

“We Have A Patient”

By Kristin Orloff

5:01 PM

My grip tightens around the dental pliers glinting in the fading rays. I drop my gaze to the patch of sun-bleached carpet and curse life.

“Ummmm Cori?”

Unable to hide my scowl this late on a Friday, I let it set in. “What?”

Tiffany twists the doorknob. I can’t bear to look at her perfect white teeth.

“We have a patient.” Her voice trembles.

I enjoy her fear. She wants to ask me if I’ll take him. She wants to tell me she has a date tonight. I of course, do not. I’m going to make her ask. Beg right through that sickening white smile. “And?”

Tiffany’s looks down. “He’s been sedated. Dr. Rume had me give him a good dose.”

Sliding the pliers into the lab coat pocket, I subconsciously hear it clink against my engagement ring and I wince. “And what? Just say it. You have a date. You want to leave. You want me to stay and prep him because I must have nothing else to do on a Friday night.”

“No, really, I wasn’t saying that.” Tiffany takes a step back. “There’s not much to do. He’s been in a fight or something. A few broken teeth to pull.”

Damn. I reopen the cut on my tongue. Should I swallow the blood? Or let Tiffany watch me spit into the little swirling toilet bowl next to the chair. I give her a narrowed eye glare, turn and spit. “Get out of here.”

“Do you need any--”

“Did I say needed anything?” I spit again.

She leaves, mumbling under her breath ‘what a bitch’ but I know who I am.

Almost grateful for something to pull my thoughts away from what today should be, I wash my hands in scalding water. Steam from the faucet intermixes with smells of fluoride. It twists in my stomach like a Cobra hissing and fanning her hood. My hands burn red under the relentless stream, but even the burn of my flesh can’t stop the flood of memories.

I see myself turning before the mirror in my dream bridal gown—the one I designed right down to the last pearl—three weeks before my wedding. My dad had smiled. “You look a fairy princess. Vahn is the luckiest man alive.” He tapped his hand to his breast pocket. “And I know Vahn loves you with all his heart.”

How could my dad have known what was to come?

Every breath I take tortures me back to that moment. The moment when I could have, no should have, walked down the aisle.

“Cori?”

I jump at the deep voice and snap off the water. “Yes Dr. Rume. Tiffany told me about the patient.”

His eyes travel over my coat. “What’s that all about?” His pudgy index finger lifts slightly to the direction of my heart.

I look at the trail of red drops splattered on my lab coat. “I’ll change before I see him.”

He stuffs his hands in his pockets and rocks on his heels.

I wish he wouldn’t do that. It reminds me of my dad.

Dr. Rume. clears his throat. “Don’t think your coat’s the problem here. You keep reopening that wound Cori. Can’t heal if you keep picking at it.”

“It’s just my tongue,” I say, turning away. “Nothing serious.”

“Scar tissue’s strong,” he says. “Give it a chance.”

My legs tremble. In my mind’s eye, I’ve collapsed onto the floor sobbing into my hands. *I can’t let it go. I can’t. If I could only, only undo what I did... and no one can help me. All I want to do is curl in a ball and fade away. I see Morice everywhere. He haunts me.*

Taking useless breaths, I steady myself against the sink. “I’ll just put on a fresh coat. Do you want me to begin the extractions?”

Dr. Rumeo looks at his watch. “If you could just yank out the two broken ones. Shouldn’t be too complicated. I’ll grab a quick bite with the wife and be back here ‘bout 6 to finish. And you can head home.”

“I don’t mind staying late.”

“I mind it.” He walked out of the empty office.

With my new coat, almost as white as Tiffany’s teeth, I walk into the room where the patient lay moaning. He wasn’t quite unconscious and I was annoyed that Tiffany didn’t give him enough to knock him out. I didn’t want to have to deal with anyone today.

A well-built man, from the way he filled out his shirt and jeans, I noticed something oddly familiar in the way his left shoe tilted inward so that it rested on the top of his right. Sperry loafers. Morice would button up his 501s and slip his foot into his Sperry loafers saying, ‘Rocking it old school’. God, even his feet were sexy. *But I can’t think about Morice now, I have teeth to pull.*

I look on the counter and in the door pocket. His chart is nowhere. Probably in a hurry to get to her date, incompetent Tiffany left it on the front counter. “And I’m the bitch?” I say to the patient.

