

GLISTEN

A Holistic Medical Suspense Novel

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This book is also available in print from online retailers.

Glisten

To reflect a sparkling light or a faint intermittent glow; shine lustrously.
- *Dictionary.com*

Chapter One

“Freeze! U.S. Department of Glisten!” Isabelle Adler kicked the door shut behind her and pointed her nine-millimeter at the surprised man, ready to pull the trigger if she had to. “Dr. Ross, you’re under arrest.”

A silver-haired man in a white coat stood near the basement window, fiddling with the stethoscope hanging around his neck. His eyes narrowed. “Why are you arresting me?”

Oh, please. Like he doesn’t know. Isabelle nodded toward the shelves lined with medical books, journals, and files. An anatomical skeleton on a roller stand, wearing a *Washington Nationals* baseball hat, stood in the corner. “For breaking the law by running this underground Western medical facility.”

He jutted his clean-shaven jaw and rubbed it with a weathered hand. “I’ll have you know that I’ve been an MD for almost fifty years, young lady.”

His condescending voice had no effect. “Western medicine was made illegal a year ago.” Isabelle felt no remorse. Not even a miniscule droplet. As a senior Health Enforcement Agent for the federal government, arresting law-breakers was her job.

“First, you people wouldn’t allow us to accept insurance anymore, and then you made my profession illegal in favor of *holistic health*.” He shook his head as though he had never heard something so crazy.

“Drug-Med’s over, sir. As in *au revoir. Sayonara*.” She was happy with the new law. Conventional medicine with its overuse of drugs was not something she had ever supported. “However you want to say it, it’s a done deal.”

“I hate how the government refers to Western medicine as *Drug-Med*.”

“Sorry you don’t like the term, but if the shoe fits...” She held his gaze and advanced toward him. “Now turn around and place your hands against the wall.”

She glanced at the oak desk lined with framed photographs. The display showcased an old wedding picture of the doctor and his bride. Young, glowing, and smiling. Along with several recent photos – his wife now an elegant woman with shimmering silvery hair – all over Europe. Arm in arm, they posed in front of the Eiffel Tower, Buckingham Palace, and a Scottish castle.

Their smiles were cheerful, but the contentment in their eyes was unmistakable. They were absolutely in love. A pang of grief hit Isabelle squarely in the gut.

That’s how Zach and I would have been.

“You’re not taking me out of here in handcuffs.” His tone held a challenge.

“Everyone gets handcuffed. It’s nothing personal.” She glanced at the photos again, feeling a bit envious over the longevity of their marriage. Something she would never have with the love of her life.

“It’s very personal.” His cheek twitched and his hands curled into fists.

Jail wouldn’t be easy for him. The separation from his wife would be difficult, and Isabelle felt bad for her, but she had no sympathy for people like him. People who did not abide by Glisten Law. It wasn’t like the man hadn’t known. All MDs, Physician’s Assistants, Nurse Practitioners, RNs, and all accessory Drug-Med practitioners had been informed of the fall of Western Medicine.

The only legal medicine in the United States of America as of now was Naturopathic Medicine.

And this guy had known it. Yet he had chosen to ignore the law.

Annoyance surged through Isabelle. “Put your hands against the wall.”

“Tell my wife I loved her, OK?”

“You can tell her yourself, sir. You’re not dying. You’ll probably do five years in jail and, when you get out, you can study natural health for a year and become a naturopathic doctor. You can still be a physician, just not a Drug-Med one.” She adjusted her grip on the gun and leveled her stance, irritated that he hadn’t followed orders. “Now hands on the wall.”

“If I have to support quackery, I’d rather be dead.” A hard look altered his face before he reached into his pants pockets and calmly pulled out a small handgun.

Oh, no.

Isabelle’s heart rate sped up. “Sir, please. You don’t want to do this.”

A tense moment passed and he didn’t lower the weapon.

She nodded toward the photos on his desk. “Consider your wife. She obviously loves you. Would she want you to take your life? Now please give me the gun.”

He looked at the pictures. Maybe she had gotten through to him. His jaw tensed but then slacked. His grip on the gun remained steadfast.

He turned and leveled his heated gaze on her. “What do you know about love? I don’t see a ring on your finger.”

She stepped back, stunned. A punch to the jaw with a lead glove would have been easier to take. Her chest tightened when she glanced at her bare finger, where her beautiful engagement ring used to reside. Cold emptiness settled over her. “What do I know about love? How dare you.”

“How dare *you* arrest me.”

“My fiancé was murdered by Drug-Med supporters last year.” She threw him a hard look to maintain her tough appearance. Inside, however, she was trembling. “You don’t want to leave your wife alone in the world, believe me. No one should have to live with that kind of unbearable loss.”

“You’re just saying that to get me to back down. Nice try, but it won’t work.” Fury crossed his face and his cheeks reddened.

“Sir, I’m trying to help you.” The day Zach had been killed changed her life irrevocably. If only someone had been there to try to dissuade the bomber from going ahead with the attack, like she was trying to do with the doctor. Then maybe Zach would still be with her. And her life wouldn’t be one long act of nothingness.

No. I can’t do this now. Snap out of it.

She shook her head and suppressed her sorrow. Losing control in a situation like this would not be smart. “Put your wife first and give me the gun.”

“I can’t do that.” He stared at her with a determined look on his face. “My blood’s on Glisten’s hands.”

“Sir, please don’t—”

But he didn’t let her finish.

He pulled the trigger, the blast louder than any gunshot she’d ever heard at the firing range. She turned her head, unable to look. Blood splattered against the shelves like crimson paint flung freely from a can.

Lightheadedness descended up Isabelle. Her stomach wound into a tight knot, and her legs didn’t budge. As she lowered her gun, she glanced at the skeleton and its ghoulish blood-speckled *Nationals* hat. *It’s all your fault*, it seemed to be saying. She kicked the gun away from him and checked for a pulse.

