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Janet McGiffin
Excerpt
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Chapter 1 *Emergency!*

Dr. Maxine Cassidy sat down behind the reception desk at Mercy Hospital Emergency Room. She pulled out the lower desk drawer and put her feet on it. Her legs hurt. It was 8:00 p.m. on a Saturday night in August and she had been working in the ER for five long hours. Maxine was wearing surgical greens – a green cotton shirt and trousers. Maxine’s short brown hair curled in the humid heat. The ER was air-conditioned, but whenever the automatic glass doors opened, the August heat of the Midwest United States came inside. And on Saturday night in the inner city of Milwaukee the door opened for a lot of sick or injured people.

Shirley, the ER head nurse, handed Maxine a glass of iced tea. “Four more hours and we can go home and cool off,” she said.

Mercy Hospital was in the poorest, hottest, and most dangerous area of Milwaukee. Shirley owned a house in a neighborhood north of the inner city, where it was cooler because there were lots of trees. Maxine also lived in a neighborhood with lots of big trees. She rented an apartment on the northeast side, three blocks from Lake Michigan.

“I can’t go home after work today,” replied Maxine. “I’m going downtown to an art show at the Art Space. Dr. Hochstedder’s wife, Lillian, is an artist and her statues are in the show. I promised Leo Hochstedder I would go. I’ve never met Lillian, but I’ve known Leo for years.”

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“After nine hours on your feet, you’re going to stand around looking at art?” commented Shirley.

Maxine nodded. “Lillian’s statues are very popular, according to Leo. Besides, a famous New York artist also has some work in the show and I want to see it. His name is Soren Berendorf.”

“Never heard of him,” said Shirley.

“Soren’s collection is called *Wood Shapes*. I read in the newspaper that he attaches pieces of wood together into interesting shapes. One of them, *Musical Chairs*, costs a hundred thousand dollars.”

“Don’t buy anything, even if it costs one dollar!” ordered Shirley. “You need a new car! Your old one will die any day now.”

Just then, Maxine’s cellphone rang. She smiled when she read the caller ID: “Grabowski.”

Maxine knew Detective Grabowski because the previous year he had been hurt in a car chase and a police ambulance had brought him to Mercy ER. After that, Maxine had seen a lot of Grabowski – dinners, movies, even midnight snacks at Tony’s Fish Fries after she finished work. As a police detective, Grabowski often worked nights, like Maxine.

“Are we meeting for a snack tonight after work?” Maxine asked Grabowski.

“Sorry, but not tonight,” said Grabowski. “I’m at the Art Space working as a private detective at a show. The owner wants to make sure that the art is safe. It’s very valuable. I don’t make much money as a police detective, you know, and off-duty work pays well.”

“What a coincidence! I’m coming to the Art Space after work,” said Maxine. “We can meet there.”

“Then you can meet a friend of mine too,” replied Grabowski. “That is, if he shows up. I’m worried about him. A week ago he said he would meet me tonight. But he’s not here yet and he hasn’t called me either.”

“Maybe he’s just late,” suggested Maxine.

“It’s not like him. In fact, he hasn’t called me in a week,” continued Grabowski. “We grew up together in Milwaukee, then he moved away for several years. He just came back. He stayed with me for a week, then he moved to his own apartment. I don’t have his address or phone numbers. I’m worried that he’s hurt or sick. I think I should call the hospitals in Milwaukee to see if they have any record of him. His mother is worried and so am I.”

“I’ll check the Mercy Hospital computer,” said Maxine. “What’s his name?”

“Wyoming Syzinski.”

Maxine checked the computer patient records. “No, Wyoming Syzinski hasn’t come to Mercy Hospital.” She said goodbye to Grabowski and closed her cellphone.

Shirley smiled at Maxine. “Are you seeing that good-looking Polish detective tonight?”

“Grabowski is working as a private detective at the art show. I’ll see him there, for a few minutes at least.”

“That’s what you get for falling in love with a police detective. They’re always working.” Shirley smiled.

“I’m not in love,” said Maxine, but she smiled back.

At that moment the doors to the ER opened and Rolondo walked in. Rolondo was the leader of an inner-city gang. As usual, he was wearing expensive high-fashion clothing – blue silk shirt, yellow trousers, and Italian shoes.

Shirley didn't like Rolondo. She put her hands on her broad hips. "Get out of here, Rolondo! You don't look sick!" Shirley was a big woman who could handle any trouble, including the leader of a street gang.

