



LIGHTS OUT

THE COUPLE WHO SLAYS
TOGETHER, STAYS TOGETHER

NAVESSA ALLEN

LIGHTS

OUT

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For everyone brave enough to ride the handle.

Chapter 1

Aly

The new girl wasn't doing too well. She was curled up in one of the cheap, uncomfortable plastic chairs when I walked into the breakroom, staring into space. Her scrubs were rumpled, messy bun slipping sideways off her head, blonde strands sticking out like she'd been pulling at her hair. Beneath the fluorescent lights, her skin looked waxy and pale.

The two other nurses in the room were giving her a wide berth, casting anxious looks her way as if worried she was going to puke or pass out. Or worse, quit, like so many others had.

Over my dead body.

We needed her. I couldn't keep pulling back-to-back, 15-hour shifts, or I would burn out.

I took a deep breath and strode toward her, ducking down by her side so if she did puke, I could dive out of the splash zone. She didn't seem to notice me. Not good.

"Hey, Brinley, right?" I asked, keeping my voice low and calm. It was the same tone I used when speaking to sick children.

She blinked and turned my way, her blue eyes glassy and unfocused like she wasn't really seeing me. This was borderline shock. I would know; I saw it almost every shift in at least one of my patients.

Damn it, she was totally going to quit.

I turned slightly to the side, keeping my eyes trained on Brinley. "Blanket?"

The sound of shuffling feet told me someone was following the request, so I faced forward again and gave the new nurse my full attention. I'd gotten the gossip on her from another of my colleagues. According to them, Brinley had been a nurse for three years and recently transferred from a smaller county ER. This was her first time working in a trauma hospital.

Some people did just fine in normal ERs but cracked when they came here. We were inner city, in a metropolis known for its sky-high crime rates. Not a shift went by where we didn't see the worst of the worst: stabbings, rapes, gunshot wounds, abuse victims, survivors of horrific car accidents, you name it.

Tonight had been especially rough, even for me, and I'd seen so much shit that very little rattled me anymore. It could be scarring for someone new to a trauma center like Brinley, and I cursed her luck that this was her first unsupervised shift.

A blanket appeared in my periphery. I took it without looking and wrapped it around Brinley's shoulders. She moved like an automaton, arms jerky as she clutched the ends together and tugged it tighter.

"His chest," she said, so low I barely caught the words. "The whole middle was just...missing."

Ah, so she'd gotten the close-range shotgun wound. It was amazing the man was even alive when he arrived, and terribly sad because there was almost nothing we could do in cases like his. Too much of the heart, lungs, and other vital organs were shredded for someone to live through it. I heard he passed shortly after being rolled in. If Brinley had him, she would have gotten soaked through with blood. No wonder she was wearing different scrubs than earlier, and her hair still looked damp from having to shower it all off.

"There was nothing you could have done," I told her.

She sniffled, and her eyes finally seemed to focus on me. "I know, but... *god*. I don't think I'll ever get that sight out of my head."

Don't worry, tomorrow you'll see something equally traumatic, and that will take its place, a dark part of me thought, but I would never say something like that aloud.

"Has anyone told you about the therapists?" I asked her.

She nodded. "Third floor, right?"

"And if you're on a night shift and need to talk to someone, there's a 24/7 call line."

Our hospital might overwork us, but it did an excellent job of prioritizing the mental health of its staff. We saw the same amount of daily trauma soldiers might face on a front line, and the burnout and PTSD rates were sky-high because of it.

I regularly spoke to one of the on-call therapists. It was one of the few things keeping me relatively sane while the healthcare system crumbled around us, and so many people quit the field that we were becoming dangerously understaffed.

“I don’t have the number for the call line,” Brinley said, a single tear rolling down her cheek.

This was good. Tears I could work with. Tears meant she was already processing, and the risk of her going into shock was passing.

“Which locker did you put your stuff in?” I asked. “I’ll grab your phone and add the number.”

