

The Incredible Dr. Bruce Banner **UNDER CONSTRUCTION**

Posted originally on the [Archive of Our Own](http://archiveofourown.org/works/5095820) at <http://archiveofourown.org/works/5095820>.

Rating:	Mature
Archive Warning:	Creator Chose Not To Use Archive Warnings
Category:	F/M
Fandoms:	Marvel Adventures: Avengers , The Incredible Hulk - All Media Types , The Avengers (Marvel Movies) , The Avengers (Marvel) - All Media Types
Relationships:	Bruce Banner/Original Female Character(s) , Bruce Banner & Hulk , Hulk (Marvel) & Original Female Character(s)
Characters:	Bruce Banner , Original Female Character(s) , Original Character
Additional Tags:	Eventual Romance , Action/Adventure , Fluff and Smut , Eventual Smut , Fluff and Angst
Language:	English
Stats:	Published: 2015-10-28 Completed: 2016-01-22 Words: 25,394 Chapters: 23/23

The Incredible Dr. Bruce Banner **UNDER CONSTRUCTION**

by [MusingsOfOphelia](#)

Summary

When Natasha Romanov found Dr. Bruce Banner to join the Avenger's initiative, he was working in India as a medical doctor. When he remarks "And if the other guy says no?" she responds that he has gone months without an incident and that he shouldn't break that streak. But what happened before that? This is the story of young Mia Harper, a medical student passionate about her work. She gains the opportunity to study beneath the greatest scientist of the decade helping save lives in Kabul, Afghanistan. Here she builds a strong bond with Dr. Banner and his patients and when his feelings grow to a passionate romance she must decide just how strong that love is. This is the story of Dr. Banner before he returned to the U.S. and S.H.I.E.L.D.

Notes

FYI: This work is on the mend. I am well aware it's kind of crap. So just know it's gonna be a bit odd for a while. I also promise all changes will be for the better.

Chapter 1

Dr. Mark Antony Clock had earned the reputation of being... an ass. A smart ass, wise ass, jack ass, pain in the ass etc. In fact, he had often heard his name changed from Clock to another word used for the male anatomy. He was more than fine with that, though. Because being chief resident of the St. Mary's Learning Hospital in Hell's Kitchen was no easy feat, and if his interns feared him they had a better chance of not being shot or stabbed by the riff raff they sometimes had to heal in these very walls. In fact, he had taken it upon himself to send them home as soon as possible during daylight hours, and make sure they didn't have to take the bus when their nightshifts ended. Not that they knew that, oh no. Better to stay Dr. Cock in their eyes, but he knew they'd one day be better doctors for it.

For Dr. Clock there was no work-life and personal-life, St. Mary's was his life. Day in and day out he led around interns, bullied them during rounds and hoped that just maybe there would be enough food left in the cafeteria for at least one hot meal a day. But if not, there was always coffee. Most of his interns just bowed their heads and did as they were told and that kept most of their patients alive. Until *she* came along. Mia Harper cared about this hospital and it's patients almost as much as he did. Capable, smart, and not at all afraid of him she had given him pause the first time she had offered an alternative treatment that may have been slightly safer than what he recommended. Yeah, she had really pissed him off. It didn't help that no one took her seriously as a doctor, always mistaken for a nurse because she was pretty, only about five foot one and weighed around one hundred and twenty pounds. Mia Harper had become his prodigy though, whether she liked it or not, and he had recommended her for a study abroad program with W.H.O. because dammit if he didn't want better for her than stitching up criminals in hell's kitchen.

It was the annual dog and pony show where The Chief of Medicine forced him to take the board members around and kiss their asses for more funding. Of course, Mark wanted to also show off his own little prodigy Dr. Harper and announce then to her and the Board that she had been approved for her trip to Afghanistan to work with W.H.O. He glanced down at his watch and smiled knowingly before stating, "I'd like to introduce you to one of my most promising interns." he said. He led them into the now calm Emergency Room from the midnight shift and over to the nurse's station. He had timed this introduction to align perfectly with Harper's shift start time. Any minute now she would be strolling through those doors, pulling down wayward dark brown points of her short hair cut and with an iced coffee in hand. She drank that stuff even when it was in the single digits outside and that made her even more annoying to Dr. Clock.

Upon arrival to the little round area, he anticipated waiting only a few minutes, the stuffy old men joking in their expensive suits and lingering in the doorway. Then, Mark glanced down seeing an all too familiar Dr. Pepper pen on the counter. Sitting at the computer, chin resting in her hand and drool leaking from the corner of her lips was Mia Harper. Pointedly he locked his jaw and ground his teeth, cheeks turning red and hands flying behind his head in frustration. He'd told her to go home last night so that she could be at her best today, told her not to do more than twelve hours- no asterisks. Knowing Harper, she'd probably done close to sixteen and he huffed begrudgingly dropping his hands. This damn girl was going to be his

undoing, and he'd really been doing well with his blood pressure. The Board was going to see her as a potential lawsuit, sleepy doctors made mistakes, point blank. Well that introduction would have to wait, and so thinking quick on his feet he changed the subject and led them elsewhere.

The small bright pink and gray watch chimed the theme from Buffy the Vampire Slayer and Harper startled awake. She used the back of her hand to swipe the drool on her chin and looked at the time. Yep, just five before the start of her shift. She could change into fresh scrubs and maybe even grab a Frappuccino before Dr. Clock was on her. The nurses had promised they'd cover her tracks later today too, assuring her they'd tell the boss man she had worked her eleven hours and headed home. Gingerly she pulled on her black scrub top and touched up her tinted moisturizer and blush. Quickly she swiped on a bit of mascara and with cherry chapstick in hand she was running for her little pit stop.

"What flavor for you today Ms. Mia?" the kind older lady behind the counter asked. Mia smiled at her friend and decided to go with her favorite, "How about dark chocolate chip?" she asked and before she knew it, the frosty caffeinated beverage was placed before her. She smiled and was interrupted by two styrofoam cups being shoved on the counter.

"Two black coffees, on her. She won't be needing the girlie drink today." an all too familiar voice said. Harper sighed knowing she had been caught and handed over the cash. Without even looking at Dr. Clock she asked, "How'd you know?" and she took her coffee finding their usual table by one of the windows. He sat across from her, his ginger curly hair and piercing blue eyes looking angry and tighter than usual.

"Your scrub pants leg is stuck in those same tacky tootsie roll socks you wore yesterday." he told her, and quickly she bent down to untuck the material she had jumped into so quickly.

Mark looked out of the window as if he was pondering something in the most melodramatic way ever and then suddenly slapped his hand on the table, "Oh yeah! Pretty sure it was your insubordinate ass I saw this morning drooling at the emergency room desk as I brought the Board members by." Mia flinched and scrunched her nose, accepting her punishment as usual, black coffee hot with no sugar. It was some stupid deal she had made with her mentor that had stuck. If she screwed up, she had to go without sugar and drink coffee like 'a real doctor'. Cringing as she took her drink she rolled her eyes and sighed. To be fair though, she had fully intended to do as she was told. But a lot can happen in one night, especially a full moon in Hell's Kitchen on Friday the 13th. Not that she was superstitious, but this July heat in New York sure did bring out the craziest of the crazies.

"I'm going to cut your hours again Harper. Sleepy doctors make mistakes. You know this!" he said incredibly exasperated and angry, throwing his hands behind his head and leaning back in his chair. Harper sort of grinned to her coffee cup and then narrowed her eyes. Nodding her head she said, "Hm... and what happened the last time you did that?" and she tilted her head curiously. Dr. Clock's face reddened and she was certain he was about to yell and chew her out. Instead he puffed out his cheeks and let a deep breath go. Narrowing his eyes he responded, his words short and forced through gritted teeth.

"You. spent your off time. In pediatrics... with special needs. patients." and she gave a coy smile. Well, now was as good a time as any, "I'm just thankful you won't be my problem

much longer." he said with a smirk. Harper nearly dropped her coffee as her stomach hit the floor and her eyes widened. Hands shaking and brain short circuiting she was certain he was firing her. It was all her fault too, she'd broken the rules too often, she had pushed him too far. Mia was ready to beg for mercy, she was close to getting her residency and it was all she had wanted for most of her life. This hospital was her home, it had meant absolutely everything to her and she got on well with the nurses, she had friends working here.

"You'll be my colleague's problem when you work with him in Kabul for the World Health Organization. Maybe you'll listen to Dr. Banner." Dr. Clock finally said, deciding not to prolong her torture and fess up. The grin that split across her face was magnetic and with excitement she ran around the table, attempted to punch his arm and hugged him. Dr. Clock didn't flinch or give under her hold, just rolled his eyes and sipped his coffee. Harper had been quite a fan of Bruce's work, this he had known from reading some of her thesis papers from medical school. When Bruce had come up in conversation she had quoted the man directly and made him roll his eyes. Bruce had been working solo for years abroad trading science for medicine, and so Dr. Clock mentioned a promising young intern with a bit more heart than brain eager to get out of Hell's Kitchen. And of course it was entirely unintentional that he left out her first name being Mia, allowing Bruce to believe Harper was male.