The patient lets out a gurgling groan, so I move closer.

I gasp as I lean over him and scour the features of his face. One eye is swollen shut, but, yes, there's the scar he had on his left cheek. The one he said he got from a lightning bolt making him superhuman. I picture his smile saying this. His half-open eye searches my face. It has green specks. I'll never forget looking into those exact eyes. I'd say, "Where'd you get those cute little green specks?" He would wink, press his lips next to my ear and whisper, "I stole them from a leprechaun named Willy."

I step back and allow my gaze to rack over his body, from his Sperry loafers to his bruised and swollen face. I'd know this body anywhere. He may have put on a few pounds, *but it's him.*

I move closer to his face. His open eye follows me in a flickering haze. He must be wondering if this is real. Or a nightmare.

Studying the green flecks—there seems to be slightly more, but no other person could possibly have them—I feel a cold smile creep across my lips. Despite the scrapes, bruises and swelling covering most of his face: *I know this man.*

I lean close to the dried blood caked on his ear. "Hello Morice."

His body flinches and his mumbles register the panic, but I quickly tighten the chair straps

"Oh?" I say dripping with the sweetness of frosting. "Afraid I'm going to hurt you? Oh no. I promise never to hurt you. Oh wait." I put my finger to my lips and tilt my head. "I think that was your line. Yes, I remember. That's what *you* said to *me*."

I grip the pliers. I taste the blood.

#

5:13

Morice's open eye follows my movements with a delicious mixture of horror and submission. I stroke his fluttering eyelid and then tape it shut. I could increase the sedation drip, *but I want him to feel it*. Feel every tug and wrench. Feel the pain of having a piece of you being torn from your flesh.

Prying his jaw open, I set the mouth prop so I can inspect his teeth. Four cracked molars. Two totally broken that will have to come out. The other two Dr. Rumeel can probably save. *But, what a shame if they came out too*. What a shame if all the molars came out. And maybe a front tooth. Or two?

I scan his face again. I should add another scar across his forehead. I'll carve a heart and then add dagger ripping through it. Like he did to me. *He deserves it*.

Suddenly aware of the increase in my breathing, I drag in a slow, purposeful breath. I feel like I'm in a Steven King story and I laugh. *I am not going insane*. I'm not that girl. I'll just pull the two broken teeth. Maybe a third. And then I'll wait for Dr. Rumeel. Anything more and I'll lose my license and probably get Dr. Rumeel sued for every cent he's worked 35 years to earn. I will take the high road. Like Vahn did.

#

5:16

I glance at the clock and I'm reminded of my therapist's philosophy of time. "Only humans fool themselves to think time can be measured, counted or controlled," she would say. "Clocks and calendars. The universe laughs at our self-made prisons."

Frustrated, I would snap at her. “Hey, I’m paying you \$200 an hour. I can’t eat. I can’t sleep. I hurt every minute of every day and you reel off some crap about clocks? I want this pain to end! Tell me how to do that!”

“It will just take time.”

And I never understood what she meant.

Until this moment.

Now, I control time.

I snap on the blue latex gloves and push the loose hairs behind my ear. Concentrating to not bite my tongue, I begin to work on the broken tooth. Wedging the dental elevator into the space between his molar and gum, I rock the tooth. “This one’s for Vahn,” I say. “He’s 100 times the man you’ll never be.”

I think about the day Vahn proposed to me. Everyone knew we would eventually get married. And he had everything planned to perfection: The dozen red roses, playing our song, a huge ring I knew he couldn’t afford (and refused to take back)—even the beach’s magnificent sunset seemed to bless our union.

After all, we were ‘the couple.’ Meeting in our freshman Comp 101 class, his intelligent contributions and surprising wit made me look forward to every class. Later, he confessed he would try to predict where I would sit so he would be next to me. He told me he had loved me from the moment he saw me.

I wish I could remember the moment I fell in love with Vahn, like I remember the moment I fell in love with Morice. Like everything about Vahn, it was gentle, safe, predictable. We talked, we dated, and we progressed through the stages of romance as if reading signals from the third base coach.