Twenty minutes later, she was back on her feet with her hands wrapped around a steaming mug of chamomile tea. I’d put the call line in her phone, she’d stopped trembling, and a little color was returning to her cheeks. Only one other nurse was in the room with us now, having replaced the previous, unhelpful two from before. That nurse was Tanya, a trim black woman in her mid-40s who’d worked in trauma hospitals almost as long as Brinley had been alive. Tanya was my favorite coworker. She was great under pressure, had an excellent bedside manner, and knew more about treating people in emergency situations than most doctors we worked with.

Right now, she was standing with Brinley near the window, talking quietly, one hand gripping the younger woman’s shoulder. I tuned in and out as I gathered mine and Brinley’s stuff, trusting Tanya to know all the right words to use as she coaxed Brinley back from the brink.

“You did so well,” I heard her say. “And I’m not just blowing smoke up your ass to make you feel better. I’ve seen other nurses with more experience freeze up during nights like this, but you kept your shit together and did what you had to.” She turned to me. “Back me up, Aly.”

I slung Brinley’s bag over my shoulder and joined them. “She’s not lying,” I said. “You crushed it, from what I saw. And it’s totally normal to break down a little afterward. All that adrenaline built up too high, and your cortisol levels probably went bananas. There’s no shame in disappearing into a miniature stress coma. I still do it, too, on really bad nights.”

Brinley paled. “I thought tonight was really bad.”

Whoops. Time to backtrack.

“It was,” I said. “I just meant I didn’t see the worst this time. I think you and Mallory did.”

She let out a shaky breath. “Oh. Okay.”

Tanya turned back to her. “Now, Aly’s gonna give you a ride home. Her shift is over, too.”

Brinley looked between us. “But my car is here.”

Tanya nodded. “Yes, but we don’t think you should drive right now.”

Brinley seemed to see the wisdom in that. “Yeah, you’re probably right.”

“Don’t worry,” I said. “I checked your schedule. We’re both on shift at the same time tomorrow, so I’ll give you a lift back. You parked in the employee lot?”

She nodded.

“Your car should be fine there. Do you need to get anything out of it?”

She frowned. “I don’t think so?”

Tanya plucked the tea from her hands. “Then you two should get out of here while you can.”

“*Thank you,*” I mouthed at her.

She nodded.

It wasn’t uncommon to get roped into a few more hours of work if you loitered too long after your shift ended because someone always needed an extra set of hands or more people were required to help stabilize a patient. Brinley wasn’t in any shape for that, and I’d been here four extra hours already. It was time to go.

I steered Brinley toward the exit, and we took the back way out to avoid running into anyone else. She was quiet as we walked but looked much better than when I first saw her, so I took that as a good sign.

“Do you live with anyone?” I asked her.

“My boyfriend,” she said.

“Is he home right now?” I didn’t love the idea of leaving her alone if he wasn’t.

She nodded. “He is. I texted him at the end of my shift before I sat down, and, well. You saw.”

“Talking about it helps,” I told her. “I’m not sure if your boyfriend is squeamish, but telling him about what you went through tonight could get some of it out of your head.”

“I’m not sure,” she said, her voice laced with indecision.

“You don’t have to go into detail. Just the basics. And I put my number in your phone along with the therapist line, so you can always call me too.”

She shot me a relieved look. “Thank you. I don’t think he’d get it. You know?”

I nodded. I did know. Unlike Brinley, I was single...ish, but even when I had partners, I didn’t talk shop with them. I never dated seriously – I was too career-focused for that right now – and talking about a bad day or how sad it was when I lost a patient felt like the kind of thing you saved for a significant other. Mostly, I spilled my guts to therapists or other nurses, and from the look on Brinley’s face, I could tell she would be the same. Civilians, as we called non-healthcare or emergency workers, didn’t get it a lot of the time.

We chatted more on the way home about safer topics like the latest TV show everyone was watching to distract ourselves from the night we’d had. By the time I dropped Brinley off at her townhouse, the sun was starting to rise over the city, glinting off the distant high-rises and painting the clouds a macabre ombre that ranged from the deep purple of new bruises to the arterial red of freshly spilled blood.

God, I’m morbid this morning, I thought, pulling my eyes from the sky.

I’d spent so much time trying to help and then distract Brinley that I hadn’t processed my own shitshow of a night. There was a guy who’d gotten stabbed three times, a woman with a broken wrist, bloody nose, and a guilty-looking husband who wouldn’t let her speak for herself, and a two-year-old with RSV so bad he had to be med-flighted to the children’s hospital.