Finally Mia took her seat across from Dr. Clock and took a drink of her coffee, "I just can't believe this is happening!" she exclaimed, hands shaking at her joy.

"Yeah now you can run off to some shithole sandbox taking everything I've taught you, all of my time and hard work spent on you, oh and believe me you were hardwork. I just hope you learned enough to not be a medieval murderer over there. Might ruin my reputation." He said, his voice monotone and sarcastic as ever. Most people would have thought what a jerk and stormed off, but Mia had a different approach. While other people would have heard Dr. Clock's words verbatim, what she heard was 'I'll miss you. I'm proud of you. Don't forget me and don't screw this up.' Dr. Clock stood first when it was time for rounds and their respective shifts, and Mia followed suit before stopping him in the doorway. He looked bored and uninterested, but she gingerly wrapped her arms around him in a full front hug.

"Thank you Doc Rock-a-Doodle. I'm gonna miss you too." she whispered as tears sprang to her eyes. He patted her back a moment and groaned, unfamiliar with affection but deciding she deserved it. Harper was, a very good doctor. That was the highest compliment of which he was capable.

"Take care of yourself over there. And who knows, if you never call me that again, maybe there will be a residency here waiting on you. When you get back." Mia laughed and pulled away from him. She had thought the nickname was incredibly clever, refusing to call him Cock like the other residents and trying to find a better word. His red curls had reminded her slightly of a rooster, and she knew he preferred mostly rock music so the name just stuck. Besides, he'd called her serial killer, murderer and any number of other nicknames over the last two years. Seemed only fair to her.

Mia's last two weeks to prepare for her trip flew by. She would be spending the next six months of her life in Kabul, Afghanistan working under Dr. Banner in refugee camps, war prisons, various under funded hospitals and anywhere else they were needed.

Chapter 2

The first 8 hours of her flight, Harper slept very soundly, wanting to make sure she was well rested to keep up with the amazing Dr. Banner. Then, she spent some time writing in her journal, marking the beginning of her wonderful journey and speculating if Dr. Banner would really prove to be true to his name and fearing he might disappoint or worst, be some pretty boy spoiled Harvard graduate doing all of this for the publicity. She had encountered plenty of doctors like that throughout her two years as an intern. It's why she steered clear of the ER and worked more in ICU, CCU and the trauma ward. She could not stand arrogance in their line of work or the sense of entitlement the paid doctors had. Not to mention, most of them were men and they either belittled her with snide comments about soon working in obstetrics or pediatrics or tried to sleep with her.

At last, after more sleep on the twenty-seven hour flight and several transfers and connections, the plane touched down in Afghanistan and she gathered her single leather brown hiking pack and headed into the airport. Languages filled her head as she made her way towards the glass doors leading out onto a dusty street, filled with people of all different kinds. She saw soldiers in uniform coming back from leave in America, business men on cell phones, and families embracing happily. She was so busy gazing around, taking in the sights of the moments around her that she almost missed the man holding a sign with the words "Dr. Harper" written across it. She grinned at the title and said, "I'm Mia Harper. Not doctor yet, but I'll get there one day."

Before Dr. Banner stood the most charming woman he had ever laid eyes upon. She was petite, standing at only approximately five foot two inches in a long skirt and t-shirt that hugged her hour glass like frame, her arms and stomach very thin and he assumed that was from the hours he was told she had put in at the hospital. Her skin was olive indicating she had some Italian descent and she wore her hair in a short dark brown pixie with long bangs curving over her bright and warm honey colored eyes. She had been highly recommended by his colleague Dr. Collins, the only colleague he had stayed in contact with from before the accident. Collins told Banner of a young doctor with a gentle touch, soft bedside manner, quick ability to assess and diagnose, and well seasoned in the trauma, ICU and CCU wards. If that hadn't been enough, the essay he'd moved him beyond words, the passion pouring through the words and the anger palpable on paper. The one detail that seemed to be missing was that she was quite thoroughly female.

"I'm Dr. Bruce Banner. I'll make it easy and you can just call me Bruce. Pleasure to meet you Ms. Harper." He said extending a hand. Her big, round, honey colored eyes widened as she opened her mouth slightly and shook his hand. She seemed transfixed a moment and then finally let go of his grip.

"I'm sorry. It's not every day you meet your hero and he asks you to address him so informally. Please just uh, call me Harper. It's what all my mentors have called me, well Dr. Collins anyway. I only have had- one mentor. And it's so- just such an honor-t-to work, to meet you." She stuttered, her cheeks flushing and her brows furrowing at her obvious frustration with her lack of eloquence.

“Are you ready, Harper?” he asked in an effort to save her from her embarrassment.

“Oh yes, Dr. Banner!” she said, smiling enthusiastically and allowing him to lead her from the busy airport and out into the stifling Middle Eastern sun.

Dr. Banner led Harper to the edge of the city to a small flat that looked more like a shed from the outside. It amazed Harper to think she thought she had seen and known poverty in LA, but it was nothing compared to this city. She herself was poor by normal standards, living off of ramen noodles and terrible coffee in a tiny room with only a bed and a stove. Since she had never had the opportunity to intern in the ER she was thrilled at the prospect of really helping people in urgent situations and hoped she could learn from the man leading her down the dusty, loud street. She was also taken with how handsome he was, in a shy way. His voice was husky and soft; his skin tan from the sun and his hair a gorgeous mess of brown curls brushing his ears with touches of gray, which she found confusing since he couldn't possibly be old enough for that yet. He was in his early to mid thirties at the most. He had the kindest, weariest eyes she had ever seen, brown and filled with gentleness. Dr. Banner also had a quiet strength about him too, something underlying in the way he carried himself she could sense.

Once inside the flat, Harper noted the two cots across one long room from each other, a small bathroom and a kitchen. She tossed her backpack on the cot that appeared unused and Dr. Banner managed to look shy a moment. She simply smiled at him unable to contain her happiness as she gingerly unloaded her boots and toiletries bag.

“I’m sorry about the cots. Collins talked about you like you were a uh...”

“Man?” she asked, “Not to worry, Dr. Banner. I shared a 2 bedroom with five roommates in med school at UCLA. This is nothing.” She finished happily with a shrug, noting the way the corner of his mouth quirked when he spoke. She carefully unpacked the vitamins and medications for immunity the government instructed her to bring, as well as Dr. Collins had insisted she pack, her box of gloves and medical kit. She had tried to be prepared for anything but was sure once her stock ran out she would have less advanced tools.

“I do get in a shipment once a month of the basics. Your generic Nsaids and other proprietary medications. And gauze. Sometimes it gets lost along the way but it looks like you brought enough to get started.” He said, observing her clear zipper bag filled with disposable needles and topical ailment relief, stethoscope and various drugs.

“I didn’t really know what to bring. I brought as much as I could but, I know a lot of what you do out here is primitive. I think it’s amazing what you do with so few resources. I want to learn this side of medicine, where it’s most needed.” She said, looking at him with pure untarnished admiration in her golden eyes. He quickly looked away, abashed and guilty that she had no idea about... the other guy. As feminine and beautiful as she was, he was also taken aback by just how cavalier she was being about their living situation for the next year. It still baffled him that he had been convinced to work with someone, a female intern for that matter. The amount of time was ominous as well, and he found he was already counting down the days. Day 365.

Knowing he really needed to assess her strengths in action and possibly try to get to know his new flat mate for the following year, he put his hands in his pockets and said, “I’ll step

outside so you can change and I'll take you to the refugee camp. You can meet some of my patients." He mumbled and stepped out of the squeaky, thin wooden door.

Harper emerged moments later in tight fitting khakis tucked into brown leather hiking boots and a black v-neck. She would have loved to have dressed in tank tops but, she was well aware of the law against women, specifically in the religious sect of Kabul known for its more radical Islamic followers. The heat made her very thankful for her pixie cut as well, since it was well over one hundred degrees and she couldn't dress any lighter than she was. He smiled kindly at her when she joined him outside and then immediately became serious again, leading her past the flat to a harsher more uneven road. The refugee camp was about two hundred feet from the city and it was better than Harper could have hoped for, if still over crowded.

