
1

“YOUR RELATION TO THE INMATE?”

Sloane Ferrell’s stomach tensed. “He’s my stepfather,” she confirmed, lips brushing her cell phone in a whisper. “It was . . . manslaughter.”

She glanced past a grouping of palm trees toward the peach stucco entrance to Los Angeles Hope hospital’s emergency department. Would she ever stop peering over her shoulder—watching her back? This past year it had felt as necessary as breathing and was the biggest part of why she’d left San Diego. New zip code, new living space, new job . . . a paper trail painstakingly shredded. She’d done all that, and thankfully, the last few months had been uneventful. Right now Sloane was simply concerned that a fellow ER nurse would join her at any moment. She’d said something about

taking their break together. This return call from California State Prison couldn't have come at a more awkward—

“We don't have you listed,” the office assistant announced. Her tone was as friendly as the slam of a cell door. “It had to be arranged in advance and approved.”

“I did that—and I was,” Sloane insisted over the distant whine-hum of saws; preliminary work had begun on the new hospital wing. “I was promised a chance to speak at the parole hearing. My name *has* to be on the list. Could you check again?”

“Hang on.”

Sloane closed her eyes and let the late September sun warm her face, a light breeze sifting strands of her dark hair. She pretended the construction sounds were ocean waves, imagining salt-laden moisture on her skin and the keening calls of gulls. She missed San Diego, even if it had started out as a place to escape to—and ended up as one more place to run from. Her fingertips found the still-pink scar around her left eye, from the accident that could have killed her. The short time in San Diego had changed her life, but how that would play out remained to be seen. Nothing was guaranteed. Especially not for someone like Sloane. Life had taught her that in strokes as bold as freeway graffiti. But right now all that mattered was—

“Nope,” the woman reported. “I've checked twice. Nobody by the name of Ferrell on the list.”

Sloane blinked. “It's . . . Wilder.”

“You said Ferrell.”

I did? Sloane bit back a groan. “It's Ferrell now. When I filled out the paperwork, it was Wilder.” New zip code, new name. “I'm sorry; I forgot. But I'm sure you'll find me under that name. Wilder. *W-i-l-d*—”

“Sloane!”

She turned, saw her friend waving.

Harper Tatum strode forward, long hair tossed by the breeze and stethoscope swinging against her watermelon-red scrub top. A Los Angeles native—an “Angeleno”—she was honey blonde, long limbed, and as effervescent as a shaken can of soda. Nothing at all like Sloane. This nurse’s smile appeared in a TV commercial for whitening toothpaste, and she’d recently been signed as a foot model for a local day spa’s magazine ad. “*Grasping fame, tooth and nail,*” Harper liked to joke. She was a sharp, skilled nurse every hour of every shift, and a model and aspiring actress every off-duty moment—until her student loans were paid in full.

Sloane returned Harper’s wave and then hurried to wrap things up with the woman on the phone. “Got to go. It’s Wilder, Sloane Wilder. Find me.”

Find me? She almost choked on the irony.

“Hey,” she said as Harper took a seat across from her at the visitors’ table.

“Hey yourself, pal.”

Sloane smiled. It was hard not to like this nurse—one of the few things she didn’t have to overthink or completely fabricate. Not even six months ago, she’d have shot the gregarious coworker a back-off look. “They let you out.”

“Finally.” Harper pointed at Sloane’s phone on the red-tile table. “I interrupted you. Anybody date-worthy?”

“No such luck.” Sloane feigned a casual shrug, reminding herself that real friends were too much of a risk. She couldn’t imagine telling Harper she’d changed her name to avoid the dangerous consequences of her last serious relationship. Or that the only “date” she cared about was a parole board hearing at the state prison.

“Nothing like the soul-soothing ambience of power tools,” Harper pronounced over the staccato whap-thwack of a pneumatic nail gun. “Though I do like the contrast: men in hard hats, steel-toed boots, and layers of sawdust making it happen, while—” she nodded toward the ER doors behind them—“our man in a sports jacket and khakis hustles to get it all funded.”

Sloane saw what Harper did: Micah Prescott, the assistant director of the hospital’s marketing and public relations department. He was early thirties, probably, with a lean build, sandy hair, sunglasses, and an undoubtedly practiced smile. An ad man with a well-appointed office a safe distance from stat pages and messy trauma, who preferred cash procurement over lifesaving. It was the kind of career that required finesse, charm, and an aptitude for creative spin. Unfortunately, Sloane knew the type far too well. Micah Prescott was the kind of person she tried to avoid at all costs.

