing events.

I had just survived the painful experience of properly scrubbing for surgery when the call came down. Our scheduled patient had been bumped by an emergency trauma case, the victim of a car wreck.

The surgical staff scrambled to set the stage for the greatest of dramas—the saving of a life. Equipment was powered up, lights were switched on, gleaming instruments were arrayed on sterile trays. Everyone moved with precision and ease.

Except for me and the other student, of course. We, as instructed, didn't move at all.

After a few moments, the pace slowed. A riff of unease trickled through the room.

"Where's Dr. Thompson?" a resident asked in a whisper.

"She's sick. The new guy—a real hotshot—is stepping in."

The news didn't ease the atmosphere. The team, so assured before, now fidgeted and fretted as they went about their jobs.

When everything was in place, there was an expectant pause. The staff exchanged glances, and their eyebrows hovered with silent query. One nurse stared at the clock

ticking away the precious seconds. A resident cleared his throat.

The OR door flew open, and the surgeon strode into the room like a bull entering a ring. His oversized hands, encased in gloves, were held upright in front of his broad chest. Over his mask, steely eyes raked the scene. His surgical cap, pulled low on his brow and tied in back, had a slight defect, a discoloration of dark blue that feathered along one side to resemble the wings on Mercury's helmet. On someone else it might have evoked an air of capriciousness, the lighter side of the god. On him it was a warning: he might be changeable, but above all, he was a god.

The icy atmosphere abruptly fractured when the victim was hurtled through the door on a gurney, covered in blood, trailing tubes, and wires. A resident hovered over the patient's head, doing something with a penlight—checking the patient's pupils, I guessed, but I couldn't see because there were too many bodies in the way.

“Okay, people, move!” The surgeon barked out orders as IV lines were started, instruments checked, monitors powered up. “I want a scalpel in my hand in ten seconds.” He pointed at a nurse. “You. Move that lamp so it shines on my hands. Keep it there. The rest of you, don't crowd me.”

A deeper understanding of the scrub nurse's warning began to penetrate my brain. I scrupulously kept my environment sterile and was careful not to impede the staff—that part was easy. But I began to realize the wisdom of staying well out of the way of the surgeon. He was thorny and unpredictable, that much was obvious.

Within seconds, I realized that at least one part of the Hippocratic Oath was under revision. Scarcely a shred of “I will enter only for the good of my patients” graced the room, but a miasma of “. . . for the good of my splendid reputation” saturated the atmosphere.

“Ego swamp here,” the other student whispered to me.

“If the man’s a surgical genius, he gets a waiver for humility,” I whispered back.

When the surgeon was fully occupied, I crept closer, standing on my tiptoes to peek over the shoulder of a nurse. My curious gaze landed on the patient, starting at his feet. His unmarred toes, long and graceful, peeked out from under the blue surgical drape with a peculiar vulnerability . . . and something else.

A tickle of dread slipped under my skin. I scanned upward and my unease grew. The blood-soaked T-shirt now being scissored off his body . . . it was pink. A faded-red baseball jersey. A deep chill crept down my throat and curled around my heart, like a dragon encircling its prey with jaws opened wide.

My eyes slid to the patient’s face . . . and the dragon’s jaws snapped shut.

The room went dark around the edges and unnaturally bright in the center. I saw a tumble of dark curls, now matted with blood, and long, dark lashes against deathly pale cheeks, all etched in crystalline clarity. An oxygen mask covered his mouth, but it didn’t matter. Every feature on that face was more familiar to me than my own. My heart stuttered once, then stopped.

The pain in my chest squeezed the breath out of me. A keening noise erupted in my head. Panic gripped me and I had to move, but my legs had turned to lead. When my knees buckled, I fumbled for the side of an equipment cart, trying to stay on my feet.

The surgeon shot me a sharp look. His gray-blue eyes radiated contempt. I looked away, afraid that unbearable pain showed in my eyes. I had to act strong, or they’d make me leave. And if I left, if I wasn’t here to watch over him, Craig would die.

“Are you okay?” one of the nurses asked me quietly.

I opened my mouth to speak but no words came out. I swallowed convulsively so I wouldn’t throw up.

Her soft brown eyes were sympathetic over her mask. “It gets easier,” she

murmured before turning back to the operating table.

She was right, but not for the reasons she imagined.

In seconds, the hot-iron smell of blood permeated the air as Craig's blood ran out. The cool, pale green and chrome of the operating room was soon marred with splotches of angry red. The team worked at a feverish pace—knives flashed, clamps clattered, and blood splattered everywhere.

My mind was numb from terror, but I hauled myself together. Craig was still alive, so there was still hope. I stared at his face and prayed the brilliant young surgeon would work a miracle.

