

Turn Back
TIME

by

RADCLY*f*FE



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CHAPTER ONE

The instant Wynter Kline ducked through the archway into Perelman Quadrangle she was accosted by a wall of sound so overwhelming she nearly turned around and left. The block-wide flagstone square, flanked on all sides by the Collegiate Gothic and High Victorian brick buildings that typified the University of Pennsylvania, was jammed with three hundred fourth-year medical students. With music, beer, and convivial shouts, the members of the graduating classes from Philadelphia's four medical schools boisterously celebrated the most important event of their professional careers to date. Match Day was the long-awaited day when a computer program—having factored the variables of student rankings, interview results, and residency choices into a complex formula—ultimately assigned each fourth-year medical student from every medical school in the United States to a single residency position. At least 95 percent of the fourth-year students matched, and the other 5 percent were left to scramble madly for the final unfilled positions or go without a job after years of grueling study.

Early May evenings were still a little cool, and Wynter wore a pale yellow cotton sweater over a white Oxford shirt, khaki chinos, and docksiders. *Terminally preppy*, she'd often been told. It wasn't so much a style statement as how she felt most comfortable, so she generally ignored the good-natured, and sometimes *not* so genial, comments of her family and friends. She definitely wasn't in the mood for a party and hadn't bothered to change after a day spent on the wards. In fact, she barely felt as if she belonged with the revelers. Before she could

dwell on the odd sense of detachment that had befallen her the moment she'd been handed the envelope containing her match results, the jostling, shouting mass of students magically shifted out of her way. Now that she could see more than the back of the neck of the person in front of her, she made out at least a half dozen kegs of beer, all tapped and dispensing foamy brew nonstop, and twice as many catering tables set end to end and littered with half-empty bottles of liquor and soda. Somewhere, a rock band competed with the human voices through speakers that must have been fifteen feet tall, if the blaring decibels that beat against her tympanic membranes were any indication. Everyone was celebrating, or drowning their sorrows.

Wynter didn't yet know which fate awaited her—joy or anguish. The envelope that held the key to her future, or at least the next five years of her life, was tucked into her back pocket. She was on the verge of escaping, having decided that she would rather not share this moment with hundreds of others. Particularly when she expected to be disappointed.

“Hey!” A wiry African American man a dozen years older than her own twenty-three pushed his way to her side. “You made it. I thought you were going to bail.”

“Rounds ran late, and then two packed subway cars passed me by.” Wynter smiled at Ken Meru. It seemed like only days, and not three years, since they had first introduced themselves over the white plastic-shrouded form of their cadaver. Although they had initially had little in common other than their desire to be physicians, the many Saturday afternoons they had spent alone in the eerie lab, bent over the desiccated, foul-smelling remnants of what had once undoubtedly been a vital human body, surrounded by death as they struggled to understand the mysteries of life, had forged the bonds of true friendship. Wynter squeezed his arm and forced excitement into her voice. “So? Tell me. What did you get?”

“Anesthesia.”

“Just like you wanted.” She threw her arms around his slim shoulders and kissed his cheek. “That’s terrific. I’m so happy for you. Where?”

His smile, already brilliant, widened, and with shy pleasure, he tilted his head toward the towering buildings visible above the campus Commons. “Right here.”

Wynter struggled not to let him see her reaction, which was a mixture of jealousy and disappointment. He'd gotten one of the best positions available in a highly competitive field. *His* dreams were about to come true. But it wasn't Ken's fault that she hadn't been able to pursue her dream with the same freedom that he had. She was truly happy for him, but her heart hurt. She forced a smile. "University Hospital. That's...that's the best news, Ken. What did your wife say?"

Ken laughed. "Mina said I better not stay too late. She wants to take me out to dinner."

"Then you should probably get going, buster." Wynter frowned and tapped her Seiko. "It's already after seven."

"I will. I will. But what about you?" He turned sideways, pressing close to allow a gaggle of excited students to shoulder past. "Did you get surgery?"

"I don't know."

"What do you mean?"

Wynter shrugged sheepishly. "I haven't looked yet."

"What? What are you waiting for?"

You wouldn't understand if I told you. I don't understand it myself. She was saved from answering when Ken's cell phone rang. He pulled it off his belt and pressed it to his ear, shouting hello. A moment later he closed the phone and bent close to her.

"I have to go. Mina got a babysitter and says I'm to come home right now."

"Then you'd better go. Another month and you won't have that many nights to spend with her."

"Call me," Ken said as he eased away. "Call me tomorrow and tell me what you got."