Then there was Morice. The first time he even touched me, my flesh burned. He consumed me. A passion, fueled by danger and lust, made me ache for every muscle in his body. I'd look at my phone and curse it for not having a text from him. *Wasn't he thinking about me too? Didn't he miss me?*

The molar pops out. He shudders and moans.

“Shut up,” I say. “I’m just getting warmed up.”

But is it really *his fault* I fell for him? He never promised to be anything more to me than a lover. So cliché. The personal trainer. The player. I knew that. But, he said he loved me. *Madly*. His signature text to me: “I’m madly in love with you.”

I convinced myself I was different to him than all those other girls. Told myself only I could be the one to tame this wild passionate beast.

Morice’s tooth crushes in my pliers. Startled by the sound, I see the tiny white pieces roll across the carpet.

“Damn.” I pick the fragments and drop them into the bowl.

#

5:23.

I better get moving. Focused, I quickly yank out the second broken molar and add the bits to the rest.

I push them around with my finger. The white enamel sparkles just a little under the fluorescent light, reminding me of the pearls on my wedding gown. My mother had zipped up the back and turned my shoulders to face her. She handed me my red rose bridal bouquet. “Everyone has doubts on their wedding day Cori,” she had said. “It’s going to be a beautiful day. Vahn loves you so, so much. You’ll build a wonderful life together.”

But she didn't know the text I had just read. The one from Morice. The one that said, "I will love you forever. Madly."

I turn back to his puffed face with trickles of blood leaking from the corner of his mouth. Dr. Rumees hasn't seen the other two. He won't know they could be saved. I'll just take those two and then I'll be finished.

The tool feels cold and merciless in my fingers.

#

5:27

"Come on," I say to the molar fighting me. "Fine. Be difficult. I should have expected this from you." Taking the expander, I tap at the tooth until the hairline crack widens. His body gives a slight lurch.

"That's right," I say to Morice. "Feel it. Feel the hurt. Experience the pain."

I wrench and twist, watching the blood pool around his tongue and ooze down his throat. He'll throw that up later. Good. He should try throwing up in a wedding gown.

It's not like I actually left Vahn at the altar. An hour before the ceremony, I sent the flower girl with a note for him to meet me in the cloak room.

Kasidy, my maid of honor and best friend since Brownie camp in 4th grade, intercepted it. I remember her so clearly now in her ridiculous mauve bridesmaid gown with the large bow and cupped sleeves.

Kasidy threw herself in my path, blocking the doorway with arms outstretched. "'He's not worth it. He's scum."

She knew about Morice. And she was right, of course. *Why didn't I listen to her?*

I had tried to push past her. "You don't understand us."

“You’re addicted to him,” she said, in a husky whisper. “He doesn’t love you Cori.” She took my trembling hands in hers and bore a stare that only someone who knows you better than you know yourself can give you. “Don’t do this. Morice is using you. You’re nothing but a trophy. He doesn’t want to make a life with you like Vahn does.”

But I pushed past her and found Vahn. Even now I can’t bear to remember that scene.

Vahn, like the gentleman he is, explained calmly to our guests that we had some ‘glitches to work out’ and thanked them for coming. I heard the groomsmen, after being talked out of killing me on the spot, took him to O’Malley’s Pub and wouldn’t let him leave until he drained every bottle of Jameson. I kinda wish I could have seen that. Vahn didn’t really drink. Or do anything fun for that matter. Maybe... maybe I shouldn’t have never said yes in the first place. But I knew, *I know*, I love him.

The roots of this molar won’t budge. The blood covers the tooth to where I can’t actually see what I’m doing and I’m forced to vacuum it out. As the tube chokes and clogs, I realize there are clots. He could have choked on the blood and died.

Death would be too kind for him after what he did to me.

The fourth molar drops next to the remains of the other three.

#

5:40.

There’s time for one more. Maybe two. I set my extractors down and rip off my blood-soaked gloves. I drop them in the sink and watch the thick red trail snake toward the drain.

I hate the tears burning my eyes. Hate the gnawing endless ache in my gut. Hate how I gave Morice my body, heart and soul.

After I called off my marriage, Morice became my life. For the next three passionate weeks, Morice and I spent every moment together. And when we weren't together, we were texting. My heart swelled in knowing I had found the right man and made the right decision.