There wasn't one.

Shards of regret cut through her. *His poor wife. I should've tackled him, she thought. I should've jumped him and taken the gun away from him. I should've stopped this.*

Unfortunately, it was too late. The doctor's wife would know what it was like to live a life filled with relentless sorrow.

Like Isabelle did.

She reached for her phone to call for back up, completely unaware of what she had just set into motion.

~*~

Minutes later, the media descended intent on getting a sensational story. Dr. Jade Nicholson, ND (Naturopathic Doctor) refused to talk to any of the pushy reporters. She dodged past them and entered the building, her toned body propelling her quickly. She swiped a loose strand of auburn hair behind her ear and adjusted her ponytail, then spotted her best friend in the middle of the ensuing chaos.

Isabelle Adler.

The five-nine blonde, who looked like she belonged on a runway in Paris instead of toting a gun around Washington, DC, was hard not to notice.

But try telling Isabelle she could have been a model. She was born to take down law-breakers.

"Jade." Isabelle blotted her tears with a tissue and then blew her nose. "I'm glad you're here."

Jade's eyes widened. It wasn't like Isabelle to cry. Not at all. In fact, she'd never once seen her best friend cry, not at sad movies or even at her fiancé's funeral last year.

Grief has a way of sneaking up on you, Jade thought. She pulled Isabelle into a hug, but her friend stiffened.

"It's OK, Iz. You've got to let it out."

"I'm not like that." But Isabelle sniffled a bit before she stepped out of the embrace.

"You've had a shock." Jade paused. "You know it wasn't your fault, right?"

Isabelle nodded, but looked unconvinced. "Yeah, sure."

"You have to believe in your soul that it wasn't your fault." Jade grasped Isabelle's shoulders. "Let my words wash over you. It. Wasn't. Your. Fault."

"I get what you're saying, but I was about to haul the guy off to jail, and he snapped." Isabelle released a pent-up breath.

"You did all you could."

Another tear trickled down Isabelle's cheek. "What's wrong with me?"

You still haven't grieved over your fiancé's, death. But Jade thought it best not to blurt that out. No, better to take a gentler approach. "Sometimes when we experience grief about one situation, it brings up our grief over another situation," Jade said in a calm, soothing tone. "So what you're feeling-"

"No." Isabelle shook her head. "This isn't about Zach."

Jade reached into her doctor's bag and pulled out a small plastic bottle of white pellets. *Ignatia*. A homeopathic remedy to alleviate grief and emotional upsets. She popped the top off, poured three tiny pellets into the lid, and held them up. "Open, OK?"

Isabelle did as her best friend and doctor said. Jade poured the pellets into Isabelle's mouth and waited for the remedy to dissolve.

“It’s all right to experience grief over a loss,” Jade said. “It’s unhealthy to stuff down your feelings. Doing that will only produce poor health.”

Isabelle held her hand straight out, as if to say *stop*. Jade wasn’t sure if the message was meant more for her or for Isabelle herself.

“I’m not grieving.” Isabelle strode away, no doubt stuffing her emotions back down.

Jade watched her zip around the crime scene markers and dart outside the medical facility. *There goes a woman who needs a whole case of ignatia*. But now was not the time. No, now was the time to examine the body of the deceased.

Not a pleasant job, but one that had to be done.

Amidst the officers working the area, snapping copious amounts of pictures and taking notes, Jade walked into the office where things had gone awry, well aware of the cacophony of whispers that floated around her. As the Chief Health Restoration Officer for the U.S. Department of Glisten, she carried an air of authority wherever she went. Many citizens supported Glisten and the magic of health that came from being “Glistenized,” but plenty didn’t.

They only followed Glisten because it was law.

A prime example was Police Chief Davis. Late fifties, a tad portly (Glisten was currently ironing out the details of its soon-to-be-released *Above Optimum Weight* fines), and with a thin dusting of gray hair, he was not a fan of healthy living. He was, however, her husband’s boss. A fact that didn’t sit well with Jade.

Chief Davis approached her with a slight sneer on his squishy face. “Dr. Nicholson.”

She hated how his tone implied a note of mockery whenever he addressed her as *doctor*. On several occasions, she’d wanted to enlighten him on the breadth and depth of her education in natural medicine, but she doubted it would make a difference.

She disregarded his sarcasm. Again. She was here to work. “Chief Davis.” She nodded, then glanced at the deceased. “Pretty cut and dried here, it seems. Suicide with an eyewitness.”

“Suicide? How about preemptive death before loss of liberty?”

Jade was not in the mood for a philosophical exchange about the man’s beliefs on freedom in health care. She’d heard his viewpoints many times, mainly through her husband, Hudson. Unease over the fact that the man she had married eight years ago had become so anti-Glisten sunk into her heart. “This is no time for debates, Davis. I’ve got a report to write and then patients to see this afternoon.”

He thinned his lips into a dry, crackly line and stuffed his hands into snug pants pockets. “I’m sure you do. State-mandated and all.”

“Actually, it’s federally-mandated because Glisten is an agency of the federal government.” She couldn’t resist boasting.

His eyes narrowed for a second, and he opened his mouth to say something. But then he pinched his lips shut, as if he remembered her position. He gestured at the body with his shoulder. “Not a pretty sight, huh?”

“No, it isn’t.” The Drug-Med doctor’s white coat was doused with blood. Not the worst she’d ever seen. But neck up was another story. A gruesome, horror-movie mess. How sickening that someone would rather take his own life than support a health movement that had made a tremendous difference in U.S. health statistics for years before it became law.

Jade simply couldn’t understand it.