First, Dr. Banner did his rounds where he greeted patients and then checked on new ones that may have arrived over night. Harper stood quietly at his heels and when presented with the opportunity dived right in. She re dressed wounds, reworked stitches, administered water bottles sent from churches across the globe, spoke with as many English speaking patients as possible and quickly would rejoin Banner to observe again. She was quiet and calm, sweet and nurturing to these people young and old, never breaking eye contact when she would talk to them, even if they did not understand English. Maybe it was the heat or perhaps it was the rush like being in the trauma ward, but Harper found by nightfall she was wiped out. Carefully she sat down with a bottle of water on a bench and took a breather in hopes Dr. Banner would not notice her absence before she could regain her strength and be back at his side.

Just as she was about to stand up and rejoin him several pairs of small children gathered around her, staring at her with fascination and hope in their little eyes. She waved at them and sweetly patted the seat next to her, unable to resist the charm of a small child and knowing they'd been through so much turmoil in their short lives. Two, a brother and sister sat beside her, while the others sat in a circle looking at her gloved hands and smiling at her surely disheveled short hair. They would point at things and she would answer in English and they would listen fixated. She knew they must have been bored, with nothing to read or play with, so carefully she stood up and they did as well.

"How about we sing? Lal la la?" she asked, trying to work through the language barrier and they all nodded vigorously, delighted giggles filling the space.

"Okay repeat? I la la la then you la la la." And again the children nodded, and she was hoping it meant they'd understood what she was getting at.

As Bruce left the last hut for the night, he saw Harper surrounded by tiny children shouting, "You can't ride in my little red wagon!". He laughed as she jumped back in mock surprise at the loudness of their voices and smiled at them brightly, happiness creating a glow about her petite face.

"Cause the front seats broken and the axles draggin'!" she yelled and they repeated in unison. When they finished, she told them goodnight and shushed them as the more elderly of the camp would probably want some rest.

"I see you have a fan club." He said to her, smiling sweetly and looking down into her heart shaped face as he crossed the dirt path.

"I think you have it backwards. I'm the fan club, I think. I'm sorry about that. I just had to take a break. Just for a minute, it's the heat I think. LA is hot but not quite this hot you know? And I've worked indoors so much. I promise I won't slow you down, though." She said nervously, hoping he wasn't regretting his choice of assistant for the year already. He simply smiled at her and laughed, a delightful sound she found made her heart skip a beat.

"I'd be surprised if you weren't. Heck I'm exhausted." He said and she breathed out a short sigh and grabbed her smaller day pack. Then he put his arm around her shoulders and said, "You did amazing today, Harper. Let's go back to the flat and have some protein bars and you can rest." She smiled up at him timidly and he led her back, opening the door and grabbing their food for the night from the cabinet. He wasn't sure what made him reach for her that way, but he had always striven to be a gentleman despite the things he'd done. Harper swapped her clothes with small splatters of blood and dust for comfortable boxer shorts and a tank top in the bathroom and curled up on her cot. She noticed then Dr. Banner's was closer to the door, while hers was closer to the far edge of the room and wondered if he did that on purpose. It was a long and narrow space so the foot of each one faced the other, but she oddly didn't mind that part either. Being close to him wasn't awkward even though they had just met, she'd studied his work so much she felt like she knew him.

Bruce tossed her the bar and sat back on his own cot, crossing his ankles and observing the adorable woman he was now sharing his space with.

"So, Harper. Tell me about yourself." He said, hoping she would open up to him and give him some insight without asking too much in return. It seemed no one asked her much about herself because she stuttered through her words.

"I-uh well, I am twenty-four years old. Spent the last two years of my life at St. Josephine's under Dr. Collins and his wonderful staff. I also worked at a twenty-four hour diner in my free time. There's really not much to tell, honestly." She answered, nibbling the bar and trying to think of what she could possibly tell him about herself that he might find even remotely interesting. He was the Dr. Bruce Banner after all.

"And your parents?" he asked. At that moment, a sad look crossed her face and her brows furrowed in thought. He immediately regretted his curiosity.

"They are deceased. Car crash, I was nine." She answered stiffly.

"I'm sorry. This is new to me. I don't share my life with anyone, and I just want to get to know you is all." He answered. She smiled sweetly at him then, in an effort to change the subject lifted her head and said, "Well I have to tell you, Banner, I've always been told to never meet your heroes. I'd have to say I can't imagine why." And he knew she meant it as a compliment but couldn't help how that word affected him. Heroes couldn't destroy entire cities when they were angry, heroes didn't need cages to protect the people around them. They were saved an awkward silence as the power shut off suddenly, something she had read was a routine occurrence.

“Goodnight, Banner.” She said to the dark.

“Goodnight, Harper.” He said back and carefully they both rolled to one side to sleep.

In minutes Harper’s soft snores filled the room like a hum and Bruce found himself grinning, she must have been extremely exhausted. She was everything Dr. Collins had promised and he found he actually was a bit... excited to be working with her. Maybe she was going to prove more therapeutic to him than he realized and maybe being alone wasn’t the only solution to his large green problem.

An urgent knocking hours later sent both of them flying from their cots and Bruce flinging the door open. Rushed words filled the space as Harper changed her clothes in the dark, putting her dirty t-shirt and khakis back on and stumbling into her boots. By the time Banner turned to her she was fully dressed. He carefully pulled on his pants and began to re button his shirt over his white t-shirt.

“Emergency in the camp. It’s a young girl in labor. I couldn’t understand everything but the baby won’t come out.” He said, running out the door and Harper quickly at his heels armed with a flashlight and her day pack back on her shoulders. She stumbled in the dark and he righted her by delicately holding her elbow. She slammed her palm onto her forehead several times and at his confused look said, “It helps me wake up. And focus.”.

They followed the screams to a hut where a young girl was very clearly in labor, on the floor with blankets beneath her soaked in blood. A large man pushed Bruce back from the doorway as he tried to enter, leaving Harper alone with the terrified young girl.

“Please I’m a doctor. I can help.” He said with eyes wide and nervous, but the man simply shook his head. Harper thought quickly and covered the girls legs then pulled on her gloves and walked to the door. She pointed to where she had the young girls exposure covered and pleaded with her eyes. The large man let Dr. Banner in but Harper knew he was not pleased and would have a fit if he saw any part of her anatomy.

“You can’t examine her. She can’t be more than thirteen and the laws here are strict.” She whispered to him urgently, the girls wails escalating as more blood splattered beneath her.

“There’s a lot of blood. Have you done this before?” he asked voice soft and calm, suddenly wary of not having control of the situation.

“Delivered babies? Tons. But I’ll need some guidance with this. I’ve never had a distress situation.” She told him, feeling it was best to be honest with him.

“Alright. I’ll elevate her head you examine her. I’ll also give her a shot of iron since she’s lost so much blood.” He answered begrudgingly and knelt down to the young girl, cradling her sweat covered brow across his thighs and pulling on the gloves. Carefully, he injected the iron while Harper lifted the blanket and felt her abdomen. She could tell the baby had descended but quick examination revealed it was stuck because it was breech. She inhaled through her nose and tried to still her shaking hands. She placed them on her legs and breathed in deep through her nose gathering her nerves.

“What is it?” he asked, eyes wide.

“The baby is breech.” And she saw panic flicker across his face knowing neither of them could perform a cesarean in these conditions, “I think I can turn it. It will be painful and not easy but it’s been done before. Then I could do an episiotomy and deliver.”, she continued, looking to him with question and concern in her big amber eyes. Banner was again shocked by the amount he had underestimated this girl. Sure she was scared, it was written all over her face, but she held steady and calm, choosing to be transferring that energy to the patient and not her fear and doubt. He half grinned at her in amazement and nodded, reaching for a pain reliever and syringe. Unfortunately they did not have time to let it take affect and Harper had to turn the baby. With one hand on the girls abdomen she felt the small thing inside rotate to its rightful position and knew she had to do the rest rapidly to get him out, worried he was not getting enough oxygen.

Harper swiped her with a topical numbing gel and made the cut, her hands so steady she was amazed at her own unparalleled calm. Holding the girls knees firmly she urged the girl to push until in minutes she was holding a newborn screaming in her arms, tears of joy and relief filling hers and the new mother’s eyes. Her mouth was open and she laughed in a surprised way that could only be born of pure panic. Banner even grinned and laughed as she passed the baby to the girl and she sat up to look at her newborn. Bruce stepped away so the girl could have her moment as a new mother and watched as Harper consoled her and helped clean the baby and cut the cord, quickly stitching the necessary cut. He wasn’t sure which the bigger miracle was in that moment; this beautiful girl or the baby.

Chapter 3

When they made the trek back to their flat, the sun was rising and for a moment the two of them stopped to watch it transform the dark of night to a brilliant burst of purple, orange and pink. These were the days Bruce felt his best, when something good came of all of this hard work. He was constantly in stressful situations, constantly under strain and it was the only thing so far he found that kept the other guy away. He looked over at Harper and she was smiling a weary smile.