I turn back to Morice now. Blood oozes down his neck and soaks into the collar of his shirt. When did he stop wearing his too tight T-shirts? Probably wanted to fake an image of being smart.

The metallic smell mingles with the taste of my own blood. I snap on a fresh pair of gloves and grab the pliers.

#

5:43

Just before I pull the curtains close, the rising full moon catches my eye. She's beautiful. Perfectly round, crisp—even brighter than she's ever been. *It's Karma.* It has to be. How else would he end up in my chair? This is the universe sending him to me. *Sending him so I can complete the circle.* And heal my wounds.

I lock the door and take the phone off the hook.

I turn back to Morice moaning in my chair. "You ruined my life. Betrayed me. Shattered me to the core." I kneel next to him. "I can't sleep. Or eat. Enjoy dinner with a friend."

A fresh round of hot tears flows. Gripping his arm strapped to the chair, I slowly forced myself to stand. *I have to finish this. I have to.* My tongue runs over the salty film on my teeth and I debate whether to spit or swallow.

I bend down next to his ear. "Remember the first time I saw you?" I swallow with a delight in the taste of my own blood. "I remember."

Morice's scent had excited me before I even saw him. A sexy breeze wafted over me. I spun around and there he was. A magical smile, bright wicked eyes and these amazing muscular shoulders under a faded red tank top.

I had just left hot yoga, so of course, I was mortified at my appearance.

"Hi," Morice said. "How was yoga? I missed it, but I heard the instructor is fantastic."

A thousand clever responses rolled across my mind. "Good," I grunted out.

"I've noticed you," he said. Then he cast his eyes down like a shy child. "I'm Morice and I thought you'd be a good person to ask."

Noticed me? Me? Sexy guys like you never notice girls like me. Just ask my entire high school graduating class. Ask Brian Brewster. And Tim Trout. Ask anyone. Nobody ever notices me.

"Oh," I stammered. "I like yoga."

He smiled. "I can tell."

I melted.

He pressed his palms together, making his biceps flex, and touched his thumbs to his heart. "Namaste. Hope to see you around."

"Sure," I choked out.

That was it. I fixed my hair before I went to yoga. Spent money on every color of waterproof eye makeup. I memorized the license plate on his black Mercedes. 1JNL489.

Morice always seemed to be in my class. When I saw his perfect body unfold before me, I knew I needed to be with him.

But, Vahn and I were already engaged. Vahn noticed how much I was going to yoga and surprised me with a new mat. Sage green with patterns of the Chakras. Vahn took my tears of guilt for happiness.

Vahn had hugged me. “You’ll be an amazing mother. I can’t believe my luck in finding someone as perfect as you. I love you so much.”

I then laid my head against Vahn’s chest and let my tears flow.

#

5:45.

Two bicuspid and an eye tooth lay in the blood pooling on the floor next to the dental chair. Morice’s mouth pulsed and oozed in a thick lava flow. Groans and choking gurgles give me a moment’s pause. He could be going into shock.

Trembling, I squeeze my pliers. “You know nothing of pain. Of shock. Of a hurt so deep.” I spit my blood onto his mangled face. “I’d imagine my dead heart with little white worms crawling through it.”

I hear a car door and glance at the clock.

5:51.

It could be Dr. Rume. I listen for the tacky cow bell on the front door. Silence.

I look back down on my patient. I can’t process what exists before me, so I remember the first time Morice and I were alone together.

He had invited me to his home for my advice on the stone pattern to use on his patio. I had blurted out something about choosing the brick design for Vahn’s coffee shop entrance—I was trying to work into the conversation that I had a fiancée, a wedding date—a life all planned out.

Morice congratulated me. “Vahn’s a very lucky man.” And somehow that led to Morice redoing his patio and to me coming over to add a “woman’s special touch.” And my finding myself wrapped in his powerful arms.

He was like a drug. I couldn’t get enough. He occupied my every thought. Every song on the radio was our song. I’d hear his special text tone on my phone--only to see a blank screen. I had *imagined* he texted me. My anxiety built until he finally texted. A simple ‘hi’ or ‘I miss you’ or ‘hope ur daz good’ and I’d risk everything to be with him again. And again.