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Charelle Adler paced past the grimy windows in her office at the American Medical Conservation Organization (AMCO) for at least the seventh time. Word had just come in that

Glisten had busted another one of their underground medical facilities in the States. A facility that had operated under a fine doctor who was now dead, because of *them*, and therefore unable to help any more patients. Or write any more prescriptions.

Stupid, evil, freedom-squashing organization.

Charelle twisted a lock of hair around her finger. Her hand tensed as thoughts reeled through her mind. How had the U.S. had ever come under the rule of Glisten? She now understood how people living under a dictatorship must feel. The horror those poor victims endured without freedom was sickening.

As was the horror currently being endured by the poor victims of Glisten. Being forced to do all this crazy health stuff. So ridiculously unAmerican.

Her phone rang, so she hustled toward her desk, taking care not to trip on the cracks of the cheap linoleum. “Hello?” she said, slightly out of breath.

“Hiya, Char.” Her dad’s voice did not support the perkiness of his greeting, however. As the founder and director of the AMCO, Dr. Liam Adler, M.D., had undoubtedly been briefed on the unsettling news.

“Hi, Dad.” She sank into her wobbly black chair and cradled the phone between her head and shoulder. “Take it you heard about Dr. Ross.”

The crackling of the phone line merged the distance between her dad’s home office and her work office, and sadly, they were only about five miles apart. Liberty Key – the Caribbean Island where she had fled along with thousands of other disenfranchised Americans seeking medical asylum – was not known for the best-of-the-best in modern conveniences. Hardly. They used old rotary-dial phones, outdated computers, and dial-up Internet that Charelle still couldn’t get used to. Her life here was so different than it used to be in the States.

Before everything changed.

“We lost a good doctor today.” Her dad’s tone was funeral-like somber.

Another loss for their team. Another loss they, the AMCO, had failed to prevent. “I wish he would’ve just let them arrest him, and we could’ve tried to free him from prison.”

“That wouldn’t have worked. You can’t break into a federal facility easily.”

“I know, but it feels good to at least have a plan. Even a futile one.”

“That’s my girl. Always planning something.” Unhappiness pervaded his voice.

This time he had a reason. Charelle remembered a time when her father had been happy, but she hadn’t seen him like that in ages.

Not since the dawn of Glisten.

Stuffing her sadness down, she glanced at the computer. It had been bumped off-line. That figured. She grabbed the mouse and slammed it against her gray metal desk. Then she clicked the button to reconnect.

“Maybe we could disrupt their idiotic upcoming *Uproot the Cause* event in Washington, DC. Or do something to the agent who tried to arrest him.” She yanked the mouse around, annoyed the Internet was frozen again. “That would at least send a message.”

More crackling of the phone line ensued. Then her father said, “Have you heard which Health Enforcement Agent made the bust today? The one who made Dr. Ross kill himself?”

Apprehension constricted Charelle’s throat for a moment. *Please tell me it wasn’t her.*

“Isabelle.” He paused. “One of Glisten’s finest.”

That did it. She released the mouse, pulled the top drawer out, and picked up an orange plastic bottle. Funny how antianxiety meds had become a trusted friend. She popped one into her mouth and swished it down with iced coffee. She couldn’t believe the irony.

Isabelle, her twin sister, had been the agent responsible.

Though she hadn't seen her sister in over twenty-four years, sister-dearest seemed to be wrangling her way into Charelle's life on a fairly regular basis.

"You still there?" her dad asked.

"Yeah." The clock on her computer revealed it was almost lunchtime, which meant that her favorite burger place was open for business. A highlight of the day. "What now?"

"I don't want to hurt Isabelle, obviously," her father said. "But we can't let them keep doing this, you know."

Oh, Charelle knew, all right. What she didn't know was how to stop the organization that had stolen everything from her, including her sister. She pursed her lips. Then a wicked idea popped into her mind.

Yes, this might work.

Chapter Two

“Hiya, Punk.” Isabelle closed the door to her apartment and flipped the locks. All three of them. Then she shook a few flakes of organic fish food into a small tank, which, aside from the betta fish, was filled with purple and white rocks, a blue tree, a tiny castle, and an ornate treasure chest. “How was your day?”

Punk, her closest friend and four-year-old betta fish, swam around, stopping to flare his fins at his reflection in the mirror attached to the tank.

She smiled. “Show off.” She dropped her purse and backpack onto the green futon and strode into the kitchen, past the red punching bag that had also achieved friend status. Images from the day whirled through her mind.

The suicide tormented her, and so did the *Nats* cap on the skeleton because it reminded her of Zach and his favorite team. Memories surfaced, ones she wished to forget.

Like their first game at the new *Washington Nationals* stadium. Zach had gotten them box seats so she could have the option to get out of the heat if she wanted. So sweet of him. They had laughed over turkey hotdogs and baked sweet potato fries when the presidents had raced around the field in between innings.

Happy memories. The best moments of her life had been with Zach. Now he was gone, and all she had left were mental recollections about their life together...and the dreams of what their future together would have been like. She shook her head to stop the burning in her eyes. Was Jade right? Was she going to completely fall apart now?

No, she couldn't.

Jade always said that every symptom in the human body had a cause. So until she knew the cause of Zach's death – as in who specifically was responsible for his murder – she couldn't allow herself to grieve. She would press on and try to live without him. It wasn't like she was deluding herself that he was still alive because her empty apartment made it painfully apparent he was gone.

His death hadn't been random. But until she had someone cuffed and stuffed, she wasn't going to deal with her pain.

She opened the refrigerator and pulled out her veggie drawer. Grabbed a bunch of organic goodies and set them on the counter. Her juicer was clean and ready for action. Swiss chard first. Then some kale, though that never was her favorite. But it had been Zach's. She rubbed her hand against her heart when she remembered him buying her an *Eat More Kale* bumper sticker, along with a huge bag of kale.

Come on, Iz. Just try it.