“You did good back there, Harper.” He said softly, looking at her and then back at the sunset.

“I did my best to save a scared young girl and her baby.” She answered, shrugging her shoulders and not looking away from the sunrise.

“You don’t take compliments well either.” He said just as intently and then laughed, moving down the path ahead of her.

She grinned and joined his side, “I’ll be honest coming from you it means...everything.” She said wistfully.

By the time they were inside, the electricity was fully on and running water was in the pipes. Bruce, being the gentleman he was he let Harper take a shower first, deciding to boil some water for some instant rice.

“Be careful not to open your mouth or eyes under the stream.” He said to her as she took her small bag of toiletries to the tiny bathroom. She simply smiled and nodded.

Ten minutes later she emerged, dressed in an off white t-shirt, dark jeans and boots. She had used a water bottle to brush her teeth and felt a million times better already. When Bruce turned from the stove he saw she had lifted the t-shirt to expose her abdomen and back and swallowed hard. He’d been celibate for years and seeing just that tiny bit of perfect olive skin and dimples on her back made him swallow hard. When she pressed the needle into her lower back he realized she was taking the government issued malaria vaccine, something he would never need thanks to the radiation poisoning. Embarrassed that he had been openly staring he quickly turned away to stir the rice and set it on the make shift table in the kitchen.

As she sat across from him, amazed that he had made her something to eat as well as himself she said, “I really appreciate being here, but you don’t have to take care of me too.” Harper felt it was important he know she was here to observe and learn, not for him to coddle and feed. That warred with the independence she had been used to her entire life and she didn’t want to be anyone’s responsibility. She wanted to hold her own.

“It’s just instant rice, Harp.” He said with that perfect sideways grin.

“I just don’t want to be a burden is all. I’ve survived on my own a long time and so have you and I just don’t want to be an obligation.” She said, digging in.

He laughed, “You’re not a burden or an obligation as you said. I’ll be honest, this is weird for me but last night I realized I not only needed an assistant but a female assistant. There’s things I won’t be able to do as a male doctor when it comes to female patients. The way you handled yourself, choosing to send out comforting energy when you were nervous. I wish I could learn that.” he said. She simply nodded and once they had finished she scooped up the dishes to wash. Afterwards, Dr. Banner took a quick shower and Harper wrote in her journal on her cot, thrilled at the compliments paid by her new companion. She loved that so far he had not treated her as an intern but as his equal, acknowledging her inexperience but never making her feel inferior. It was a pleasant change.

As the first month went by, Harper found she was more in love with her work than ever. It was as if she had finally found her place in the medical field and at Dr. Banner’s side she felt more confident each day. It seemed as well, the more people found out about her, the more women called her to midwife their deliveries, and in the first month alone she delivered almost twenty babies between the city and three refugee camps. Bruce observed and let her work, relieved he no longer had to fight to see his patients and noticed her confidence growing. He was proud and began to notice more about her each day, like the way she would become silent when she was nervous, focusing her energy on comforting and problem solving. She sent out emotions and vibes contrary to how she felt when nervous or unsure, and shut herself off and it was completely fascinating.

They would walk through the dusty streets and between camps, simply talking about their likes and dislikes from food to music. Mia began opening up to him about her personal preferences on things other than medicines and procedures. She and Bruce found they both had the same favorite classic movie Arthur, both had gone through a Buffy the Vampire Slayer phase and still kept the musical episode soundtrack as a guilty pleasure and both had a love for ice cream. It was an incredibly easy partnership and their lives synced up harmoniously. Harper could tell Bruce had been lonely, and it made her realize she had been too, spending her life at the hospital and the Diner, she didn’t get to talk about herself back home and Bruce wanted to know about her. He asked her what she thought, sought her opinion on treatments and cared about her favorite candy bar and animal as a little kid.

“Did you always want to be a doctor? Even as a little kid?” he asked on one of their many walks to the camps. Bruce didn’t miss the shadow in her eyes or the sadness that seeped across her face. Then she covered it by erecting an emotional wall and said, “I think I originally wanted to be Maverick.”

He laughed in that charming way and asked, “From Top Gun? Why not just a fighter pilot?” he asked.

Harper giggled, “I thought he was the coolest person I had ever seen. The fighter pilot part seemed too lame I guess. I was a weird kid. I remember I had this green jacket I wore everywhere with my aviators as a toddler. Sans pants of course” and they both laughed. He found himself picturing a toddler version of her, all sass and cuteness with dark hair and big eyes, in the outfit described and felt his heart melting. Bruce could not remember the last real human connection he had, but he found he was becoming rather fond and attached to his companion and he began to wonder if she would come back after graduation and help him. He could never go back of course, not after what he had done to Harlem.

Chapter 4

One morning, a wave of refugees hit the camp from a nearby suicide bombing. At least fifteen wounded joined their patients in the small make shift huts and Bruce and Harper were forced to separate in order to see to everyone. The hours flew by and as Harper found a moment to check on the new mother and baby, she heard Bruce yelling from a hut, "Harper! I need some pressure in here!" and she took off running. Inside was a young man with much of his body blown away, wounds of all sizes covering his body, blood leaking through what appeared to be fresh bandages. She pulled on a new pair of gloves and rushed to where he stood. She placed her hands where his were and realized she was covering his exposed liver. She became silent quickly and watched as Bruce struggled to get a pain shot in the main artery of the man's leg. She wanted to stitch him up in some way but knew lifting her hands would cause him to lose more blood.

Bruce was doing everything he could but knew there was no point, this young man would die. There were too many wounds and an exposed major organ meant he had minutes if even that. The least he could do in that moment was ease his passing and hurry it along. He knew Harper would have something in her bag so he swapped places with her. He ordered her to grab two drugs that when combined was lethal and watched as she steadily loaded a syringe to a dosage based on his size.

"All of it." Bruce said and she did as he asked, almost like a robot administering only half of the contents.

"Directly into the liver. It'll enter his bloodstream more quickly and stay instead of bleeding out through the wounds." Harper froze a moment and just stared wide eyed, her hands shaking for the first time since she placed her first IV.

"He'll die." she stuttered.

"He's already dying! Just do it Harper!" he yelled and she did. The man's eyes closed and he breathed his last breath, and once Dr. Banner called it and looked at his watch she backed out, flinging off her blood covered gloves and feeling the tears roll down her cheeks. Banner squeezed his eyes shut and closed the eyes, pulling a cloth over his face. When he found Harper, she was leaned against a tree, on her knees with her hands held up in front of her face. She was crying and trembling and in that moment he realized she had never lost someone before. It was a look he'd had years ago as an intern after leaving Harvard. It was her first death and she was taking it as well as any good doctor could. It broke her inside. He didn't know what to do so he carefully made his way over to her, sat down and draped his arm over her shoulder.

"It happens, Harp. There was absolutely nothing we could do. You know major arterial and organ exposure is a death sentence." he said kindly, his hand finding the silky skin of her bicep and his fingers caressing her of their own volition.

Harper tried to get it together but found it harder than she thought it would be. She knew she would face death one day, a doctor had no right to play God and some things just couldn't be stopped, some people couldn't be saved. The moment took her back to that fateful night in Michigan, sleeping soundly in the backseat and cuddling her stuffed rabbit Bunny close. The car swerved and jerked, there was a loud horn, brakes skidding and then the car was airborne. It sounded like a train slamming into a brick wall and happened so slow and so fast Harper had blinked and found herself upside down. She undid her seat belt and climbed across broken glass to the front. At nine years old she had watched her parents bleed out and die, crushed under the engine of the car coming through the dash. That was why she had become a doctor, so she would never feel so helpless again, so she could save every car wreck victim, every gun shot wound she was able to get her hands on. She didn't even realize she was crying into his blood stained purple shirt, didn't realize how deep she had been pulled in until she felt him rocking her.

"It's just that... my parents. I was there, I was in the car when they died. I sat there undone from my seat belt, between their seats and frozen in fear did nothing to save them." she said, swiping her cheeks and running her hand delicately under her nose.

"You were nine, Harper. You can't blame yourself. It was an accident." he said, lifting her chin to look into her lovely honey eyes, soft with unshed tears and pain.

Chapter 5

Harper would never forget watching that man die, would never shake the feeling she felt in that exact moment. She was practical, literal in her medical knowledge, but watching a person die was something spiritual and transcendental. Something private and yet, as a stranger she bared witness to it. She had known it would happen one day, but was sure it would have been different. She was sure she would be able to handle it, just as she did anything, maintain her calm nature and remain detached. It hadn't happened that way of course, but she couldn't regret it. She was better prepared now; she would have crossed one of her greatest hurdles.