The worst was the homeless man with frostbite. Not because it was an extreme case – his frostbite was relatively mild, and he’d keep all his toes – but because no one else in my rotation wanted to go in his room because he smelled so bad, complaining loudly enough in the hall outside that he probably heard them. It both broke my heart and pissed me off, so I sent the others running and took care of him myself.

Those were the kind of cases that stuck with me now, not the overly gory ones, but the sad ones. I fixated on them. Where was that man’s family? Were they looking for him? What about the woman being abused by her husband? Would she be able to get out before he hurt her again?

My drive home passed in a blur as these thoughts filled my head, and before I knew it, I was pulling into my driveway. The street was dark

enough that my house was lit up by twinkling string lights. It was well into the second week of January, but a few of my neighbors still had their holiday decorations up, so I wasn't rushing to take mine down. Seeing those lights flashing merrily in the pre-dawn gloom was precisely the kind of pick-me-up I needed – anything to keep the darkness at bay.

I turned my car off and got out. My house wasn't much, just a small two-bedroom craftsman-style cottage in a semi-safe neighborhood, but it was all mine, and I was damn proud of the work I'd done fixing it up and putting my unique stamp on the place. The siding was an antique pale blue-green, the trim was a warm white, and the small front deck looked festive and inviting thanks to the holiday-themed welcome sign and the Christmas tree that sparkled with tinsel and decorations.

Inside, it was just as merry. I didn't have any family left that mattered, and decking my house out top to bottom in seasonal décor was how I distracted myself from the depressing fact that I either spent the holidays alone or working every year.

A loud yowl split the air as I closed the door behind me and kicked off my shoes.

Well, I wasn't *entirely* alone. I did have Fred to keep me company. He must have been fast asleep on my bed when I walked in because his yowling started farther away and then rose in pitch and volume as he raced toward me, like an ambulance screaming down a highway.

Man, he's loud when he's angry, I thought. If he kept this up, my nearest neighbors were going to start thinking I hurt him.

"Oh my god, Fred," I said as my long-haired black and white cat raced around the corner. "You're fine. I'm only a few hours late this time."

I scooped him up when he reached me, turning him onto his back so I could bury my face in his fluffy belly. My mom called this "fur therapy" growing up. She'd come home from a long day of work, and before saying hi to Dad or me, she'd head straight to a cat and snuggle them until they started to squirm. It always made her feel better, so I'd done the same thing to Fred since the day after he showed up in my yard, a half-drowned kitten crying to get out of a storm. I didn't know if it was because he was so young when I started doing it to him, but he tolerated fur therapy pretty well, purring and making biscuits in my hair.

I probably would have seemed like a lunatic to non-cat people, but I didn't give a shit. On principle, I didn't trust anyone who didn't like cats, so

they'd never be around to judge me anyway.

I set Fred down once I'd gotten my fill, and he trotted behind me as I headed into my room to change. You think I'd be tired after such a long shift, but I was wide awake. Probably because I'd learned how to fall asleep at the drop of a dime, and I found somewhere to take a five-minute power nap whenever there was a lull. The hospital had been weirdly quiet from midnight to one, and I'd slept for a whole hour. Tanya told me one of the floor nurses – someone who worked on a higher floor in a specialty unit – had commented about it being slow when she came to pick up lab work, which jinxed us. ER nurses knew better than to say things like that.

I showered, changed into the coziest pajamas I owned, poured myself an oversized glass of white wine, and snuggled up with Fred on my couch. I had half a mind to turn on the TV and zone out for a while, but I hadn't checked my phone once during my shift, and those social media notifications were calling.

Giving in to the inevitable, I pulled up my favorite app and started scrolling. There were the expected videos of cute animals doing cute things, people acting like idiots and getting themselves into trouble, storytimes about exes, and muscular people posing in gym mirrors. But more than anything else, there were thirst traps. Specifically, thirst traps of men wearing some sort of mask. My obsession with them started at the beginning of autumn when this subgenre of videos rose to the spotlight every year, thanks to horny book lovers and lusty lurkers like me.