Isabelle set her hands on the counter and counted to ten. *Pull yourself together.* Then she rolled a leaf of rainbow chard and stuffed it into the chute of her juicer. Next a few leaves of Napa cabbage. Then celery, romaine, apple, lemon, and some bok choy.

She spooned off the froth and took a sip. The power of the raw juice worked its way through her digestive system, emitting a healthy buzz all the way to her toes. Nothing like fresh green juice to revive your soul.

A knock at the door interrupted her.

Her right hand went for her gun. Two years at the Glisten Health Enforcement Agent Academy had made reaching for a weapon an automatic reaction to an unexpected visitor. She headed to the door and peered through the peephole.

Derek.

Her *sort of* boyfriend. They hadn't even kissed yet, because she wasn't over Zach – not that she ever would be – but for now the companionship was nice. Plus she still hadn't told Zach's mother, Amelia, that she was seeing someone. The only person who knew was Jade.

And she planned to keep it that way.

She peeked at him again. Why hadn't he called first? She had told him several times that she didn't like surprises. At least he was cute, in spite of being a bit dimwitted about just showing up against her wishes. Nearly six-feet tall, with eyes and hair the color of molasses, and the physique of a professional bodyguard. Most women would be elated to be with him. Not that she didn't appreciate him, but he wasn't Zach.

No man ever would be.

"You going to let me in? Or just stare at me all night?" His voice was almost sexier than he was. "I hate to tell you this, but I charge for peep shows."

A smile broke across her face. OK, he was funny. Another one of his laundry list of qualities that most women would go bonkers over.

She undid the locks and swung the door open. Setting her free hand on her hip, she gazed at him. "You know how I feel about drop-ins?"

He held up a brown shopping bag as if it were a white flag. "I saw the news and thought you could use a comfort-food dinner."

"That was thoughtful." She pulled the door open wide and gestured him inside. "What sort of comfort food will I be privy to tonight?"

He flashed her a devilish smile. "Mac and cheese made with organic brown rice pasta and manchego sheep cheese. Sound good?"

It sounded divine. She might have to reassess having a professional chef for a *sort of* boyfriend. "You're nice, Derek."

"I know." He winked.

He carried the bag into the kitchen and unpacked the contents. A big brick of sheep cheese, two bags of brown-rice corkscrew pasta (her favorite), a stick of organic butter, and a bag of gluten-free breadcrumbs. He glanced at her juicer. "I see I interrupted your juicing fest."

She laughed. "You know how I hate that."

"I know." He folded the bag up and tossed it into the recycle bin, stopping in front of her to rub her shoulder. "You're a tough one, Adler."

Though she tried her best not to, she stiffened. Just a bit. But thankfully he swooshed her out of the kitchen.

"You need to relax after the day you've had." He steered her toward the futon and lowered her into it. "You OK?"

"I can deal."

"Rough day." He paused. "I'm sorry."

Tension filled the too-close-for-her-comfort gap between them, so she picked up the remote. Hadn't a clue what she would watch as she wasn't big on T.V. She only had one because Zach had bought it, staking out his right to watch sports.

"I've got a busy day tomorrow starting with an early meeting about *Uproot the Cause*," she said. "Talking about the event should help distract me."

"Glisten still doing that?" he asked over his shoulder while heading back into the kitchen.

"Yeah, we're working out the security details."

"You think it's safe?"

“Of course. I’ll be working it.” *What a dumb question.* But she didn’t point that out. He was making mac-and-cheese after all.

“Just wondering.”

The rush of water from the kitchen faucet echoed through her apartment. Isabelle glanced at Punk and wished she could pick his tiny brain. She would love his take on Derek. A knot of apprehension always set up shop in the pit of her stomach whenever she was around her *sort of* boyfriend.

Her reaction to him seemed rather foolish. Maybe it was just proverbial butterflies over how cute he was? Or maybe it was guilt?

Yeah, that was probably it.

~*~

“You feed the cats yet?” Jade asked her husband as she walked into their Cape Cod home in Chevy Chase, Maryland carrying a grocery bag in each hand.

Hudson lounged on his navy-blue leather recliner with a bottle of mineral water, zoning out at a soccer game on the flat screen T.V.

“Yup,” he said without turning his head.

Lovely, how excited he is to see me.

His lean body was stretched out, legs crossed at the ankles. At six foot two, he was in pretty good shape. Played basketball with his policeman friends several times a week. He kept his light brown hair cut short, the way she liked it. And he wore nice clothes whenever they went out. Externally, he was pretty close to male perfection.

But internally, she couldn’t help but feel something was amiss.

She continued toward the kitchen, wishing she could wrangle that tiny little voice inside that kept her in constant *is-my-marriage-over* turmoil. Their two lilac-point Siamese cats circled her feet, purring like motorized toys. *Aw.* At least someone was happy to see her. The remnants of wet food in the fish-shaped kitty bowls confirmed that Hudson had fed them.

The counters were clear, so she set the bags down, slid off her pink doctor’s jacket, and hung it on the coat rack along with her purse. Next she glanced at her appearance. Not bad for a long day. She neatened her auburn ponytail and grabbed her lipstick from the ledge in front of the mirror, swiping the pale burgundy gloss across her lips.

There. Much better.

She unpacked the grocery bags and set the fresh cod aside for dinner. She turned the oven to three-fifty and basted the fish fillets with lemon juice, garlic, basil, and sea salt. As soon as that was baking, she assembled Hudson’s favorite salad. Nondairy Caesar with gluten-free croutons. She chopped up romaine lettuce and prepared the dressing from scratch.

“You want garlic bread tonight?” she called out. The Italian in her craved garlic bread several times a week.

“Sure.”