Dr. Banner hugged her and then lifted her from the ground, not saying a word. He could tell in this moment Harper needed to work this out on her own, sort out her own feelings as a doctor. Still, her sadness was palpable and he found it difficult to simply ignore it. Apparently he was developing a soft spot for the incredibly attractive woman, which meant he was toeing the line with the other guy. He needed to stay a little stressed out, but right now he needed to be consoling. Surely no harm could come from simply cheering her up.

"Harp, do you like Butterfingers?" he asked with a sideways glance. He saw the corner of her smile quirk and an eyebrow lowered. It appeared he would be sharing his secret stash with her tonight. She decided she quite liked the way he shortened her name, making her feel like he considered her his equal.

Back at their temporary home, Bruce turned on his laptop and looking through his previous and dated playlists, he found Once More With Feeling, and pulled the military canister from under his cot. He crossed the room and pulled it open, extending it to her where she stood just beside her bed.

"I think you've earned this." And his smile made her hesitate, he was so handsome, so sexy and when she reached inside and pulled out a candy bar she believed things could not get any better. So Dr. Banner had a soft spot for chocolate, even in a third world country halfway around the world. She laughed as she opened it and he helped himself to one as well.

"You're full of surprises, Banner." She said, taking a bite and licking the quickly melting chocolate from her lips. He swallowed before he recognized what she had said and responded.

"You're quite full of surprises yourself." He said with a smile. She felt herself blushing and looked away a moment.

They spent that night talking, listening to Buffy on repeat and laughing. Harper felt her attraction to Dr. Banner growing, his laugh husky and his eyes lightening when he did. They had so much in common, despite his advanced years in medicine, and she loved listening to him speak, leaning on the edge of her bed and resting her head on her arm across her bent knees. She was enthralled by his brilliance and could not help herself.

He had never met a woman so intelligent in his life, never wanted something so selfishly in a long time. Of course, she could not possibly be attracted to him. She looked interested in what he was saying and he figured it was because she viewed him as some hero in the medical field. If only she knew the truth. It didn't help she was beautiful, a complete knockout with those big whiskey eyes and perfect little figure, a beautiful soul to match that gorgeous face. If he had been normal he would have wished for her, someone strong and smart, as a wife and partner. They would have gorgeous children, especially if they had that perfect nose and olive skin, and just as his thoughts were getting carried away he noticed she was exhausted and ready to sleep.

"We had better call it a night. Follow-ups tomorrow with everyone we treated today." He said calmly and sleepily she smiled and threw the thin blanket over herself, falling asleep quickly.

Chapter 6

Harper and Bruce had become incredibly close and six months passed quickly, so much so that he could not remember at which point he thought more about her than his own problem. She had helped him so much, and together they were making medical break-throughs despite the immense poverty in Kabul. If he was perfectly honest with himself, he was falling more in love with her with each passing moment, second even. She was quirky and smart, cheerful and sweet, something so rare and wonderful to him despite all the death and darkness he had seen. As her birthday approached, he decided he wanted to do something special for her and began carefully planning.

Harper awoke that day and showered, going with Bruce to the refugee camps and making their rounds. She was relieved it was one of their calmer days so far and she got to spend more time with the homeless children in the camp, teaching them songs where they would repeat her and sitting quietly with the elderly, providing silent and peaceful company to them. She was so in love with her work and Dr. Banner she could hardly keep the smile from her face. Despite their losses, they were doing well and for now the malaria outbreak in the city had been contained, thanks to his brilliance and perseverance. She had merely made mild suggestions along the way and he had taken them seriously, listening and putting them into action.

Dr. Banner led them back to the hut early and as he always did, offered to let her take a shower first. Feeling sweaty and a little self-conscious about it because of her attraction to Bruce, she took him up on his offer and took a brief cold shower. Once her legs were shaved and she felt less smelly she emerged from the shower with her hair freshly dried and styled to find the place empty. As she entered the bedroom she noticed something lying on her cot. Upon slightly closer inspection she realized across the space were a long sapphire blue tank top dress and gorgeous pale pink shawl, hand sewn beads and thread decorating it. On her pillow was a note with messy scrawled handwriting saying “Happy Birthday. Dinner to celebrate. Ready when you are.”

Quickly Harper changed and put on her Chaco’s she had worn upon arrival with her new dress. She had to admit wearing something so feminine and soft was a welcome reprieve. Not that she was too prissy of a person; it was just nice to trade in working clothes for something well... pretty. Stepping out onto the porch, the sun reflecting off of his brown hair she found Dr. Banner clad in khakis and a royal purple linen button down. With his back to her and the sun in the distance he looked amazing to her in that moment and her chest swelled a bit when he turned to her. She didn’t miss the way his eyes widened ever so slightly and the parting of his lips. Then he looked embarrassed and almost looked down, but she didn’t want him to. She loved looking into his eyes.

The squeaking of the front door had caught his attention, but what he saw when he turned he had not expected. She was beautiful in every situation he had watched her in, but in that dress and shawl, her eyes glowing she was breathtaking. That crooked grin she gave was one of confidence, not conceit but she knew she looked lovely. And he liked that, the fact that Harper did not need someone to build her up and tell her how gorgeous she was. Maybe she

didn't quite think of herself as breathtaking the way he did, but she knew she was pretty in her own right. If he was completely honest with himself, he wasn't quite sure she would even like the dress or want to go to dinner with him, but she deserved at least some kind of Birthday celebration.

"Shall we, Ms. Harper?" he asked, holding his arm out to her and she took it smiling and nodding.

"Yes, Dr. Banner. Please lead the way." She said happily.

They traversed to the city at a leisurely pace, her hand delicately on the crook of his arm and a lovely smile pulling at the corner of her lips. Bruce could not help but smiling too, she was happy and it made his chest swell a bit with pride. He led her to La Cantina, one of the safest restaurants in the city and they sat at a small brightly orange painted wrought iron table and chairs set. He of course pulled her chair out for her and rubbed his palms together anxiously as their server brought chips and salsa to the table. The place was lovely, a string of lights over them on the patio area glowing as the sun set and so many different people from locals to foreign soldiers surrounding them.

When the server asked them what they would like to drink Harper said, "I think I will have a beer. Corona?" she asked. The server nodded and then turned to Bruce.

"Make it two." He smiled and when the drinks arrived he lifted his into the air, and when she followed he said, "Happy Birthday, Harp." And with a clink of the glass they drank.

"What do you think?" he asked her.

"I think I can't believe I am eating Mexican food in Kabul with the doctor whose work I've referenced in all of my essays in medical school. On my birthday no less." She said laughing and shaking her head. He took a drink and shook his head.

"The respect is mutual, Harp. I don't just look at you as an intern or my protege. You're phenomenal out there in the field. The world needs more like you." He said, "Not to mention we've worked pretty hard lately. You deserve a break, and your birthday seems as good as an excuse as any." He said. She smiled at him tenderly and when their food arrived they ordered another round of beers. The food was hot and delicious and they were both very happy to be eating something other than protein bars and instant rice. Bruce found himself learning something about her he had not known previously, Harper loved spicy food and groaned when she took the first bite of her tamale. He tried not to think about how he'd love to hear her make that sound in a different situation. Apparently being around a woman was reminding him just how male and normal he could be.

After they finished eating, a couple of American soldiers at a nearby table bought them shots of tequila. Harper looked down at her shot and then flicked her eyes up to Bruce, smiling mischievously.

"We've earned a little fun right?" she asked, quirked her perfect brow and Bruce couldn't help but laugh.

“I should say so.” He answered and together they downed their shots and Harper quickly sucked the lime between her lips.

“One more?” Bruce asked in his husky, kind voice. She nodded and two more were brought and downed by the doctors simultaneously. He paid the bill, and simply shook his head when she thanked him several times. It meant a lot to her that back in L.A. she had never had a real birthday since her parents passed, but here she was, halfway around the world spending the evening with her favorite person in the world. She was full with delicious food, content with the adventure life had brought her on, and mesmerized by the handsome man she had spent the last six months with and would be spending the rest of the year with.

He stood and extended his arm to her, and when Harper stood she realized she was a little tipsy. He led her in the opposite direction of their hut, and she furrowed her brows wondering what else he could possibly have planned for them. At the edge of the opposite side of Kabul was a military camp and leaning against a deep green army jeep was an American soldier. Bruce shook the man’s hand smiling and then was handed the keys to the vehicle. They exchanged greetings before Bruce walked around to the passenger door and held it open for her. She wanted to ask where they were going, but she could not resist the rush of not knowing, the excitement of adventure. So Harper climbed inside and once Bruce followed suit, cranking the engine and driving off.

Bruce slowed the jeep once they were five miles from the city and turned to look at Harper. Her hair was perfectly windswept, her bangs pushed further across her forehead and she looked delighted. He opened his door, and walked around to take her hand to guide her from the passenger seat. Carefully he began to take the top from the jeep and lowered the trunk gate, revealing a good sized space for the two of them to sit. When he stopped fiddling with everything he turned to her, noting the way the warm breeze ruffled the shawl around her shoulder.