I told myself that if I wished hard enough, Craig would live. He had to. I pinned him with my eyes, trying to force my will into him to keep him alive.

His face blurred and shifted. I blinked away the tears and looked again. Now I saw double: Craig lying unconscious on the operating table, and a fainter but somehow more vital image struggling to get free of his battered body. As he pulled away, a monitor began to beep. Someone said, "We're losing him."

Panic touched me at the words, but it was abruptly rerouted when Craig, or the spirit of Craig, sat up slowly and glanced down over his shoulder at his inert body punctured with tubes and covered in blood. He shook his head at the torn flesh and shattered bones and turned back to gaze at his new, less corporeal hands wonderingly. He rotated them this way and that and ran them down his perfectly intact if somewhat translucent chest. A smile blossomed on his face. He raised his eyes to mine.

Dumbfounded, I stood immobilized and witnessed the transformation of Craig from a living, solid-flesh human into a perfect, most decidedly *not* fleshy version of himself.

I'm usually pretty rational, but reason is feeble when matched against hope. Was

this the spirit of Craig or a miracle? Or some concoction of my shock-riddled mind?

I didn't know. I hadn't seen a miracle before. Neither had I seen anyone die—a significant omission for a soon-to-be doctor. This was obviously not the ideal circumstance to remedy the situation, but I guess we don't always get to choose our educational moments.

“Joy!” The spirit of Craig could have been addressing me or simply reporting his feelings, judging from the look on his face. “You can see me?”

Maybe I was approaching shock-saturation. Maybe Craig—the one who spoke to me—was only a hallucination driven by my desperate need for him to live.

Or maybe not. Maybe it was a test of some sort? I blinked again and shook my head, trying to rid myself of the vision. It didn't work. I didn't know what to think or what to feel, but one thing was certain: whether because of superstition or my own need, I couldn't ignore him.

Silent and scared, I nodded slowly at Craig, confused hope rising in my chest.
Yes, I can see you.

The monitor began to shrill, and the atmosphere in the ER went from loosely chaotic to intense. Craig, casually ignoring the team working feverishly on his body, climbed off the table and wandered over to me, all happy and cheerful. I reached out to touch him, and my hand went through his arm. I snatched it back, disturbed.

Not in the least bothered, he smiled. “Glad that's over with,” he said, as if he'd had a dental filling replaced or a splinter removed from his big toe. He looked down at himself again, ran his hands down his arms, touched his own face. “Amazing.” His mouth curved up on one side.

With every fiber of my being, I wanted Craig to be fine. And until this very moment, I had known with absolute certainty that “fine” was synonymous with “alive.”

But seeing his happy face, witnessing his delight—that changed everything. I lost my compass of what was good for Craig—or any patient, really. So, in complete confusion, I fell back on the default—what was good for me?

Craig dead was not it. No matter how happy he was.

“You’re happy? How can you be happy? You can’t die,” I whispered, verging on hysteria. “I need you!”

“I’m here. I haven’t left you.”

“But . . . your body—”

“ . . . is done. It won’t ever work right again. And the pain . . . you wouldn’t believe the pain.” He shuddered.

“But—”

“Joy, if you could only feel this, you’d know,” he said, with an expression of rapture I’d never—and this was a slight source of irritation—before seen on his face. Not even during . . . Well.

I tried to muscle my feelings into line, to be happy for him, to rejoice with him. It was a struggle. I bit my lip and focused on the trauma team still working frantically on Craig’s uninhabited body.

Until this moment, I hadn’t paid much attention to the gap between belief in the spiritual hereafter and our strong drive for medical intervention in the face of approaching death. Logically it didn’t make sense—if we believe in a better hereafter, why try so hard to prevent death? Why go to extremes to actually prevent a person from reaching what we profess to believe is a better place?

That was Logic speaking. Emotion didn’t listen.

Craig glanced at the team. “What are they doing?” He didn’t sound anxious, just curious.

The surgical staff shot worried looks back and forth between monitors and the body. Another monitor beeped, another order was snapped out. The crash cart appeared and the surgeon lifted the defibrillator paddles.

“Oh, no,” I whispered, finally finding my way back to my better self. “They’re going to —”

“What?” Craig asked.

“Oh, honey, I’m so, so sorry.”

The corpse jumped grotesquely as electric paddles were applied. Craig’s face twisted in horror as he was ripped out of his happy new world and slammed back into the excruciating old. The surgeon dove back into Craig’s violated body with a look of relish on his face. I stifled a cry.

A few heartbeats later—mine, not his—Craig once again struggled to get out of his body. “Do something, Joy! Stop him. Please! I can’t go back.”

The monitors started to bleat again, and the surgeon growled at the team, “I don’t care what we have to do, I’m not going to lose him, goddamn it. Stabilize him. Now!”

