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Waiting Room

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Author Bio

Lindsey Parker is a senior Biology major and chemistry minor from Parkton, Maryland. On campus, she is the secretary for both Habitat for Humanity and the Pre-Health Professions club. Lindsey enjoys baking, watching movies, and drinking coffee of any variety. After graduation, she will be attending the Pennsylvania College of Optometry at Salus University in Philadelphia.

Lindsey Parker

Waiting Room

The alternating click of two high-heeled feet dueled with the drum solo echoing in my ears. Looking up to find the source of the rhythm, I watched as the thin cotton of a white jacket rippled at the knees of a middle-aged Asian woman. The stethoscope around her neck bounced slightly with each of her strides and an overflowing pile of maroon binders was spilling from her arms. She grabbed the pager perched on the waistband of her scrubs and suddenly broke into a strained jog, almost knocking out two nurses coming around the corner at the end of the hallway. Pulling the buds of my headphones from my ears, I turned off my iPod and dropped it into my canvas bag. Folding my arms, I slouched in the blue pleather chair and stretched my legs, crossing them at the ankles. The waiting room was an expansive area surrounded by large windows that faced one of the many parking lots bordering the building. The space was bisected by a wide hallway, the main freeway on the first floor of the hospital. TVs were mounted on the wall every couple of feet, each one playing muted versions of Regis and Kelly. I watched as Regis's lips moved, disjointed from the delayed black-and-white text appearing at the bottom of the screen. I sat forward, trailing every doctor and nurse darting down the hallway with my eyes, silently pleading for someone to tell me what was going on.

I had received the phone call at four o'clock that morning. I was at work at the time, setting up an IV for a dehydrated German Sheppard who had been brought in after an all-night episode of vomiting. I had gotten the job at Bucks County Pet ER as a veterinary technician about a year ago after having to defer my admission to Duke's graduate program in marine science indefinitely after encountering some tuition trouble. I didn't mind my job as a vet tech; despite the mediocre pay and the never-ending smell of feces and wet dog. I enjoyed working with the animals. Besides, the night shift gave me an excuse to sleep during the day when my father worked from his basement office and kept me away at night when he stumbled in at 2 AM, belting Motley Crue and cursing about the unruly condition of the front bushes.

That's why when Dr. Salisbury handed me the phone as I placed a cone around Daisy's neck, I didn't make any great effort to rush over to the hospital. While the nurse didn't get into any specifics on the phone, I figured that it had probably been a Scotch and beer combo night for my father and he was lying in one of the beds in the ER, sleeping off the hangover with the help of some IV saline. I finished bandaging Sierra's paw, carefully went through all of the medication charts, and made sure the surgery schedule

was set for tomorrow morning before Dr. Salisbury came to the back, saying that the hospital had called again asking for me. Grabbing my coat and bag from the back closet, I pulled my rusty red pick-up truck out of the parking lot and drove the ten miles to Warminster Hospital.

"What?" A large hand squeezed my shoulder firmly. I yanked my body away from the grasp, blinking and staring at a man with short salt-and-pepper hair slouching in the seat next to me. He wore the standard blue hospital scrubs, but the neon green Nikes on his feet and the red-rimmed glasses perched on his nose were far removed from hospital protocol. He sat up from his slumped position, twirling a gold ring around his pinky finger.

"Mallory? I mean, Miss Haskins?"

"It's Mallory. Can I help you?" I pushed my back against the railing of the chair, trying to create some distance between me and this doctor imposter.

"Dr. Magala." He reached his hand out toward me, revealing small tattooed letters of a language I didn't recognize on his wrist. I grabbed his hand and shook it limply, withdrawing quickly and resting my hand in my lap.

"We have your father in a bed in the back. He was brought in, oh, I'd say about two hours ago."

"So he should be about ready to go then. Two hours and an IV usually cleans him up enough. Do I need to sign some papers or something?"

"Well, unless IV saline is a new treatment for a heart attack, we're still going to need to keep him around. We actually found that a couple of his coronary arteries are blocked off. He needs bypass surgery."

"Wait. A heart attack? And he needs surgery? Now?"

"Yup. He's scheduled to go in in about thirty minutes." Dr. Magala stood up and stretched, slipping his hands in his pockets.

"Here, let me take you to pre-op to see him before we wheel him back to the OR. We can have a Q & A session on the way." He grinned, rocking back and forth on his heels.