His one-word responses could really have driven her nuts if she’d let them, and they always got worse after he’d been at work for a several day stint. That ultra-obnoxious Chief Davis had a way of bringing out the worst in her husband. Not to mention her father-in-law’s anti-Glisten influence. Tonight was Hudson’s Friday, though, which meant he would be home for the next three days.

She was fast learning to love her husband’s days off.

Luckily, she had a secret weapon against the gnawing unease that swirled in her gut whenever she thought about how Hudson had changed. *Rescue Remedy*, a homeopathic Bach

Flower Remedy that had been around since the 1930s to alleviate panic. She pulled the bottle from her cupboard and said the accompanying affirmation.

The calmness deep within me gives me strength and courage.

She squeezed eight drops under her tongue, swallowed, and repeated the affirmation again. Following her own advice to her patients, she made sure to state the affirmation with enthusiasm and conviction.

With her mental sanity in check, it was time to make the garlic bread. She prepared three slices of gluten-free millet bread with olive oil, chopped garlic, and parsley flakes. She slid them into the oven on a cookie sheet and waited, pondering what to talk to Hudson about over dinner.

You like the cod? The garlic bread too garlicky? You want that last crouton? Why do you seem so distant lately?

That was not going to work. Trouble was, she didn't know what would work. What could she do to fix whatever was wrong? Minutes later, dinner was ready. She dished up their plates. Set them onto two trays, complete with blue napkins and miniature salt-and-pepper shakers, and carried his out first.

"Thanks," Hudson said when she handed it to him. "You get called to the doctor suicide today?"

She cringed, not wanting to discuss anything remotely related to his cretin boss. "I was there for a short while. Just enough to get the required information to write my report."

He paused, took a whiff of his dinner, and flashed her a cute smile. "Smells awesome, hon."

Warmth tingled through her. She was glad to have averted any potential upsetting conversation. "I've got dessert planned, too."

"You know I love my sweets."

"Lucky for you I'm an expert baker with coconut sugar or else you'd probably have diabetes by now." His family had diabetes on both sides, so white sugar was not his friend. But coconut sugar certainly was.

Seriousness settled into his eyes, and his jaw tensed. "If it weren't for you, I'd probably be on insulin by now."

"But you're not going to, because I'll keep you in healthy desserts."

"There's not a recipe on the planet that you can't Glisten-ize, babe." He winked at her, and she melted.

Her heart filled with love and hope. *Yes. This is how it used to be. How we used to be.* Happy and joking about how she could convert any recipe into a healthy one. Laughing as she had attempted one cookie recipe after the other. Sometimes the outcome was a huge success and sometimes not.

Jade wanted it all back.

He resumed staring at the television while she retrieved her dinner from the kitchen. Settling on the couch next to him with the cats joining them, things felt almost normal. Like they used to. Until her adorable husband had been transferred to that parasite Chief Davis's unit last year, she'd never once questioned the longevity of their marriage.

She stole a sideways glance at her husband. Memories churned through her, all the way back to walking down the aisle up to the newfound tension between them. No way was she losing her man. A thought popped into her mind as she munched on her delicious garlic bread.

As the Chief Health Restoration Officer, she made more than enough money to support their lifestyle. Even when they, hopefully soon, started a family. They didn't need his police officer salary. Sure, it was nice to have extra money but, when it came down to the tight wire of what

was truly important in life – saving her marriage or having a few extra bucks – it was a no brainer. Plus she'd noticed a distinct pattern. Her husband always softened toward her when food was involved...and when he'd been off work for a few days. Away from Chief Davis.

Jade would choose love over money any day, but Hudson would never willingly quit his job.

So how could she arrange it so he was no longer employed?

~*~

The text still had not come in. Where was it?

Charelle doused a slice of pizza with Parmesan cheese and concentrated on what Samuel, her boyfriend of several months, was saying. "I'm sorry. What was that again?"

"The MS is starting to make my arm feel more weird." He lifted his right arm as far as he could and then let it limply drop to his side. "It's getting weaker, and that's not good for my sculpting or my painting."

"That's for sure. An artist needs both hands, even if you are ambidextrous."

He nodded emphatically. An *All That Glistens Isn't Gold* (Liberty Key's national slogan) baseball hat suffocated his shoulder-length, blackish hair. He wore khaki shorts and a pale green tee shirt that accented his Hispanic American bronzed skin. "My art career could be over, and all my neurologist suggested was to join an MS support group."

They were seated at an open-air pizza joint on the north end of Liberty Key. Samuel's favorite restaurant. As far as he was concerned, pizza was a major food group, along with beer and spicy wings. His bulging tummy was proof of his diet.

Oh, well. It's not like I couldn't drop a few pounds myself. Even a little bit overweight wasn't healthy, but forget letting some government organization nose its way into the number on her bathroom scale. No way. "I'm sure your doctor knows what he's doing," she said.

"But what he's doing is *nothing*." A look of fear crossed his face while he chomped down another bite, followed by a huge swig of beer. "I know that Glisten's rules are nuts, but sometimes I wonder if they could help."

Heat flared across Charelle's cheeks, and it had nothing to do with the balmy Caribbean night. "If you think their natural ways are going to save you, you're sadly mistaken. The AMCO has conducted numerous studies proving Glisten's theories to be wrong."

He swiped a napkin across his mouth. "Yeah, but Drug-Med doctors don't take any classes in nutrition." Then he gestured at the half demolished pizza and basket of chicken wing bones in front of them. "Not that I exactly know much about the subject." He laughed.

"That's not the answer to your MS, Sam. Multiple sclerosis is a degenerative neurological disease. There's no cure." As a health administrator of AMCO, she knew this to be true. "Your doctor's right about the support group. There are some things in life you just have to accept."

He toyed with his napkin for a moment. "You swear not to kill me if I confess something?"

Now her entire body flared with heat. If he were turning pro-Glisten, she'd dump him immediately.