"A woman who lives in my building is sick," said Rolondo. "She's outside in my car. Remember Latoya Thompson, Dr. Maxine? She lives with my girlfriend, Rosa. Latoya has come to the ER several times."

"I remember Latoya," said Maxine. "Bring her inside."

"She's too sick to walk," said Rolondo.

"I'll get a wheelchair," said Shirley.

Shirley took a wheelchair outside, and she and Rolondo brought Latoya into the ER. Maxine and Shirley helped her to lie down on a bed. But before Maxine could talk to Latoya, the doors of the ER opened and an emergency medical technician from an ambulance hurried in.

"I've got two people in my ambulance who have been shot!" said the EMT. "They need help, fast!"

Maxine put a blanket over Latoya. She said to Rolondo, "I'm sorry, but Latoya will have to wait while I take care of these two people."

Chapter 2 *Wyoming is hurt*

Shirley and the EMT brought in the two people from the ambulance. The man was wearing jeans and a white T-shirt. The woman was wearing a red miniskirt and a tight purple blouse.

“Rosa!” shouted Rolondo. He grabbed the hand of the woman wearing the red miniskirt. “Dr. Maxine, this is my girlfriend, Rosa Jones.”

Maxine examined the girl. She had been shot, but she was awake. “What happened, Rosa?” she asked.

“I was standing in front of our building talking to our new neighbor. Two men drove by in a car and shot us!” Rosa replied.

“Did you see their faces?” asked Rolondo.

“Yes,” said Rosa. But then she closed her eyes.

“Talk later.” Maxine put a needle in Rosa’s arm.

Shirley opened the man’s shirt. “He’s bleeding a lot, but he’s still breathing,” she said. “What’s this man’s name, Rolondo?”

“I don’t know. He moved into our building only last week.”

Shirley reached into the man’s pocket and took out his wallet. “Wyoming Syzinski, it says on his driver’s license.”

“Grabowski’s friend!” said Maxine.

Shirley called the surgery unit to let them know that two patients with gunshot wounds were in the ER and needed surgery. Quickly two nurses arrived to take them to surgery.

Maxine and Shirley went to examine Latoya. Rolondo followed them.

“Latoya is getting worse,” said Shirley.

Maxine put her hand on Latoya’s forehead. It was cold and damp with sweat. “Can you hear me?” Maxine asked.

Latoya didn’t answer.

“When did she get sick?” Maxine asked Rolondo.

“About five o’clock this afternoon,” replied Rolondo.

Maxine put her hand on Latoya’s wrist to feel her pulse. Her heartbeat was faint and she wasn’t breathing well either.

“What’s wrong with her?” Rolondo asked Maxine.

Maxine shook her head, worried. “I don’t know. It’s unusual for someone to get this sick so fast. What did she eat today?”

“I don’t know,” said Rolondo.

Maxine and Shirley pumped everything out of Latoya’s stomach. Shirley put some into a bottle and sent it to the lab to find out what Latoya had eaten. Then Maxine gave her drugs to raise her blood pressure. But suddenly Latoya stopped breathing and her heart stopped beating.

Immediately Shirley called for help. Other doctors and nurses quickly arrived with emergency equipment and medicines, but they could do nothing to save Latoya.

“You waited too long to take care of Latoya!” Rolondo said to Maxine. “Latoya shouldn’t have died!”

Maxine felt terrible. “I don’t know why she died,” she said to Rolondo.

Then Shirley handed Maxine a paper. “This is from the lab – the test results from Latoya’s stomach.”

Maxine read the report and told the others, “Latoya had eaten a lot of chocolate. And there was also medicine for TB – tuberculosis – in her stomach, INH.”

Rolondo looked surprised. “Latoya didn’t have TB.”

“Then why did she take INH?” asked Maxine.

Rolondo lifted his shoulders in a shrug. “I don’t know.”

“Could Latoya have died from taking too much INH?” asked Shirley.

“I’ll ask Dr. Hochstedder,” said Maxine. “He’s a specialist in lung diseases and has had many TB patients. He’s at the Art Space now with his wife, but he always carries his cellphone.”

Maxine called Leo Hochstedder. “Can a person die from taking too much INH?” Maxine asked. She read the lab report to him.

“Yes, someone could die from taking that much INH,” Leo answered. “I hope this isn’t one of my TB patients!”