"Oh, no, that's okay. I don't have any other questions and it'd probably just be best if I didn't see him until later. I don't want to, you know, get too upset in front of him right before he goes under."

"Are you sure? When I saw him earlier, you're all he asked about."

"No, that's okay Dr. Magala, really." I looked down and began rummaging aimlessly in my purse. I sniffled loudly a few times, hoping he would get the hint.

"Okay then. I'll be out when he's all stitched up to let you know how it went." Dr. Magala walked down the hallway, whistling some Broadway tune that sounded vaguely familiar. Suddenly, he turned around and walked back toward me.

"Hey, Mallory, I forgot to ask you. Your father said he was on a medication for his blood pressure. He couldn't remember what it was called. Do you know by any chance?"

"It's Levatol," I said, giving Dr. Magala a half-grin. He smiled back and turned on his heels to head toward the elevators.

Sitting back in my chair, I watched as a couple of nurses carried steaming cups of coffee and scones from the cafeteria toward the break rooms on their respective floors. I fidgeted endlessly, sitting up and slouching, pulling my jacket on and off, unsure of what to do with my achy body. I had spent a lot of time in the hospital as a nine-year-old, sitting next to my father in a cramped, avocado-green waiting room with a single TV and faded Time magazines. My mother, battling breast cancer, was always in for some procedure: tumor removal, chemotherapy, a double mastectomy, the works. In the end, nothing worked and I was left with my father. Unable to deal with the loss of my mother, he shipped me off to my grandmother in New Jersey while alcohol became his only coping mechanism. I stayed with my grandmother until I left to study biology at the University of Connecticut and then moved back home with my father after my grandmother passed away. By that point, at the age of fifty, my father had tried to clean up his act: he worked from home as a computer programmer and had found friends willing to handle his drinking escapades so that I didn't have to. Still, his efforts did nothing to relieve the awkwardness between us or to erase the feeling of disgust that my father provoked in my gut. We shared the same genes and the same tragedy but found little else in common between us.

Looking at my watch, I was surprised to see that three hours had passed since Dr. Magala had spoken with me. Antsy, I pulled at the lint on my sleeve. Suddenly, two chairs down from me, a loud thump through a large bag with pastel lambs dancing on the side. A baby carrier was placed on the seat stopped my plucking. A woman of petite build was perched on the edge of the chair, rummaging next to her and the gurgling sounds of a cry-in-the-making were beginning. Searching more furiously, the woman finally retrieved a purple pacifier and gave it to the whining infant. Standing up, she tried rearranging all of her belongings; three bags were piled in the chair on the other side of her while crinkled papers bloomed from the top of her handbag. As she organized, I leaned back in my seat, trying to get a glimpse of the child. Peering in, I saw a little girl with faint red curls in a light blue jumper, eyes fading as she sucked contentedly on the pacifier.

"Your baby is adorable. What's her name?" I was desperate for someone to talk to.

"Oh, thanks. Her name is Cecelia. After her great-grandmother." The woman's straight brown hair was thrown up into a messy pony tail, her bangs sticking up in all directions. I watched as she collected herself,

placing her overflowing purse on her lap and throwing her head back, taking a few deep breaths.

"Who are you here for?" I asked slowly, staring straight ahead at the blonde CNN newscaster on the screen before glancing sideways in her direction. She looked at me briefly and then stared at the floor, fumbling with the worn straps of her bag. I looked away quickly, now cringing at the intrusiveness of my question. I was focusing on a red convertible weaving in and out of the rows in the parking lot, when she cleared her throat quietly. "My husband. He has colon cancer. They're removing some tumors today."

"Oh, wow, I'm sorry." She turned her gaze from me to Cecelia, resting her hand on the infant's belly. I tried to remember how I felt when people told me how sorry they were about my mother's cancer. Squirmy, anxious, annoyed.

"Well, we knew it was likely. His mother had it, both sets of grandparents. His genes are crawling with it. I just pray that they caught it early enough this time."

Watching the woman play with Cecelia, I pictured my genes crawling with breast cancer. Desperate to lose this image and to leave my racing thoughts, I pressed on with our conversation.

"So, what do you do?"

"Me? Nothing right now. I'm taking some time off to be with Cecelia and you know, this whole thing with Todd. I used to teach fourth grade, though. How about you? What do you do?"