An artist for the past two decades, Samuel had sought medical asylum on Liberty Key a few years ago. His artistry required him to lead a very unstructured life, both workwise and dietwise. No way could he conform to the strict requirements of Glisten life, no matter what alleged glowing health resulted.

He needed freedom. For the body, mind, and soul. Or at least that was what he had told her. And that was what had kept her connected to him. She required freedom, too. At any cost. Even her health.

“Do I want to know?” Her hesitation was evident in her tone.

“I downloaded a copy of that book, *Kill the Cause and Produce the Cure*. And it said that neurological symptoms could be caused by aspartame or old mercury fillings.”

“You’re kidding, right? I mean, about downloading that bogus book.”

He shook his head, looking as guilty as a little boy with his hand caught in the cookie jar. Or in his case, a cookie vat. “Figured I may as well consider all angles, because nothing I’ve done is working. The medication’s sure not doing a thing.”

“Amelia Brandt’s a quack and a troublemaker.” *What’s he thinking?* She dropped her fork and scooted back from the table. “She started the entire stupid Glisten movement that ruined everything. How could you pay money for anything she wrote?”

“Because I’ve got MS.”

Tension filled the gap between them. She glared at him. Other patrons of the pizza joint took notice of the lover’s spat.

“We lost a good doctor today because of Glisten.” Her eyes burned with hostility as she lowered her voice. “Have you forgotten that?”

“I thought he committed suicide?”

“Geez, Samuel. What’s wrong with you? He killed himself because of *them*.”

More silence.

“I was only interested in reading what Dr. Amelia had to say because my arm’s not getting any better,” he said. “And I don’t want to lose any more mobility.”

“Doctor Amelia?” She snorted. “That woman is not a doctor.”

“How about Healer Amelia then?” His cheeks reddened. “I thought you and this entire island stood for freedom. Shouldn’t I have the freedom to choose my own healthcare?”

Morons like him are the reason Glisten took off in the first place.

But what could she say? Yes, she was a self-proclaimed freedom fighter, but finding freedom in quackery wasn’t anything she would support. Luckily her cell phone buzzed, alerting her to a new text. She desperately needed a break from this awful evening, and the message was a welcome one. *Uproot the Cause meeting tomorrow morning at Glisten Headquarters. Event expected to unfold as planned. Amelia still to take the lead.*

Most excellent news. Happiness settled into Charelle’s soul, pushing out her annoyance with Samuel. He wasn’t part of her life plan anyway, so what did it matter if he was fool enough to read Glisten’s idiotic manifesto? All she cared about right now was that *Uproot the Cause* was a go.

Fortunately, Charelle had an informant. She inhaled the sweet night air, pleased with the way things were working out. After all, she was going to have a chance to change the course of history.

And *Doctor Amelia* was going to help her do it.

Chapter Three

Last hill, she promised herself. *Then it's green tea time.*

Dr. Amelia Brandt hustled up the final incline of her early morning power walk, a three-pound weight in each hand and a smile on her face, thankful for another healthy day. Twenty years of poor health had taught her not to take wellness for granted.

According to her birth certificate, she had recently turned eighty-one. But to the energetic dynamo with golden brown hair – save for a silver strand here and there, only noticeable in direct sunlight – zipping past much younger people on the Rock Creek Park trail, Amelia hardly felt a day older than forty.

“Morning, Dr. B,” a woman with a dark brown ponytail and a pink jogging attire called out as Amelia passed. “You’re looking good.”

“And feeling even better.” Amelia grinned.

“You rock, Doc.” The woman picked up her pace. “I hope I’m as peppy as you when I reach fifty.”

Amelia laughed. “Keep up with the Glisten program, and you’ll be your most amazing self forever.”

As the Chief Health Preservation Officer for the U.S. Department of Glisten, Amelia was used to inspiring people with her personal health story. In a way, she was glad for the many years of sickness endured at the hands of Drug-Med because she had become the ultimate prescription-drug cautionary tale. The so-called Glisten Pioneer.

A title she had earned the hard way.

A small gray cat darted in front of her and ran into the forest alongside the jogging path. Amelia had spotted the mama cat and kittens last week, and was happy she had remembered to stuff her pockets with a baggie of diced chicken – organic, of course – and a small box of goat’s milk. She headed off her route and a few minutes later, trees, dense bushes, and a litter of kittens surrounded her.

She set down her weights and unfolded two travel kitty bowls. Mama Kitty wolfed the chicken while the kittens lapped up the milk. A life-long cat lover, Amelia fantasized about taking the kitty family home with her, but wasn’t sure if they were feral or not.

A nearby crackle snapped her out of her reverie. She glanced around and saw nothing at first. Then a glimmer of shiny chrome became visible about fifty yards away.

There was that black motorcycle for the fourth time this week.

A tingle of fear snaked up her neck. This was no coincidence. The rider, who appeared to be a male, wore a helmet with a tinted visor and a black leather jacket. He sat on his bike, staring at her.

She picked up her dumbbells and stood, glaring at the anonymous rider. After an intense stare down, he revved his bike and tore off through the woods. She returned her attention to the cats, but her hands and legs were shaking.

You got my son, but you’re not getting me.

~*~

Several hours later, composed and refreshed, Amelia strode into the small conference room at Glisten Headquarters ready to discuss *Uproot the Cause*. A quick glance confirmed that everyone she had invited was present, including Dr. Jade and Isabelle. Excellent.

“Good morning.” Amelia poured herself a cup of green tea and then added a splash of coconut milk and a tiny scoop of herbal sweetener. “How are my favorite Glisten people doing?”

“Just fabulous.” Dr. Jade, her bubbly protégé, positively glowed in her pink doctor’s jacket. “You decide to take the kitties home today?”