“This is the best place to look at the stars. And if I remember L.A. correctly, there aren’t many places to look at them.” He said to her, his eyes looking deeply into hers from the short distance they stood apart. Slowly Harper looked up and her breathing hitched, she was transfixed immediately. Above her the sky was glittering with so many stars she nearly forgot to breathe. She stumbled back to sit on the bed of the Jeep and could not look away as he eased down beside her and held her hand. The sky was not black but a deep blue, almost purple in some spots and the stars; they were like flawless diamonds burning their light so brilliantly she had to blink a few times.

The CD in the stereo began playing Iris by the Goo Goo Dolls and Harper turned to look at Bruce and asked, “Would you dance with me?” He did not hesitate when she stood, and carefully he pulled her close, his palm flat and respectfully against her back, and she pressed her cheek tenderly to his as he held her hand and moved to the rhythm, swaying lazily as they danced. Harper felt her heart thundering in her chest, butterflies beating their wings against her insides and happiness flooding her veins. Her body was soft against his, small but substantial and real. And Bruce could not remember the last time he had been this close to a human, felt their heart beating against his chest, felt the warmth of skin through cotton against his. It was nice and really romantic. God, he had isolated himself, made himself so

lonely since the other guy. He desperately wanted this moment to last, that song to play on repeat.

She pulled away when the song ended and the next one played, sitting on the tailgate and waiting for him to join her.

“So do you always plan such romantic dates, Banner?” she asked.

He blushed adorably and looked away, rubbing his jaw and mumbling,” Well I um... it’s not... it doesn’t have to be... a uh-date. I just wanted to do something nice for you... unless you... want it to be a date. I mean it could be or not if that’s not-“

She placed her hand on his cheek and turned his head, their noses breaths apart, “I’ve fallen in love with you, Banner.” She whispered softly before pressing her lips to his tenderly. His reaction was instant and instinctual. He grabbed the back of her head to deepen the kiss, his fingers pressing firmly into her neck and felt her grab his shirt front in her small fingers. That one touch from her and he found himself unable to stop, she tasted like alcohol and limes, her lips were so soft, her back warm through the cotton of the dress. He deepened the kiss when she opened her mouth to welcome his tongue and he felt like fire was tearing through him.

Harper felt his grasp on her back tighten as he eased her back further into the bed of the jeep. She was lying against one arm on her back and he was over her, moving his lips sweetly against hers. She could not have asked for a more perfect and romantic setting, it was something the likes of which she had only read about in romance novels to get through the lonely nights. Bruce was an expert kisser, and when his lips began brushing her neck a tremor of lust ran through her body. Clutching his hair she took the opportunity to catch her breath before his lips seduced hers again in the press of his kiss. His hands were all over her, touching her ribs and waist, caressing her back and nothing had felt so wonderful in her entire life.

Chapter 7

When her fingers brushed the skin exposed at the open buttons of his shirt, Bruce thought he was going to lose all control. It was the softest and yet most sensual touch he had ever had, even before the accident. His heart was thundering hard in his chest, and her lips were so perfect and soft, a girl born to be kissed and he was the lucky man to be doing just that. He'd give anything to be able to make love to her right there in the bed of that Jeep, but he had no way of knowing if she was ready to take that step, and he couldn't let her believe even for a second he was taking advantage of her. As she caressed the hair at the base of his skull, he pulled back to find he was panting and looked deep into those gorgeous honey eyes.

"Harper I... I'm not the man you think I am." He said his voice even huskier than usual and thick with desire. She furrowed her brows and slid back to sit against the front of the bed of the Jeep.

"What do you mean? Of course you are. Trust me, I have met my share of arrogant doctors who get whatever and whoever they want and you are not like them. Not at all." She said as he sat beside her and ran his fingers across his forehead in frustration, remembering why he'd kept his distance from everyone, why he didn't want to take a trainee under his wing. Not that he had anticipated falling in love, which had been quite the shocker. But why would a woman like Harper, someone innately good and simple, love him for not just Bruce Banner, but for the big green monster living inside? And the truth of it was he could not blame her if she didn't. The other guy was not just big and scary; he was ruthless, destructive and could not differentiate friend or foe.

Suddenly he felt her hand on his, pulling it away from his face to look into his eyes. He looked so alone and sad, and she knew it was a feeling they shared. After the death of her parents Harper had been totally and completely alone. What she could not understand was why a man like Bruce was alone in the world? He was a widely successful doctor and his research was unparalleled, gaining respect from the likes of Tony Stark. Yet, he was humble beyond words, and just so kind. He was a man that deserved the love of a rather extraordinary woman, and while she was simply an intern now, Harper hoped to be just that someday. Not that she desired fame or status, but just to be recognized for making headway in the medical field, for actually treating disease in more advanced ways in the coming years. That was the dream.

"You know, Banner, this has been the best six months... of my life." Harper whispered as his eyes bore into hers.

He rested his hand on her shoulder, his thumb brushing the spot where her neck softly became her collar, "Me too, Harp. In all honesty, you've really changed things for me. I... the way I feel about you..." he said before looking away. He felt her scoot closer as she asked him back, "And how do you feel about me?" she asked.

"Isn't it obvious?" he asked incredulously and she simply shook her head. He was instantly flustered as he gestured his hand between them, "What do you think...that kiss? Do you just

kiss people?” he asked. At that moment, she laughed loudly, throwing her head back and the sound filling the space and making him join in as well.

When she stopped she shook her head and said, “No, Bruce. I don’t. But I have to be completely honest with you. Working beside you and learning from you, sleeping near you and sharing my life with you, it’s made me fall in love with you.” She said and suddenly his head snapped up at her.

“What did you just say?” he asked, confused and instantly butterflies filled her stomach. All she could think was he must be thinking she was smitten with her own image of him as a hero, like just another fan girl but, truthfully, she loved him for all that he was. She was about to stop him and clarify when he pulled her across his lap and with one hand on her neck kissed her deeply and passionately, diving his tongue to dance with hers and holding her close as she dug her fingers into his gorgeous brown hair and felt the heat and electricity flood her veins. She kissed him back just as ferociously to make him feel what she had tried to express with her words, her thighs holding to his and her heart pounding against his shirt front. He pulled away so they could catch their breath.

Bruce moved her bangs from her eyes, pushing them aside and pressing his forehead to hers whispered, “I am so in love with you.” And with that their bodies were pressed back together. For the next few hours they were lip locked, hands roaming all over one another. Once Bruce touched her back and sides, the shoulders where her dress left them exposed, he could not stop. She was soft, feminine and smoother to his touch than fine satin, warm and so incredibly sexy from each and every curve of her perfect little body. When they had nearly ripped each other’s clothes off, they had the sense to ease off and lay in the back of that Jeep staring at the stars and talking. It was so beautiful and quiet Harper felt like she had to whisper, afraid to break the spell.

Chapter 8

Bruce and Harper were in the tiny apartment building where they had contained a new malaria outbreak. They had just perfected the combination of several natural plants and chemical to perfect an antibiotic, and together they were administering the vaccines and tending to their more severe cases. These people were incredibly sick, many of them with fevers so high they were unconscious, groaning in their discomfort. There were bodies lined along the floors on thin blankets and some looked as still as corpses. It was the worst case of outbreaks the city had in a while, and the living conditions and poverty didn't allow much room for the disease to stay contained so there were multiple families confined to their shabby homes.

The power had shut off for the night and the two doctors could no longer administer the vaccines, with little light and supplies running low they would have to return in two days. As they descended the stairs to the street both walked with an obvious weariness. Dr. Banner was trying to remain obtuse and not let his sadness and worry eat at him. If they could not quickly replicate the formula and have it divided quickly, half of the patients would die and almost all of them would be small children. Harper was looking at her feet and quietly crying over those poor souls, something she knew her mentor had become accustomed to. When they had their darkest days they remained silent, he would brood and she would wait until their day was done to let it out of her system. She had found the crying therapeutic actually.

The street was particularly noisy for so late in the evening and before they made it to the dusty lane, Bruce caught sight of a civilian with an AK47.

"Wait." he said and carefully pushed Harper against the wall, his body caging her as if he were a human shield. She gasped and then stayed silent until the man moved out of sight. Bullets and gunfire blasted through the night, there were screams and shouts. Bruce knew this was serious and an American soldier approached them as he passed.

"The city is on lock down. No one is to leave their homes. I must ask you to return inside." he said firmly and Bruce looked very concerned.