I hesitated for barely a second before jumping feet first into the lion’s den.

“Let him go!” I yelled into the maelstrom. “There’s no one there. He’s dead. Let him go.”

The surgeon turned to me, incredulity flashing in his eyes. “What the hell? Are you crazy?”

“No. But I know—”

“You know shit.”

Given the circumstances, I had to agree with him on that. But I had a mission, and I couldn’t let my ignorance stand in the way. “I know the difference between compassion and ego. And this isn’t compassion.”

You could have heard a pin drop in the room. The kindly nurse, now standing directly opposite me, winced and looked away.

The surgeon's icy eyes pierced me and his brows gathered like a storm-filled thundercloud. His huge hands, poised above Craig's body, delicately held the glittering instruments of Craig's salvation—or his torture, depending on one's point of view.

The heart monitor kicked in, with a slow steady beat.

I shot a glance in the direction of the operating table. Craig-the-spirit was gone, but his body was still there . . . , which meant, what? Craig was still alive?

"We have a pulse, Doctor," someone murmured.

The surgeon grunted an affirmative to the nurse and turned back to me. "What's your name?" His voice was a boulder rolling down a hill.

My medical career flashed before my eyes and petered out like a spent roman candle.

"Joy Abercrombie," I said, pushing my name past the blockage in my throat.

"Joy Abercrombie, you just made the biggest mistake of your life." Icicles hung on his every word. "Get out of my operating room. I don't want to see your face again."

I gulped air like a landed fish and desperately searched the room for Craig—the *real* Craig, not the inert lump of flesh and bones on the table. I couldn't leave . . . not without him. I started to protest, to explain why I had to stay, but when a staff member moved purposefully in my direction, I realized resistance was useless. I stumbled out of the room and into the hallway, where I stripped off my surgical gown and gloves with shaking hands.

Any sane, dedicated medical student would be trembling in their bootie-covered shoes from the dismissal, but I had greater fears to deal with, and a world of confusion. Or maybe I wasn't as dedicated as I had believed. Considering the past few minutes, one

could also make a case for the sanity part, I guess.

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I wandered through the hospital, disoriented and shaken, trying to understand what had happened in the OR, trying to understand where—or what—Craig was now. He'd been hanging by a thread when I'd been booted out, but only a thread.

Did he want to be alive? Apparently not, but if he were now locked back into his body, would he even remember his brief interlude as a spirit? And if he were now a spirit, where was he?

I stopped in my tracks and stared at a blank wall long enough to stiffen my spine. I needed to know where and what Craig was. I spun around and started the trek back the nurses' station, only to round a corner and find the surgeon—the arrogant bastard who had held Craig's life in his hands—leaning against a wall, receiving the passionate attentions of one of the new residents. She was lavishly kissing him, so his face was obscured, but the blue streak in his cap gave him away. He seemed exhausted, or ambivalent. She decidedly did not.

I must have made a noise, because his eyes opened and swept in my direction. When our gazes met, recognition bloomed. His eyes bored into mine, as if trying to give me a message, or possibly to extract one, but only for a moment.

“Cr—the patient—did he make it?” My voice trembled, but I got the words out.

A flash of triumph lit his eyes. “Yes—I saved him. Now it's up to him.”

A wave of relief washed over me, and then abruptly ebbed. That last part

“What do you mean, ‘It's up to him’?” Craig had made it clear that were it up to him, he'd be gone. “Did you save him or not?” No tremble in my voice now.

The doctor glared at me. “There’s a limit to what medicine can do. He’s alive. He has to want to stay that way.”

“That is not—”

His impatient companion locked her hands on the side of his face, demanding his attention once again. He wrenched his gaze away from mine, and, with the slightest of shrugs, went back to accepting his hero’s rewards.

I turned away in disgust. So much for yet another part of the Hippocratic Oath: “. . . keeping myself far from all intentional ill-doing and all seduction and especially from the pleasures of love with women or with men, be they free or slaves.”

I guess it’s like a crystal wineglass. If you’ve already broken the Oath once, re-breaking it in a new and different way doesn’t matter—it’s all shattered glass.

Suddenly a few things became clear to me. Those terrible minutes with Craig in the OR had outlined for me the close relationship between ignorance and ethics. I wasn’t sure I knew enough, or ever would know enough, to decide who should live and who should be allowed to pass on.

I was absolutely sure, however, that my carefully planned future was gone, as surely as if a flash flood had plunged through my life, leaving no trace of all I’d held dear. At this moment, I had no compass point, no reference, nothing to guide me but my pain and my fear.

So, although I had nothing to draw me forward, nothing to encourage me, I knew with the certainty of primal instinct which way *not* to go. That was a start.