Amelia recalled the motorcycle incident and her stomach tightened for a second. She didn’t want to bring it up here, though. No need to frighten anyone. It was a possible security issue that she would discuss with Isabelle later.

“Not yet, but I might pick them up tonight.” She couldn’t leave the cats unattended. Especially after the strange man had undoubtedly seen them.

“You’re such a softie.” Isabelle’s tone was always the same. Firm, strong, and steady. Even when Amelia knew she wasn’t. Tiny half-moons darkened the skin under Isabelle’s eyes. Her pretty face looked anything but well rested.

“How are you holding up after the incident with the Drug-Med doc?” Amelia set a concerned hand on Isabelle’s shoulder. “That had to be gruesome.”

Isabelle stiffened and tilted up her chin. “Not to sound callous, but I’m OK. I’m the not the type to fall apart.”

That was the understatement of the millennium, but no sense in getting into another stuffing-down-your-emotions conversation right now with others around. Plus with the first anniversary of Zach’s death – Amelia’s son and Isabelle’s fiancé – fast approaching next week, Isabelle undoubtedly had to be struggling.

As was Amelia.

Amelia gazed at the stunning blonde that her son had loved, and memories passed through her; memories that could have easily destroyed her had it not been for her strong constitutional ability to stay healthy. The two women locked eyes, wordless dialogue flowing between them.

Even though Zach had been murdered before he could marry Isabelle, Amelia knew one thing for certain in her heart.

Isabelle would always be her daughter. No piece of paper necessary.

“If you need to talk,” Amelia said, “I’m always here for you.”

“I know.”

Enough said, Isabelle seemed to be saying. Amelia leaned toward Isabelle and whispered, “I need to talk to you. Can you stop by my office later today?”

“Sure thing.”

“Secrets about the event?” a tinny voice asked.

Amelia turned to see Beverly, her assistant. Nosy woman, Amelia thought. Beverly was in her late forties and had worked for Amelia for five years. Her dark brown hair and classic Chanel-style suits always reminded Amelia of a younger Jackie O.

Minus the famous husband, though. Beverly was single and always “on the hunt.”

Amelia gestured for everyone to sit down. “As a matter of fact, I do have an announcement about *Uproot the Cause* that I want to share.”

She perched on her seat, taking care not to wrinkle her periwinkle linen pantsuit anymore than necessary. She had taken special care to ensure her lilac eye makeup and mauve lips were the perfect match to her outfit, not to mention her tanzanite necklace, earrings, and bracelets.

The chatter ceased as everyone leaned forward to hear what Glisten’s Chief Health Preservation Officer – aka the Glisten Pioneer – had to say.

“*Uproot the Cause* is the culmination of my life’s work,” Amelia began. “I dreamt of teaching people about finding the causes of their diseases back when we were on the forefront of

the Glisten health revolution in this country.” Suddenly, the enormity of it all sunk in, and her eyes stung with the warning of tears. She reached into her pocket and pulled out a bottle of *Pulsatilla* she’d brought to lessen her tears when she made her announcement.

Lord knew, she had gone through cases of it since Zach had passed.

She popped three homeopathic pellets under her tongue and let them dissolve. “Sorry, everyone. I promised my cats this morning that I wouldn’t get gushy, but here I go.”

Pull yourself together. For them as much as you.

“No need to apologize.” Isabelle reached for a tissue and handed it to Amelia. “Take all the time you need.”

Amelia blew her nose, thankful for Isabelle’s consideration. Years of challenges had taught her that a little thoughtfulness was the world’s most valuable currency.

“Thanks, Iz. I appreciate your kindness.” She blew her nose, tossed the tissue into the trashcan, and composed herself. “The reason I called this meeting is to announce that I have decided who I want to dedicate this wonderful effort to.”

“Who?” Beverly asked, leaning forward eagerly, no doubt planning what the email blast should say.

“To my son, Zach Brandt. Health Enforcement Agent Extraordinaire, marathon runner, and all around incredible human being. He used to tell me all the time that the American people were starved for the truth about health and nutrition.” She folded her hands and drew them to her chest. “He lost his life fighting for that truth, and I want his life to mean something.”

She went silent and allowed her sentiment to settle into the collective consciousness. Isabelle’s perfect face was taut, but Amelia knew she was crumbling to pieces inside. Dr. Jade set a reassuring hand on Isabelle’s arm, but Isabelle didn’t flinch.

“That’s a wonderful idea, Dr. Amelia. Zach would be proud,” Dr. Jade said, and others agreed.

Amelia nodded, but remained composed. She would do right by her son, no matter what.

“If you’ll all review the contents of these,” Dr. Jade said as she passed a stack of gray folders around the room, “we’ll take some time to brainstorm. Our biggest worry right now is security. We’ve received several threats in the past few weeks.”

Chairs scraped against the floor, and murmurs erupted around the room.

Isabelle edged forward in her seat, already recovered from her emotional turmoil. “I wouldn’t put it past the Resistance to try something, especially now with the proposal that all drug manufacturers convert to nonprofit entities.”

“Can we do a little preventive medicine?” Amelia joked to lighten the somber mood. Plus she loved to relate anything and everything to her passion.

“We’re going to be ready for them, don’t worry.” Isabelle threw Amelia a confident smile. “We’ll have cameras on every leg of the race and be fully armed, ready to eradicate any danger.”

“We’re going to start a national ad campaign next week.” Dr. Jade held up a pink cardboard sign displaying a sideways weed, its roots exposed. The sign read, *Don’t Suppress a Symptom... Uproot the Cause*. “We’ll have them on buses around the country.”

“And we’ll have ad slots on the national and international news,” Beverly added. “That should garner some attention.”

“These ads are also critically important to inspire confidence in citizens who are required, yet resistant, to enroll in Glisten healthcare.” A serious look crossed Dr. Jade’s face. “So you can bet the Resistance is going to up its anti-Glisten strategy.”