"We're Doctors and-" but the soldier ran off when an explosion shook the ground beneath their feet. Harper grabbed his arm to steady herself and was immediately frightened, adrenaline pumping through her veins. Bruce was accustomed to this, and he knew exactly what was happening. At least every few months Kabul would go on complete lock down due to terrorist actions by Islamic Radicals. The problem was they were too far from their camp and the only place to find shelter was full of people contaminated with a highly contagious disease. It wasn't himself he was worried about, he couldn't contract malaria, it was Harper. He felt like he was having to choose which way she would die, either by gunshot or bombing or disease. It made him angry but he carefully closed his eyes tight and played soft calming music through his brain.

When he opened them he looked down at her wide golden eyes and knew he had to make a decision. He had really only one choice and could only hope the immunizations she'd had

over the first half of the year were still in her system. Carefully he leaned away and took her hand, guiding her up the stairs and into one of the overcrowded apartments on the first floor. Harper couldn't explain why, but with his hand in hers she felt very safe, a feat she would not have thought possible when she felt the bomb going off so close. He looked angry but this look quickly faded as the family that let them in embraced them and tried to give up their few pillows to the two of them. He and Harper would have none of it of course, passing these to the family's three small children.

Backs pressed against the wall, they stayed awake well after their hosts had fallen asleep. The children seemed unfazed by the loudness of gunshots and tanks just beyond the thin apartment walls, their fevers knocking them out. Harper and Bruce were having a harder time, their senses on high alert as the ground seemed to rumble softly ever few moments. As they sat with their shoulders against one another's, Bruce couldn't help but reach for her tiny hand laid across her thigh. He laced his fingers with hers and gave her a soft squeeze, pulling those golden eyes to his. She bit her lip and simply looked at him a long moment, and then he leaned in to kiss her with a tender press of his lips in a gesture of love and comfort.

When he pulled back she whispered, "I'm afraid for them. For all of them. I'm not sure there is enough food in my pack. And I'm not sure how many vitamins I have with me to keep them stable, I was running out and planning on overstocking tonight.". Bruce could barely hide his grin, of course she wasn't scared they were trapped within an apartment building with several families contaminated with malaria, she was afraid they would not be able to care for them properly. He put his arm around hers and kissed her on the temple a long moment, closing his eyes against the pounding in his heart, so touched by such a wonderful creature.

"Just try to sleep Harper, I've got you and we will figure it out in the morning." he whispered, resting her head on his chest and waiting, as her breathing became even and low.

Chapter 9

To their disappointment, the city was still on red alert the following day as various tanks paroled the streets. The power also did not turn back on as the sun rose, leaving them limited in their supply of clean water. Wearing their gloves they ventured from one apartment to the next to check on their patients. Some remained stable through the night while the younger patients were not doing quite as well, due to their under developed immune systems. Stethoscopes around their necks they did their best and Harper and Bruce distributed the remaining vitamins to those worst off, prioritizing by case and focusing on the smallest children foremost. Harper could honestly admit it was her hardest day and with only Bruce to lean on she felt vulnerable. Not to mention her mounting fears at the possible contagion if they did not get out of there soon, she had never seen him have any kind of immunization.

Keeping a brave face was the best she could offer these people, so she watched Bruce and followed suit. As they left another overcrowded living space, Harper leaned her head back against the corridor wall and closed her eyes. She breathed in deeply through her nose and took a long exhale before she felt a warm hand on her cheek. She opened her eyes and found his chest pressed close, his eyes boring into hers saying so much he need not have spoken. She leaned up on her tip toes and wrapped her arms around his neck, pressing her forehead into his shoulder. She breathed in his scent as that warm hand traveled down her back and she gripped him close. In those few seconds he held her, just like that, the despair and fear fell away and it was a welcome reprieve. She pressed her lips to the exposed bit of skin beneath his shirt collar top buttons, and he placed a kiss into her silky black hair.

Pulling her back he looked deep into her eyes, "We have to get you to the home base. If you get this..." and he stopped talking. Her big, wide, golden eyes blinked up at him thinking about what he had said.

"Let's see what happens tomorrow. You need to be safe too. I have enough immunizations for both of us." she answered.

The next second they were pulled apart by a woman's sobs and screaming above stairs. They looked at each other and quickly bolted to the thin door the cries were emerging from. Bruce felt his chest tighten when they found a woman on the floor clutching an infant to her chest. He closed his eyes and tried to hold Harper back, because although she had chosen this field and he knew she would face death day after day, there were things even a doctor shouldn't have to see. He knew exactly why this woman held the infant this way, knew what he would find when he tried to pull them apart. To keep the other guy at bay he carefully chose what to feel in this moment, and he let the devastation roll over him in waves. He was struggling to control himself and protect Harper, and it scared him to acknowledge his love and passion for her and the fact she might not like what she discovered when the truth came out.

Harper struggled to contain herself as they covered the baby in sheets and disposed of the body as carefully and strategically as possible. She tried to shut herself off, knowing allowing this to enter her heart would force her to quit medicine altogether. She wasn't entirely sure how much more she could handle, knowing she had more materials just a couple of blocks

away that could save the rest of these people's lives. In spite of her grief, while that night Bruce tried to console the family of the baby, Harper grabbed her pack and left down a fire escape behind the building, through the open window of the kitchen. The sun had set and it was eerily quiet as she ducked near waste bins and other assortments of obstacles. She was thankful to be so small and light on her feet as she made nearly no sound, only her light panting filling the space as she navigated to the place she and Bruce called home.

When he gave the mother a sedative to help her sleep, he turned from the one bedroom and looked around the sitting room. It was shabby and drafty, but more importantly, Harper was nowhere about. He looked in a couple of nearby apartments until he noticed her brown smaller bag was gone as well. He did not want to believe what he was pretty sure she had done, but a tiny fist tugging vehemently on his shirt tail then grabbed his attention. In the little bit of Islam he knew he asked the child if he had seen Harper, and the small boy answered yes, she had left through the window and disappeared like magic. Bruce breathed heavily through his nose as he tried not to think about what possible danger she was in.

Chapter 10

Harper easily bolted from the nearest alley and onto the front covered patio of the small house. She carefully slid the door open to avoid drawing attention to herself and entered closing the door tight behind her. She let out a quick breath of relief and set about to filling her pack. She began loading it down with the antibiotic she and Bruce had created and perfected over the last month, stored in water bottles and then grabbed the blank sterile syringes she had left. Next she tossed several protein bars in and then grabbed a fresh v-neck and dark jeans, fresh socks and underwear. She knew Banner would feel much better if he had the same, so she delicately opened the box he stored his clothing items in and grabbed a fresh gray button down and jeans for him as well.

Touching his things, she couldn't help but feel a little guilty for leaving without telling him. She knew he felt responsible for her well being, but she wanted more than anything to continue to pull her own weight in their relationship and work. She hoped he would be so relieved to have food and fresh clothes he wouldn't even worry about how she had managed to get past the American soldiers and radicals. She found herself pulling one of his shirts to her nose and lightly inhaled, remembering the way his chest felt cradling her face.

He was a wonderful man Bruce Banner, and she adored him somewhere deep inside, like he was in her soul. She loved to watch him, the way he rubbed his palms together if he was nervous, the husky sound of his voice. The way he looked so young in his eyes but had those streaks of gray hair. The way he laughed sometimes when she had something clever to say, as if he had forgotten he was capable of it and his smile would make him appear ten years younger. Breathing him in he always smelled like sandalwood and vanilla and earthy. She rushed out of the door then, missing him and wanting to get back and make sure he didn't get sick from working so closely with the contaminated families.

Just as she had reached the heart of the city, Harper felt a hand twist her arm back and drag her from the alley and immediately she put up a fight, kicking and struggling against the harsh grip on her wrist. It was a large man with a thick beard and dark eyes, his body large and powerful as he pulled her into the street and threw her down to her knees, tying her hands behind her back with zip ties the plastic cutting her flesh. Her instincts took over and she violently jumped to her feet ready to fight with everything in her. A group of men surrounded her and the original assailant quickly grabbed her hair forcing her back to her knees. Tears rushed to her eyes as the pain encompassed her scalp and the rough sand and rocks cut through her khakis scraping her knees. They were speaking quickly in Islam and one man stepped forward, his face concealed as he gripped her chin and turned her face into a bright flash light. She struggled immediately before halting her efforts at the site of the AK47 poised at her chest.

Two of the men began throwing her contents from her bag, and she screamed loudly begging them to stop.

"Please I'm a doctor! I need those things to help people!" she shouted, emotions and terror warring with the adrenaline in her body. They mocked her, laughed, and one stung a slap

across her cheek like a viper striking. They kicked her water bottles, food and clothes away as if these were simple items.