I’d plan our magical future life together, even though Morice casually mentioned that he didn’t see himself as the “commitment” type. I responded by tracing a heart gently on his solid chest. “Maybe you haven’t met the right girl.”

If I woke up and didn’t have a ‘good morning babe’ text, I was crushed. My whole day seemed to go wrong until he contacted me. Sometimes, I wanted him to text me just so I could *not* text him back. *Show him how it felt.*

But once I was in his powerful embrace, all was forgiven. His kisses poured over my body as he told me how much he missed me. And how I wanted to believe him. How I wanted to imagine that wherever he was—whoever he was with—he only thought about me.

And then there were the cold sweats at 3 a.m. I’d wake up gasping for breath. I can’t do this anymore, I’d say to myself. He brings nothing to the table. Nothing. He’s just a plaything. He *is* using me.

#

5:53.

I glare down at Morice, completely unconscious. “You rotten bastard. I wish I never met you.”

Shiny, sharp dental tools lay like soldiers waiting for battle on the tray. A faint smile grows from within me. They seem to beg me to finish the job. As if each little perfect silver tool wants to help carve my pain away.

With a pristine square of white gauze, I wipe the razor point of the probe. I want it to glisten. I want it to be flawless as I finish the job.

“This is for all the tender, trusting hearts you’ve broken,” I grit through my teeth. “Kasidy was soooooo right about you.”

#

5:55

Reaching deep into his raw and bleeding gums, I begin my assault on all of his teeth.

Tears blur my focus, but I’m not trying to be accurate, or even careful. I probe. I cut. I make him bleed. Just like he did to me.

Why didn't I see the warning signs? Why didn't I walk away?

Only days before my wedding, Kasidy insisted to meet with me before she went to into her law firm. Of course, impeccably dressed with her fabulous red shoes and matching Italian bag, how could she know what it’s like to face a life of serving coffee, of carpools and icing cupcakes.

“You have to block his number Cori,” Kasidy said to me. “Shit. You’re not going to that. Here. Give me your phone.”

“No,” I said. “We can still text. Be friends.”

“Friends?” She gave her latte a stir. “You can’t be in the same room for five minutes without hopping on each other like jackrabbits.”

“Not true,” I lied.

“He texts ‘I miss you’ and you’re flying to him like a car on a road of hot grease toward a brick wall.”

“That’s a little harsh.” I folded my arms. I hated that her lipstick never comes off onto the coffee cup. “You just don’t understand.”

“Good God Cori, do you think Morice actually loves you?”

“He says he—“

She leaned into me, nearly knocking my tea into my lap. “He is a liar.”

“He says he wants me in his life. Even just to talk sometimes.”

“Do I really need to repeat myself?”

I swallowed and looked down. “Remember when we were in 8th grade? And we were going to buy a Chinook and drive across the country? And not tell anyone. Just leave. Just leave and follow the roads.”

She took a last drink. “We’re not doing that, Cori. Get your shit together.”

#

6:02

Dental school failed to mention the opportunity for this glorious act of complete and sweet revenge. My laugh choked a little short by my own gurgles of blood.

I look into Morice’s entirely unconscious face and I’m faintly disappointed he’ll miss the grand finale.

I’ll have to crack the remaining teeth to show why I’ve pulled so many. But that’s easy enough. Teeth crack. Like hearts break. People act as if a heart is a puzzle and its pieces can be neatly reassembled. Healed. My heart was shattered. Broken pieces with jagged edges. They

poke and pierce. They cut with the razor's edge of thin glass. And no one ever glues back together bits of broken tooth.

The night after my cancelled wedding when I felt Morice's body next to mine, I knew I had made the right decision. And Morice and I were inseparable. At least, in my mind we were. If I brought up the idea of us moving in together, he'd say he needed more time. If I asked where he was when he didn't answer the phone, he'd change the subject. If I'd press, he'd remind me he was still a single man. "Let's just have fun," he'd say. "No need to make it complicated."

"But you'll always love madly, right?" I'd tease.

"Of course," he'd reply with a kiss.

He forgot my birthday.

It hurt, but I knew soon enough he'd realize he couldn't live without me. I learned to prepare his favorite meals exactly the way he loved them. He smiled at his ironed T-shirts. No little hussy out there could compete with me. I would own this man. *He would love me more than any woman he's ever known.*

That morning had begun like any other.