“Good point.” Amelia stood and walked around the room, wanting to emphasize her words. “The Resistance doesn’t want our message of treating the cause to get such international exposure. They don’t want people knowing that drugs don’t work for chronic conditions. They don’t want it to be public knowledge that drugs only suppress symptoms and don’t produce health. People have been falsely led to believe that pharmaceutical drugs are the answer to chronic health problems.”

As far as Amelia was concerned, that was the biggest scam ever perpetrated on the American people.

~*~

Samuel was getting more annoyed by the minute. Sitting on an examination table in a busy medical office on Liberty Key, he asked his doctor for advice.

Again.

“What else can we do about my MS? Nothing in two years has made a difference.” Samuel demonstrated the loss of mobility on his right arm by picking it up with his functioning left arm and letting it drop by his side, like limp spaghetti. “See? There has to be something else you haven’t thought of. I can’t lose my arm, doc. It’s getting worse every day.”

Dr. Wilson, a middle-aged man with dark hair, silver glasses, and a narrow physique, who looked like he belonged to a marathon-training group, shook his head. “I’m sorry, but multiple sclerosis isn’t curable. All I can do is up your prescription meds.”

“But the drug doesn’t cure my disease, right?”

“Correct. It only slows down the progression.”

“And causes side effects. I’m starting to lose my taste buds.” He had barely been able to taste the tomato sauce on the pizza he’d shared with Charelle the other night, nor the spiciness of the wing sauce. Not to mention, his beer had tasted like watered-down soda. To Samuel, a man who loved his meals, not tasting was totally unacceptable.

“I’m afraid I can’t help that.” The doctor flipped through Samuel’s medical chart. “The drug you’re on, the new MS drug, can cause loss of taste. And to warn you, it can also cause hearing loss.”

Great. So I’ll be a deaf, one-armed artist who can’t taste his beer.

“How’s your hearing?” the doctor inquired.

Samuel considered responding with *huh?* But instead he said, “Fine so far.”

“Good. It’s the best drug science has come up with for your condition.” Dr. Wilson nodded at a poster taped to the off-white wall across from them. “Mr. V swears by it, and he’s been dealing with MS longer than you have. That should give you some comfort.”

Samuel wasn’t sure it did. He glanced at the picture of the hottest martial-arts movie star in America and wondered if the new drug was all he was taking. After all, Mr. V could afford any health service, natural or conventional.

“All right, then.” The doctor’s tone had an edge of finality to it. He snapped Samuel’s chart shut and slid his gold pen into his pocket. “Make another appointment in six months, and we’ll see if your arm is getting worse. You definitely should join a support group for your condition. It’ll help you to be around others who are dealing with the same health challenges.”

That’s it? Samuel hesitated. Should he ask the one question he was dying to know? The doctor would probably get irritated, but then again, he was paying big bucks for medical advice, so he should have all his concerns addressed.

Right? *Yes*, he told himself.

“What about mercury?” Samuel blurted out. “As in old mercury fillings? Could that be causing my MS?”

“Be my guest and get your fillings removed, but that’s a hocus pocus, ludicrous suggestion.”

“Is there any test you can run to see if it is, by chance, mercury? Because I have a ton of old fillings.”

He shook his head. “I can tell you right now that in my medical opinion, it’s not mercury. We don’t know what causes the myelin sheath to become damaged and cause MS.”

“What about doing one of those bionetic tests? You know, one of those machines that test meridians? I was reading that they’re like an EKG of the whole body. Supposedly they can tell what’s causing the problem.”

“Been following some of Glisten’s voodoo literature, I see.”

“You don’t believe in meridians?”

“What I believe in is medical science, which Glisten is lacking.”

The doctor’s quickly reddening face told Samuel that the conversation was not a welcome one. *Should I keep pushing my luck? Why not? It’s my arm, after all.*

“I believe in medical science too,” Samuel said. “But people say this bionetic testing is based on traditional Chinese medicine, which has been around for thousands of years. Aren’t meridians the basis of acupuncture?”

The doctor affixed a how-stupid-are-you gaze on Samuel. “Yes.”

“Do you believe in acupuncture?” Samuel asked.

“I believe it works for those who think it works.” Dr. Wilson tucked Samuel’s chart under his arm and settled an annoyed gaze on his patient.

“Then why is there so much information about these machines and how they find the cause of disease?” Samuel’s curiosity was genuine. “Why do people say they’ve gotten over MS by removing their mercury fillings after a bionetic test found mercury was attacking their neurological system?”

“Because,” the doctor said in a scolding tone, “the world is full of snake oil salesmen, and the sooner you realize it, the better off you’ll be.” He scribbled out a new prescription and handed it to Samuel.

As Samuel shoved the script in his pocket, he glanced at the poster of Mr. V again. Then he glanced at the free samples of the new MS drug stacked next to the cotton balls, swabs, and disposable tongue depressors.

Hmm. Maybe the only difference between snake oil and pharmaceutical drug sales are the billions of dollars backing the drug manufacturers.

Clearly it would be a mistake, however, to point that out to Dr. Wilson.

“You need to accept the unfortunate fact there is no cure for MS,” the doctor said, striding toward the door. He turned around and added, “And if you don’t take the drug as prescribed, I’ll mark you AMA, which means Against Medical Advice, and then you’ll be hard pressed to find another doctor who will see you.”

Dr. Wilson walked out, clicking the door shut. For the first time in his life, Samuel realized something about Drug-Med. Dr. Amelia had been right about one thing.

Scare tactics *were* in their repertoire.

But Samuel wouldn’t be pushed around by fear. He had worked too hard as an artist to let that happen. And no way would he sit around and wait for his arm to get worse, as the doctor proposed.

What a ludicrous suggestion.