“Her name was Latoya Thompson. She lived on Fifth Street and Center Street,” said Maxine.

“I don’t remember that name,” said Leo. “Maybe she’s a patient at the Milwaukee Health Department TB Clinic.”

“Latoya’s friend says that she didn’t have TB,” said Maxine. “But I’m going to order an autopsy to find out.” She thanked Leo and closed her cellphone.

“An autopsy?” asked Rolondo. He had been listening to the conversation.

“The Mercy Hospital pathologist will examine Latoya’s body to find the cause of death,” explained Maxine. “Autopsies aren’t common because a lot of tests are done before a person dies, so the cause of death is usually known. But Latoya died too quickly to have many tests.

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I'll ask the pathologist to test for TB. But an autopsy doesn't always give the right answer to why a person has died. It would help the pathologist if we knew more about Latoya."

"Such as what she ate today," suggested Shirley.

"Rolondo," said Maxine, "will you take me to Latoya's apartment tonight? I want to search for any food that had gone bad."

"Sure," said Rolondo. "It's not far. I'll take you in my Cadillac."

Shirley frowned at Maxine. "You're crazy to go there, especially at night, and especially with Rolondo! There could be trouble!"

"I want to find out why Latoya died," argued Maxine. "I want to make sure I did everything I could to help her."

"Then I'm coming with you," decided Shirley. "Nobody makes trouble with me. But we're not going in Rolondo's Cadillac because another gang might shoot at it. We'll take your old car and hope it doesn't die!"

Rolondo sat down in the ER waiting room. "I'll stay here until Rosa is out of surgery and I know she's OK."

Shirley brought him a cup of coffee.

An hour later, the surgeon called. "Rosa and Wyoming are out of surgery," he reported. "Rosa is doing well, but they are both still unconscious."

Maxine hung up and told Rolondo the good news. "Rosa and Wyoming will be moved to the ICU now – the Intensive Care Unit," she told him. "You can see Rosa there."

"When Rosa wakes up, she can tell me who shot her," said Rolondo. He got himself another cup of coffee.

“It was probably a gang shooting,” said Shirley. “Other gangs are always shooting at you and your friends.”

Rolondo nodded. “That’s true. The police don’t even investigate the shootings any more.”

At midnight Rolondo agreed to take Maxine and Shirley to Latoya’s apartment. They went outside to the parking lot. Rolondo got into his white Cadillac. Shirley and Maxine got into Maxine’s yellow Nissan.

“It’s hot in here!” complained Shirley, as Maxine drove out of the parking lot. “Turn on your air conditioner!”

“It’s broken. And now a red light is on,” said Maxine with a worried frown.

“That means that your engine is too hot,” said Shirley. “You need a new car.”

“I’m saving money to buy a house,” said Maxine. She watched the red light nervously as she drove behind Rolondo’s white Cadillac through the dark streets of the inner city. Suddenly, a few blocks from Fifth Street, the engine died and smoke rose from the front of the car. It rolled to a stop.

“Don’t stop here!” shouted Shirley. “We’ll be robbed!”

Maxine pulled out her cellphone. “I’ll call 911 and a police officer will come.” She was trying to remain calm.

But before Maxine could phone the emergency number, 911, Rolondo had backed up his Cadillac. “Get in,” he said. “Leave your car here. I’ll tell my friends to steal everything out of it, and you can buy a new car with the insurance money.”

“Don’t tell Grabowski,” said Maxine to Shirley.

The street where Rolondo lived had been beautiful many years before, when it was a middle-class neighborhood.

However, the area had gone downhill and now the people who lived there didn't have enough money to paint their houses. The steps to Rolondo's apartment building were broken and bottles lay where flowers used to grow. The lobby light had burnt out. Maxine and Shirley followed Rolondo up the dark stairs. He opened the door to an apartment on the second floor.

Maxine, Shirley, and Rolondo searched the apartment for bad food, but they didn't find any. In the bedroom Maxine found a red box of chocolates. There were only three chocolates left.

"Where did these chocolates come from?" Maxine asked Rolondo.

"How should I know?" he replied. "Latoya was always eating chocolates."

Maxine put the box under her arm. "Can you take me to the Art Space?" she asked Rolondo.

"And after that please take me home," added Shirley.

"OK," said Rolondo. "And then I'm going back to Mercy Hospital. I want to be there when Rosa wakes up. I want to know who shot her!"