With a spring in my step, I remember humming Goo Goo Doll's "Come to me my sweetest friend" as I went to the kitchen to make his favorite breakfast: two buttermilk pancakes and a scrambled egg with honey butter. Morice headed to the shower.

As I cracked the eggs and brewed the coffee, I heard his phone buzz, but I wasn't exactly sure where it was located. It startled me because he always kept it on silent—and with him. We'd had a few little spats about passcodes, but, he was single. Still, each time he typed in the passcode, I made mental notes.

I turned off the stove and listened. Where could his phone be?

I paused in front of the bathroom door and heard his voice singing Adele in the flowing water.

On the nightstand, his phone lit up. A picture of a young woman in a short skirt and tight blouse smiled up at me. Numb, but feeling fire in every nerve, I watched the phone until the call ended.

His voice sung out in the shower. “Rolln’ in the deep...”

I lifted the phone. It only took three tries until I broke his code. I had his life in my hands.

And I scrolled.

A few texts to random girls. All with their secret contact names *Sizzle*, *Dirty girl*, *Desire*. I was *Sparkles*. My hand trembled and my grip tightened. So clearly, I remember scrolling and scrolling. So many girls.

Dirty Girl: I miss u xxoo

Morice: I want to wrap my loving arms around ur hot body babe

Dirty Girl: Come now. I’m alone

And I read more. And more. I half smiled through my shock. Telling myself he loved none of them. Only me he truly loved. *Only me he madly loved.*

“You Sluts,” I said to the screens of texts. “He’s just using you. He loves me.” Meaningless flings I told myself. I’ll make him forget.

But then, time stopped. The world stopped. A single line from Morice paralyzed me.

My finger shook as it touched her name and opened their thread from yesterday.

Morice: I can’t stop thinking about you.

Desire: Am I your favorite?

Morice: Yes. I love you so much it hurts. I'll be alone soon. Call me so I can hear your voice.

Desire: Tell me how much you want me.

Morice: I am madly in love with you.

Desire: I love when you say that to me.

Morice: I have a gift for you babe. I want to make you so happy.

“What the hell are you doing?” Morice ripped his phone from my hand.

At first, I stood paralyzed. I could barely process what I saw. Like swallowing razor blades, each word cut into me. *He said he loved her. Madly.*

My lips moved, but no sounds came out.

Morice scrolled through his phone. “Don't do that again,” he said flatly. He turned his back to me and pulled on his pajama bottoms. “Pancakes ready?”

A renewed rage clawed through me and gave me my voice. “What's her name?”

He pulled a perfectly ironed T-shirt over his head. “Stay off my phone.”

I lunged at him and tried everything I could to tear out his hair. His eyes. I clawed at his cheeks and pounded his body.

He grabbed my wrists. “What the hell is your problem?”

“You know who! Do you love her?”

“You shouldn't go through my phone.”

Anger ripped through me. “How can you love her? Madly? You love her madly? I gave up everything for—“

“That's on you. I never said to do that.”

“What?” Screams tore my throat raw as I yelled insults and demands.

Squeezing my eyes open and close several times, I cannot stop the flow of the hot, angry tears. The tears that humiliated me then, but empower me now.

“You never loved me!!” I yell at his bloody face. “You don’t know love! But now you’ll know pain!”

I lift the pliers over my head. “You horrible wicked excuse for a man!”

Hands grab mine. “What are you doing?”

I turn to face Dr. Rume. “I...I... he...”

Dr. Rume rips the pliers from my grip. “Call 911.”

“You don’t understand. Morice. He... he..”

“Call 911 before this man dies!”

At the reception desk, the receiver slips in my hands. I take off the soaked gloves and dial. I reach for the chart.

A voice answers. “You have reached 911. What’s your emergency?”

I can’t speak.

“This is 911. What’s your emergency?”

The chart trembles violently in my hand. “A man needs medical help.”

“What’s his name?”

I can’t breathe.

“Ma’am. What’s his name?”

Vomit burns up my throat. My lips form the words, but I can’t bring myself to say his name. Ben Sisk’s chart falls to the floor.