Harper watched as the marketing man was joined by two young men with cameras slung over their shoulders. “It’s still five months until the official launch of the Face of Hope campaign, but Micah’s already stirring things up and getting interest from the media. Of course, he’s no rookie when it comes to publicity. With his connections and all.”

Apparently the extended Prescott family was involved in the music industry—Christian recording artists and performers. Enormously popular, Harper had said more than once. Not surprisingly, Sloane had never heard of them. She only knew that she didn’t like the intrusive scrutiny this marketing campaign brought with it—a “star search” for an employee who best personified the spirit of the hospital’s mission. The campaign kickoff had coincided with the groundbreaking for the new wing, an event headlined by a megastar film couple,

an impressive sampling from the roster of the Los Angeles Lakers, and a former First Lady of California. The event immediately spawned rallies with staff, endless surveys, and photo shoots. There were days it felt more like a casting call than a workplace. Sloane avoided all of it as best she could. This past year had taught her that a low profile meant safety.

“Imagine it: your face on a billboard,” Harper said, sweeping her hand in an arc as if the palm trees had been magically replaced by those old spotlights at movie premieres. “The Face of Hope. Looking down on the freeway. The 405 or the 101—both maybe. Thousands and thousands of people seeing it every day, for hours at a time, LA traffic being what it is. And smog willing.” Her brow puckered. “You don’t look too thrilled by the idea.”

“I’ll pass,” Sloane told her, feeling a prickle of panic. Ridiculous—it would never happen. Besides, she’d changed her name, and there had been no threatening calls in months. If she got caught in the background of some publicity photo, no one would notice. “Anyway, I’m still on probation as a new hire. You’re a far more likely candidate. You’re comfortable in front of a camera and—”

“And you are drop-dead gorgeous, my friend.” Harper wrinkled her nose. “I probably shouldn’t say ‘drop dead,’ considering our line of work. But I’m not kidding. The last woman to claim eyes like that was Liz Taylor. And even if you do your best to hide your light under a bushel, it’s there. Not just looks. The real deal.” Harper’s expression turned best-friend kind. “I see how you are with the patients. Especially our lost souls, people with nobody and nothing—and bad choices up to their eyeballs. Most of us draw straws to avoid dealing with them. But it’s like you champion those people, Sloane. And you’re

not afraid to butt heads with management or stretch some policies to do that.”

“Butt heads?” Sloane grimaced. “Did I mention probation?”

Harper laughed. “I don’t think there’s going to be a problem. I’m on the performance review committee.”

Sloane hoped her smile wasn’t as weak as it felt. This nurse was intent on making her into a Mother Teresa, when nothing could be further from the truth. What was altruistic about simply recognizing her own kind? Poor choices? How many had she made in her thirty-two years—how many more would tempt her? Someone like Harper would never understand. And right now Sloane’s priority was simple: be there, Wilder or Ferrell, to make herself heard at Bob Bullard’s parole hearing. Nothing felt more important. That and the very real need to travel under the radar. Close relationships, friendships or otherwise, fit nowhere in that plan.

“We should get together away from the hospital sometime,” Harper suggested, glancing toward the parking lot as a car with a noisy muffler screeched to the curb. “A movie, maybe. Or out to eat. I’ve heard good things about The Misfit in Santa Monica. They start happy hour at like noon. Five-dollar lunch specials, and it’s all done sort of vintage French literary decor, with card catalogs, shelves of old books, and those tall tin ceilings.” Her toothpaste smile gleamed. “You even get a free chocolate chip–sea salt cookie along with the bill for your cocktails and—”

“I don’t drink,” Sloane said in a rush, hating that it sounded rude.

“I don’t either, really. I just thought . . .”

“My evenings are pretty booked. Because . . .” Sloane hesitated. Lying used to be much easier. “I’m taking some classes.”

“No problem—good for you.” Harper looked toward what sounded like a disturbance at the curb. That same car. “What’s going on over there?”

“I can’t tell for sure.” Sloane stared, thinking it must be an argument—a man’s voice rose above the background construction noises. A young woman wearing a black cap over pink hair opened the car’s passenger door and attempted to slide out. Sloane stood, getting a bad feeling about the situation.

“Do they need help?” Harper asked, craning her neck to see. “It looks like that man is—”

“No!” the young woman shrieked, struggling to stand as the driver leaned across the passenger seat and gave her arm a savage yank. She dropped to one knee on the cement curb and pulled back, beginning to sob. The man grabbed a handful of her T-shirt, jerking her backward. She screamed again. “Stop! Let me go!”

Harper gasped, rising to her feet.

The car rolled forward, half-dragging the girl. “Help!”

“Call 911!” Sloane ordered, then bolted for the parking lot.