She nodded, realizing as she lost sight of him that she was surrounded by strangers. She didn't know the students from the other schools and had rarely socialized with those from her own. She'd been part of the accelerated combined BS/MD program at Penn State and had begun her clinical rotation at Jefferson Medical College off-cycle with the other students. Unlike her classmates, she'd preferred to study in her Center City high-rise apartment and not the medical school library. During her clinical years, she spent her days in the hospital, took night call every third or fourth night, and had rarely repeated a rotation with the same group of students. She had acquaintances but few friends, at

least not in the medical community. Now with Ken gone, she had no reason to stay. *I shouldn't have come. I'm not even a part of this.*

Suddenly angry, she turned abruptly, intent on leaving. Her head snapped back as her chin slammed into the face of a dark-haired woman, and when her vision cleared, she found herself staring into stunned charcoal eyes. At almost five-eight, Wynter was used to being taller than most women, and she was as much surprised by the fact that she was looking up as she was by the sudden pain in her jaw. "God. Sorry."

"Ow! *Christ.*" Pearce Rifkin brushed a finger over her bruised lip. It came away streaked with blood. "Score one for your team."

"Oh no." Wynter reached out automatically. "You split your lip."

Pearce caught Wynter's wrist and held her hand away from her face. "It's okay. Forget it."

Pearce surveyed her assailant intently. She didn't know her, because she was certain she would have remembered had they met. An inch or so shorter, wavy shoulder-length reddish brown hair generously streaked with gold highlights, and sapphire blue eyes. With her fresh features and clear complexion, she was a walking J. Crew ad. "You're going to have a hematoma on your chin."

"Feels like it," Wynter agreed, fingering the already palpable lump. "We both need ice."

Pearce grinned, then winced. "Lucky for us there's about a ton of it here." She held out her hand. "Come on. Follow me."

Wynter stared at the outstretched hand. The fingers were long, capable looking. A broad hand, strong. It suited the woman, whose athletic build was obvious beneath her tight navy T-shirt and low-slung faded jeans. Her collar-length black hair, carelessly cut and verging on shaggy, framed a bold, angular face. She looked more like a college jock or one of the gathering's bartenders than a soon-to-be doctor. Wynter took the hand, and warm fingers closed around her own. Then, she was tugged none too gently into the crowd. In order to avoid playing human bumper cars with those being forced out of her path, she pressed against the back of the woman leading the way.

"What's your name?" she shouted.

The dark head half turned in her direction. "Pearce. You?"

"Wynter."

"Stay close, Wynter." Pearce clasped Wynter's hand more tightly and pulled it around her middle, drawing Wynter near as she faced

forward and kept shoving. “Wouldn’t want to lose you.”

Wynter felt firm muscles rippling beneath her palm as Pearce twisted and turned and forged ahead. She was equally conscious of her own abdomen pressed to Pearce’s backside. It was oddly intimate, and wholly unlike her. She was neither impulsive nor prone to letting others take charge. But here she was, being led—no, *dragged*—along by a stranger. She hadn’t felt like her usual self-sufficient self for far longer than she wanted to admit, so she told herself that was the reason she didn’t resist. Plus, she was curious. Curious about the woman who so confidently cut a swath for them as if she owned the Commons.

“Hey, Pearce,” a man called out. “You’re bleeding.”

“No shit,” Pearce called back. “Brilliant. You must almost be a doctor.”

Raucous laughter followed them, until Wynter jerked Pearce to a stop. “Hey! Hold on a minute and turn around.”

Surprised by the strength in the arm encircling her waist and the command in the smooth voice at her ear, Pearce halted and angled around in the crowd. “What?”

“Did you ever think to ask if I wanted to go where you’re going?”

“Nope. I’m a take-charge kinda person.”

“Well, so am I.” Wynter extracted her hand from Pearce’s grip and studied her lip. “And he’s right. You’re bleeding pretty briskly. Do you have a handkerchief?”

Pearce laughed. “Come on. Do *you*?”

Wynter smiled and shook her head, then tapped a young blond woman in a scrub suit on the shoulder. “Can I have that napkin, please?” She pointed to the paper square beneath the woman’s plastic cup.

“Huh?” The blond gave them a curious look, her eyes widening as she focused on Pearce’s face. “Oh, Pearce. Baby. Look at you. What happened?”

“She hit me,” Pearce stated matter-of-factly, nodding toward Wynter.

“Now wait a minute,” Wynter protested as she watched the blond’s expression change from surprise to... jealousy. *Jealousy?* Wynter took a good look at Pearce—at the way she tilted her hips forward suggestively while smiling at the blond, the way her eyes unconsciously flickered over the woman’s mouth, at the lazy grin. She’d seen that look before—on men. *Oh. So that’s the way it is.*

The blond visibly bristled. “What do you mean, she *hit* you?”
Wynter edged away. *Time to get out of the line of fire.*

Laughing, Pearce reached out and reclaimed Wynter’s hand. “It was an accident, Tammy.” She took the napkin and dabbed at her face, then looked at Wynter and indicated her lip. “Better?”