"Right now I work at Bucks County Pet ER. I'm a tech. The animals are great, but it's a lot of kibble and pooper scooper duty. But it's a job."

"Not what you want to be doing I take it?"

"Well, not exactly. I love marine science and I had planned on attending graduate school at Duke, but things sort of fell through financially."

"No government aid, huh? I know my niece had the same problem. She was expecting some grants or something and then they didn't come through."

"Yeah, that's what happened to me too. I applied for FAFSA and some scholarships, but came up with nothing. It was quite a blow." The woman looked at me with a sympathetic frown and I averted my eyes to the headlines scrolling across the bottom of the news program. Government funds and rejected scholarships actually had nothing to do with my absence from graduate school. I had most of the money saved, a good chunk from my grandmother when she passed and a bunch I had put away from summer jobs. It all stemmed back to my dad; he got involved with a seedy bookie at a racetrack about an hour from home a few months before my college graduation. After some initial luck, a six-month losing streak and an enraged bookie cost me all but one thousand dollars of my graduate school savings.

"I'm sorry to hear that. Don't worry, though. You'll get there. And think of the life exper..." Interrupted by Cecelia's shrieking, she stood up, grabbed the infant, and instinctively sniffed her behind. "Oh, Cecelia."

She flung the baby bag over her shoulder and prepared to make a break for the bathroom. Stopping mid-stride, she swung around to face me. "Who are you here for, anyway?"

"My father." She grinned and her eyes took on a distant appearance of nostalgia. She opened her mouth to say something, probably about how sweet it was that I was there for my dad or about her memories of her father, when she was deterred by Cecelia's wails. Turning, she ran off toward the bathroom, leaving me with the mountains of her belongings.

While Cecelia kept her mother busy in the bathroom, Dr. Magala came out to let me know that my father was out of surgery and that everything went well. He told me that he had already been moved to the ICU and gave me the room number, offering to escort me upstairs. I declined politely, gathering my things and making my way to the elevator. Arriving on the fifth floor, I walked down the hall buzzing with nurses in bright pink scrubs. I walked past the nurses' station, where the secretary sat slurping reheated leftovers. I stopped in front of room 512 and peaked in, relieved to see that my father was asleep. Walking in, I perched on the edge of the chair next to his bed and sat my bag on the floor. I listened as the heart monitor chirped and watched the slow drip of the IV, anything that kept my gaze from his still figure. I went to reach for his hand, cracked and callused, but pulled away when I heard someone walk in the door behind me.

"Hi there. You must be Mr. Haskins's daughter. I'm Barbara. I'll be taking care of your father this afternoon. Now, I'm assuming you'll be his primary caregiver once he heads home."

"Yeah, I guess that'd be me." I winced at my quick response to her question. Sure, I was always the one taking care of him. But this was going to be a whole new level of care. Feeding him, helping him get dressed, bandaging his incisions, driving him to his appointments. I clasped my hands together, staring at my ragged sneakers.

"Okay, great. At some point, I need to go over the medication list and care instructions with you. We can do it now, or I can come back later after you've had some time with him. It's up to you."

"Now's fine."

"Okay. Well, let's see. First, it's really important to keep up with his medications. Dr. Magala has put him on daily antibiotics to prevent infection, he's changed his cholesterol medication from Tricor to Lipitor, oh, and he's kept him on Levatol for his blood pressure, just increased the dose a bit. As for daily activity, your father shouldn't..."

"Can you excuse me for just a second?"

"Uh, sure."

Grabbing my purse, I walked toward the bathroom in my father's room and shut the door. Grasping the handicap railing, I made my way to the sink and clasped my hands around the icy counter. Glancing at the dark bags under my eyes, I put my bag down and rummaged around, pushing past my planner, some loose sticky notes, and my sunglasses until I found the small orange bottle with the white cap. Joseph Haskins. Levatol. Take one pill a day with food. I pushed down on the cap and twisted, spilling the pills in my shaking hands. Shoving all but one back into the small opening, I stood over the toilet and opened my fisted palm, preparing to drop and flush the little white pill as I had done everyday for the past ten months. I was the one who set my father's pills out by his dinner plate before I headed to work every night. Between all of the vitamins and medications he took, he never noticed one was missing. I had planned to flush a pill for every dollar of my graduate school money he lost to some bookie at the racetrack. I had flushed 297 so far. As 298 lay rattling in my palm, I glanced up at a poster over the toilet, which was titled "Get Heart Smart!" and featured a grinning, dancing heart pointing to a list of dos and don'ts for heart health. Retracting my palm, I reached for the open pill bottle sitting on the counter, almost knocking its contents into the sink with my unsteady fingers, and put 298 back with the others. Throwing the bottle into my purse, I collected myself and opened the bathroom door to find that Barbara had left and my father was still asleep. I flung my bag over my shoulder and ran toward the door, keeping my head down to avoid seeing my father's snoozing figure in my peripheral vision.