With one hand, I scratched behind Fred's ears. The other was busy smashing that like button for videos of men dressed in cosplay, decked out in futuristic military gear, and even a few sporting full horror movie costumes. I saved my favorites for the ghost-like masks, though. The shirtless ones had me drooling. Add in a knife and some fake blood, and that was an instant follow.

My absolute favorite creator was a user with the handle "the.faceless.man" because he had everything I loved most: a custom mask that was unlike anyone else's and was as sensual as it was terrifying, muscles, good lighting, exceptional music selection, and an innate understanding of how to reel the viewer in and keep us begging for more. I had a whole favorite section devoted to his videos, and I routinely went back and rewatched them whenever I needed a distraction after a bad shift.

Like tonight.

I drained the last of my wine – damn, I completely lost track of time when I scrolled – and got up to pour myself another round. Fred jumped down from the couch and curled inside his little felt house by the TV, having reached his snuggle limit. I checked his food and water in the kitchen – both were still mostly full – and emptied the last of the wine into my glass. By the time I finished it, I'd be half a bottle deep.

Yup, I'd be tipsy soon and hopefully tired. I only had ten hours until my next shift started, and I desperately needed to catch up on all the sleep I'd missed during the usual holiday uptick at the hospital.

I tugged a blanket over myself as I sat back down, then pulled up my videos of the Faceless Man, as I'd taken to calling him. It was hard to pick a favorite, but if someone held a gun to my head and told me I had to, it would be the one where he was sprawled out over a couch, shirtless, his head resting on the arm, the scene flooded by red light. He was only visible from the ribs up, his skin covered in tattoos, muscles clenched as his arm moved in a rhythmic motion that suggested he was jerking off but didn't go far enough to get him banned.

I never knew where to look when I watched it. At the way his biceps tensed and flexed with every stroke? Or how his chest heaved like he was on the brink of coming? Or just off-screen, where I could imagine his hand pumping his straining cock?

He started the video staring up at the ceiling. Toward the very end, he turned his head to stare directly into the camera, and even though I *knew* a mask couldn't have an expression, it felt like his did. Like those gaping black eyes stared straight into my soul, and that smirking mouth was calling my name while he came. The video cut off right after he turned his head, and it was embarrassing how many times I'd paused it right before that happened so I could stare into those eyes a few moments longer.

What would it be like to be in the room with him when he filmed it? To be the one he thought of while he got himself off? Or better yet, to come home one day and find him taking up this very couch as he waited for me in the dark, covered in blood, light glinting off the steel of his knife?

That thought made me shudder with a mix of desire and fear. I wanted it in a way that probably wasn't healthy, but after all the ugly shit I'd seen working in the trauma center, and even before that in my fucked-up teen years, it was only natural that my tastes were starting to skew heavily toward the dark side.

Maybe Tyler will wear it for me, I thought.

Right, Tyler. The guy I'd been hooking up with for almost a year now.

I'd nearly forgotten about him. It wasn't that he was forgettable exactly – he was good-looking and a decent lay – but when work got busy, I tended to lose myself in it, and that had been happening a lot because of the hospital's staffing crisis.

When was the last time we hooked up? It must have been before Christmas, at least. Meaning it was far past time for a booty call. Tomorrow was my last shift of the week, and then I had two glorious days off. What better way to spend them than spread out under a man who knew where a clit was?

I drained my wine, feeling high on the possibility of experiencing a masked man in real life. Before I could think better of it, I screenshotted an image of my favorite video and sent it to Tyler along with a text.

I have two days off starting Friday. Wanna come over that night and bring a mask like this? I promise I'll make it interesting for you.

His response didn't come back until a few hours into my shift the next day because he'd been asleep like a normal person when I sent my text.

My heart sank as I read his words.

Damn, girl. You still alive? I thought you ghosted me. It's been two months. Pass on the mask thing. I'm not into it, and I'm seeing someone anyway.

Two months? Had it really been that long? I scrolled up in our text thread, and, shit, it had. Maybe it was time to book another therapy session and ask if they had any tips for balancing a personal life alongside this line of work.

Because clearly, I was failing.