Wynter assessed the damage, ignoring the other woman. “It’s slowing down, but you still need ice. It’s probably a branch of the labial artery.”

“Yeah, probably. Come on, almost there.” Pearce was about to turn away when Tammy grasped her arm.

“Where did you match?” Tammy asked, adding almost petulantly, “As if I didn’t know.”

“University,” Pearce replied, her eyes narrowing dangerously. Then she pointedly slipped her fingers through Wynter’s and pulled her against her side. “Let’s go.”

Wynter couldn’t move away as the crowd automatically shifted to fill the slightest available space. “Look, I have to—”

“You’re not going anywhere fast,” Pearce said, “and your face is swelling.”

“Fine. Go.”

It took another five minutes of determined effort, but eventually they reached the tables where the drinks were being dispensed. Huge coolers lined the sidewalk. Pearce collected two plastic cupfuls of ice and handed one to Wynter. “Better hold one of these cubes against your chin. You’re getting a pretty good bruise.”

Experimentally, Wynter worked her jaw from side to side, noting the tightness just in front of her ears. She sighed. “It looks like I’m going to be wearing my bite block for a week or so too.”

“TMJ?” Pearce wrapped the napkin around an ice cube and held it against her lip.

“Yes, but not too bad. Just every once in a while my jaw reminds me that I landed on my face too many times when I was a kid.”

“Climbing trees?” Somehow Pearce couldn’t see Wynter playing contact sports. She looked more like the tennis type. A good workout in a country club where you didn’t get dirty, barely worked up a sweat, and had lunch in an air-conditioned restaurant after your set was finished. She knew, because it had been her mother’s favorite pastime.

Wynter laughed, thinking of how much she had wished for tennis courts and a chance to play when she'd been young. "No, ice skating. I started when I was two, and I can't tell you how many times I landed on my face while trying to do triple axels."

"Olympic aspirations, huh?" Pearce could see her on a rink, a trainer nearby, choreographed music coming through the speakers. *Yeah. That fits.*

Though Pearce's tone was teasing, for some reason, Wynter didn't mind. She shook her head. "Nope. Always wanted to be a doctor. You?"

"Yeah. Pretty much always." Something dark passed through Pearce's eyes, making them even darker, nearly black, and then was gone. She glanced at her free hand, which was streaked with dried blood. "I should go wash this off."

Wynter recognized when a subject was off-limits. "I'll go with you. I want to get a look at your lip once you get it cleaned up. You might need stitches."

"I don't think so."

"Well, we'll decide after we see it."

Pearce grinned, ignoring the pain in her lip. She wasn't used to letting anyone else call the shots. It was neither her nature nor the reputation she had acquired in the last four years. And because of who she was, others expected her to lead. It was refreshing to find someone who didn't seem to care who she was. "Okay, Doc, whatever you say."

"Very good," Wynter said with an approving laugh. "But since you seem to be good at it, I'll let you navigate."

Once more, Pearce clasped Wynter's hand in a motion so natural, Wynter barely gave it a thought. They stayed close to the buildings, skirting the crowds, until they reached Houston Hall. When they slipped inside the student center, the noise level mercifully fell.

"Oh, thank God," Wynter murmured. "I might actually be able to think in a minute." She glanced around the high-ceilinged room with its ornate carved pillars and marble floors. "These old buildings are amazing."

"Where did you go to school?" Pearce asked.

"Jefferson."

"Ha. We're rivals."

Wynter stopped, extricated her hand from Pearce's grasp, and regarded her appraisingly. "Penn?"

"Uh-huh."

The two medical schools, a mere twenty blocks apart, had sustained a rivalry since the eighteenth century. Over the decades, the competition had become more theoretical than real, but the students of each still claimed superiority.

"Well, then you better let *me* decide how bad the problem is," Wynter said with utter sincerity.

"I might," Pearce allowed, "if I didn't care what my lip looked like when it was healed."

They regarded one another, eyes locked in challenge, until their smiles broke simultaneously and they laughed.

"Let's go upstairs," Pearce suggested. "The bathrooms down here are going to be too crowded." After years on campus, she knew the out-of-the-way restrooms that were never occupied, and quickly guided Wynter through the twisting hallways and up a wide flight of stone stairs. "Here we go."

Pearce pushed the door open and held it for Wynter, who preceded her inside. There were three stalls, all empty. Wynter ran cold water in one of the sinks and pulled paper towels from the dispenser. She soaked several, folded them, and motioned for Pearce to lean over the sink. "I guess I don't have to tell you this is going to sting."

"I can do it."

"I'm sure. But this way I can see what I need to see before you stir up the bleeding again."

Pearce quirked an eyebrow. "You don't have much faith in my skill."

"Well, considering where you trained..." Wynter carefully loosened the crusted blood below the pink surface of Pearce's lip. "Damn. This goes right through the vermilion border, Pearce. You probably *should* get stitches."