Walking in the next morning, I paused at the door to my father's room. I had played this morning's scenario out in my head all night; I'd walk in, my father would be asleep, and I'd sit there in silence, at least for awhile, trying to prepare topics of conversation. I shuffled hesitantly to the foot of my father's bed. Clearly, in the real-life scenario, I wasn't so fortunate.

"Mal. Hey. You look like hell kiddo."

"Uh, thanks Dad. I brought you some coffee from Benny's. I imagine the stuff here isn't very good. I asked the nurse if it was okay. She said you can have it." I offered him the red-and-white checkered cup.

"Thanks Mal," he said and took a small sip, placing it down on the tray in front of him. He picked up the spoon buried in his oatmeal, scooping some up and allowing it to dribble in a thick waterfall back into the bowl.

"I see they've already started you on a new diet. Looks delicious," I said with a smirk.

"Yeah, it's just great," he snorted, stirring the oatmeal with a few strokes before putting the spoon down. "I guess I should have seen it coming. Grandpa Bill had an attack when he was forty-two. Your Uncle Hank, fifty-three. And this beer belly probably didn't help." He grabbed at his protruding gut hidden beneath the green stripes of the hospital

gown, grinned to himself, and then smoothed at the blankets on his bed.

"Speaking of beer belly, Dad. When the hospital called me, I thought you were in here for having a bit too much to drink. Detoxing in the ER, you know, like a few months ago." I chuckled nervously to myself.

"Hm, yeah, I remember. Actually, Mal, I haven't had a drink in three weeks. My boss just assigned me this huge project for a local tax firm and I've been working pretty late on that most nights. I went to Westerfeld's the other night, had a burger and a Coke with Bill. I had to drive him home for once. I mean, Mal, three weeks is..."

"Hey there, Joe. How's it going?" Dr. Magala's familiar voice floated in from the door behind me. He came around and put his hand on my father's shoulder, holding a chart and peering at his vital signs on the small screen above the bed. Today, his sneakers were neon orange and he wore a yellow and teal striped surgical cap. "Mallory, good to see you again." He flipped through my father's chart, initialing a few of the pages. "Looks like you had a good first night, Joe. Vital signs look fine. How's the pain? On a scale from zero to ten, ten being the worst pain you've ever experienced."

"It's at about a six right now."

"Okay, I'll send Wendy in in just a second to give you another dose of pain meds. But first I wanted to talk to you a little bit about the recovery period. Some of the dos and don'ts, that sort of thing. I know Barbara started going over some of this with Mallory, but I just wanted to say a few more things. First thing is the medication. I've got all of your prescriptions right here. Oops, need to sign this one. Just follow the instructions and you'll be good to go. Now, in terms of diet. This is always a favorite topic, I know..."

I looked at my father, his face dazed from the drugs and all of the information hurtling from Dr. Magala's mouth. He glanced down and pulled at the bed sheet, nodding his head every once in awhile and squinting his eyes, trying to focus on what the doctor was saying. I watched him and thought about what he said moments ago. He blamed his genes and his diet for the heart attack that had landed him in the hospital. He blamed everyone and everything but the real source of his trouble, someone he would never suspect. Without hesitation, I reached out and laid my hand on top of his oversized fingers, stopping his relentless tugging of the sheets. He looked up at me, eyes widening from a squint, looking as if he was trying to decide if he should pull away. I gave him a half-smile, willing the tears to stay locked up behind my eyelids, raging water restrained by a dam. Staring at my face briefly, he turned to look at Dr. Magala and I followed, only catching a few words from his sermon on polyunsaturated fats and low sodium foods. My father didn't smile or give my hand a squeeze. He didn't sandwich my hand between his two burly ones. He just sat there, letting my hand rest on his. And it was more than I deserved.