"Let's get a look." Pearce leaned toward the mirror and squinted. "It's not too deep. A Steri-Strip will probably take care of it."

"And if it doesn't, you're going to have a very noticeable scar because of the color mismatch," Wynter said pointedly.

"Jeez, you sound like a surgeon."

"I hope so. That's the plan."

“Really? Where are you going?” It was the most common question of the day, but for Pearce, the day had held little excitement. She knew where she was going. She’d always known where she was going. Suddenly, she was much more interested in where *Wynter* would be going.

Embarrassed, Wynter sighed. “Actually...I don’t know.”

“Oh. Shit. Sorry. Look,” Pearce said hastily, “maybe I can help out. You know, with finding places that still have openings.”

Wynter frowned, trying to make sense of Pearce’s offer. Then, suddenly, she understood what she was saying. “Oh, no. It’s not that I didn’t match. Oh well—*maybe* I didn’t match, but...I just haven’t looked yet.”

“You’re kidding. You got your envelope three hours ago, and you haven’t looked yet? Why?”

Because I know it’s not going to say what I want it to say. Wynter didn’t want to admit the truth, especially not to this woman, and struggled for an explanation. “I was tied up on rounds. I didn’t get a chance.”

Unexpectedly bothered by Wynter’s obvious discomfort, Pearce didn’t push for further explanation. “Do you have the envelope with you?”

“Right here.” Wynter patted her back pocket.

“Well, come on. Let’s see it.”

For the first time, Wynter actually wanted to know, and she wanted Pearce to be the one who shared the moment with her. It didn’t make any sense, but she felt it all the same. With a deep breath, she pulled the envelope from her pocket and opened it in one unhesitant motion. She slid out the card, and then without looking at it, passed it to Pearce.

Pearce looked down, read the words, and hid the swift stab of disappointment. “Surgery. Yale–New Haven.” She met Wynter’s eyes. “Good place. Congratulations.”

“Yes,” Wynter said, not surprised. Her tone was flat. “Thanks.”

“Well. Let’s see to the rest of you.”

“What?” Wynter asked, still trying to decipher the odd expression on Pearce’s face. For an instant, she’d looked sad.

Pearce handed the card back and cupped Wynter’s jaw with both hands. She saw Wynter’s eyes widen in surprise. “Open,” she said, placing her thumbs over each temporomandibular joint. “Slowly, but

go as far as you can.”

Wynter was aware of a rush of butterflies in the pit of her stomach and her face flushing. Pearce’s hands were not only strong, but gentle. They stood so close that their thighs brushed.

“Feels okay,” Wynter murmured as Pearce carefully circled the joints. *Feels...wonderful.*

Pearce slid her fingers along the border of Wynter’s jaw and over her chin. “Sore?”

Wynter shook her head. She couldn’t feel her chin. All she could feel was the heat of Pearce’s skin. She was breathing fast. So was Pearce. Pearce’s eyes had gotten impossibly dark, so dark that the pupils blended with the surrounding irises, creating midnight pools that Wynter was absolutely certain she could drown in.

“Pearce,” Wynter whispered. Whatever was happening, she couldn’t let it. But as she slipped further into Pearce’s eyes, she couldn’t recall why not. She forced herself to focus. “Don’t.”

“Hmm?” Pearce lowered her head, intent on capturing the hint of spice that was Wynter’s scent. She slid her hand around the back of Wynter’s neck as she very lightly kissed the tip of her chin where the bruise shadowed it. Her lips tingled and she tightened deep inside. “Better?”

“Much,” Wynter said teasingly, hoping to make light of the moment.

“It gets better,” Pearce said, her lids half closed, her mouth closing in on Wynter’s.

“I...Pearce...wait...” Wynter’s cell phone rang, impossibly loud, and she jumped. She fumbled for it, unable to look away. Pearce’s mouth was an inch from hers when she whispered, “Hello?” She listened, staring at the pounding carotid in Pearce’s throat. “I thought you weren’t coming. Okay. Fine. I’m in the bathroom. I’ll be right out.” She closed the phone. Her voice was thick. “I have to go.”

“Why?” Pearce kept her hand on the back of Wynter’s neck and caressed her softly, tangling her fingers in Wynter’s hair. She knew what she saw in Wynter’s eyes. She’d seen it before, but it had never stirred her quite like this. “Got a date?”

“No,” Wynter said as she gently backed away, escaping Pearce’s grip, if not her spell. “It’s my husband.”

Standing absolutely still, Pearce said nothing as Wynter stepped around her and hurried out. When the door swung closed, leaving her alone, Pearce bent down and retrieved the forgotten white card. Wynter must have dropped it. She ran her thumb over the type, then slid the card into her breast pocket.

Goodbye, Wynter Kline.