She wanted to hang her head in shame at her own stupidity knowing she would likely die and be no good to anyone. She should've waited for the all clear to save those people, but when she thought about the horrific screams of the mother holding her dead three month old baby she found it hard to regret her decision to sneak and grab the materials. Now they lay scattered in the sand and dust and her body was soon to follow. These men sounded angry and judging by their headwraps and large guns they weren't military men, they were the reason this city was on lock down. A huge part of Harper wanted to hang her head and cry, but when her parents had died she had done just that and it had simply made her feel helpless. Not this time. She resolved to hold her head high and die as noble a death as one so clueless could die, without begging for her life or falling into uncontrollable sobs. She would face this as she had everything in life that was hard or unfair, face first with her teeth gritted and her brave face on.

Chapter 11

Bruce was mad, and inside his rage was flaring like ocean waves in a hurricane. It was taking everything in him to control it, thinking of her was the only thing that seemed to keep the other guy at bay. He would think of her small fingers and hands, the way the sun shone on her olive skin. He could picture her perfect lips wrapped about her pen as she wrote an entry in her diary at night. He tried to picture her just like that, loose tank top sliding down her shoulder, short boxer shorts showing the curves of her calves like a dancer's and thighs like a goddess. He could see her silky raven pixie cut falling around her heart shaped face, and the serious concentration in her eyes the color of bright amber. In truth he was not mad at Harper, he was mad at the situation and danger she had put herself in. His and the big green guy's other less favorite emotion, fear, was also surfacing. That was exactly why he was only partially concealing himself in the shadows as he made his way to their sleeping quarters in hopes of finding Harper.

Several male voices coming from the main strip of road caught his attention, and from the little bit he understood they had a prisoner with them. He closed his eyes and tried to calm himself, knowing immediately it was Harper and knowing he had minutes before the big guy showed himself. He carefully looked around the alley from where he was concealed and found her on her knees with a bright light shining on her like a spotlight. She surprised him again, with her wrists tied behind her back and several large arms aimed at her, she held her head high, jaw locked and a determined look on her face. His last shred of composure was lost when he noted the man crouched over her head held high with a knife poised against her beautiful olive skin. He felt his stomach clench, pain and adrenaline wrecking through him as he doubled over and noted the tinge of green on the back of his palms. Bruce Banner might be meek and kind, the other guy wouldn't quite be that way.

Harper had resolved that these men would slit her throat and leave her in the street, so she was shocked when suddenly a roar sounded from her right like a lion, but deeper and frightening in volume. It echoed and grabbed the attention of her assailant's and she quickly elbowed the man holding the knife to her neck in his nether region. Before the other men could react, the ground shook with heavy movement as a figure was emerging from the dark. From her point of view it appeared to be an elephant, but she was terribly mistaken as the gun shots fired through the air at the figure and rather than slow down the creature, it became angrier and charged faster.

In the blink of an eye a large man, taller than the tallest elephant stomped to the street, wild eyes looking around, black disarrayed hair and bright green skin covering bulging muscles. Harper wanted to scream but quickly realized her voice had quite left her in this exact moment. The terrorists emptied their magazines as he charged like a great bull and Harper dove for her materials scattering the ground while the attention was off of her. Using her mouth and nose she tried to shove as much as she could into the bag, forgoing the clothes for the antibiotic she and Bruce had created. She tried to stay on her knees but as the ground trembled under the weight of the big green creature, she fell to the side and watched as he tossed several of the men into the walls lining the nearest buildings. There was an immense amount of noise, glass shattering, concrete splitting. Gasping she tried to roll away as he

threw these large, grown soldiers into walls, then turned to beat the leader into the sand, both of his legs cracking with the force and a loud and resonating snap.

As suddenly as the chaos had ensued it seemed to end, and a bit more calmly the creature stomped toward Harper, and her eyes grew wide with fear. She rolled to her front and tried to slide away on the sand, feeling it scratch her skin and then the plastic binding her wrists snapped with a none too gentle tug and the creature's hot panting breath was on her neck. Rolling back over she scraped her palms, sliding her feet to back away from the creature afraid to turn her back on something so massive and frightening, so unpredictable, that she didn't even try to run. Then she felt her back press against a large metal waste bin and knew she could go no further. Harper found her eyes searching the green monster's large brown ones to find some kind of reason or understanding, and the familiarity of those depths drew her in causing a gasp to escape her lips.

It was fear, the fear of him in those large honey eyes that had him stumbling back. Harper. It was his Harper, his angel was frightened and trembling and all he because of him. His chest felt as if it were breaking open at the look in those gorgeous eyes and he saw it all over again. Her delicate tiny hands healing, working on the antibiotic with him. Her smile and the way he'd imagined leaning in to kiss that delicate spot where her pulse thrummed in her neck revealed by the crop of her hair. Harper's laughter in his ears and that night she really kissed him in the jeep and him returning it, making her completely breathless in his hands. Weary and suddenly weak he fell to his knees, trembling like an electric shock from the inside out, Bruce crashed to the ground naked and unconscious for the moment.

Chapter 12

Chapter Notes

Okay so I make soundtracks for everything so if you're interested, I was listening to Just Breathe by Pearl Jam while writing this bit and it was perfection!

Harper did not back away when she found the man she adored lying naked in the dust and dirt. Instead, she crawled on her hands and knees to where he had fallen and felt her heart twisting in her chest. It seemed that everything he had ever said was clicking into place in her brain in an instant, every time he had told her he was not the man she thought. This was what he had meant. Yet, she wondered how could Bruce Banner, kind and soft spoken, awkward and sweet have that living inside of him? And had she just not been saved by that very thing? She placed her hand on his forehead and very carefully brushed his brown hair from his forehead, causing his eyes to open at the tender gesture and ease up on his hands and knees.

Bruce had not felt this weak and sick in a long time, but the other guy did tend to take a toll on his body. He shivered feeling his stomach turn over and staring around at the destruction he had wrought before his eyes fell on Harper. She did not say a word, but picked up a gray button down cast aside and brought it over to him. On her knees she knelt close to him, closer than he expected after what she had just seen and held a sleeve opening near the correct hand. He let her ease the shirt over his shoulders and while his shaky fingers buttoned it she found the jeans she had grabbed for him as well. Her head turned to give him some sense of modesty as she extended the jeans behind her back and felt him carefully take them and slide them on. When she turned he had his hand covering his eyes and caught him before he stumbled down. As his arm wrapped about her shoulders she felt the immense heat coming off of him in waves and starting to lead him back to the house.

She was gentle and supported his weight as much as he would allow her to as they entered the front door. Bruce kept his hand covering his forehead and eyes and she knew his head must have been pounding by the way he laid back on his cot squinting his eyes shut. Her heart seized up at seeing him in pain, and she quickly we a piece of clean cloth with some bottled water. Delicately she lowered herself beside his long body and as his hand fell away to look up at her, she pressed the cool cloth to his forehead. He closed his eyes a long moment before those rich brown eyes were looking up at her with brows pulled low and completely full of sadness and regret. Harper tried to give him a small encouraging smile as she sat there, unsure of what to say to him. It all made sense to her now, his work on gamma radiation was so unparalleled because he had been closer to it than any scientist before him had and managed lived to record his findings. And all of his torment, his loneliness and isolation made perfect sense.

"You're still here." he said bewildered, looking at her intently and confused. She merely nodded.

"I owe you an explanation. An apology..." he said, sitting up and putting his feet on the floor next to the bed.

Harper was shaking her head, "You don't feel well. We can talk about this later." she said quietly. He stood up to cross the room, lean his frame against the make shift table and crossed his arms. He looked sad and angry, his eyes looking to his right as he said, "It passes in a few minutes. It always does.". She closed her eyes as she heard the obvious pain in his voice, felt it straight in her chest as if it were caving in on itself.

"I... uh it wasn't easy being the son of Brian Banner. My father was an atomic physicists, and I'm sure that's why I've been a boy genius. Overexposure from the start." he said, looking down at his bare feet and clearly choosing his words. Harper silently remained on the edge of his cot, listening so intently she nearly forgot to breathe.

"He beat the crap out of me, good old dad. It wasn't enough to be the greatest scientist of his time. He was a raging alcoholic too." and he let out a laugh that held no humor and crossed his arms over his chest, "But mom. Man, she was so great. I remember the way she'd hug me, y'know? Her smell, and the way she always made breakfast for dinner when I would come home from school, crying because the bigger kids at school like to beat the crap out of me too." shaking his head with eyes unfocused as he seemed to be remembering. She pressed her fingers into her lips, realizing the hard life he must have had and seeing what a great man he truly was, to have seen so much and still be empathetic to the world around him.

Bruce pressed his fingers to his eyes and a sharp intake of breath stirred the emotions connecting Harper to him. "He took her from me, too. Because, naturally, she stepped in when he was letting me have it at barely eight years old and no one stopped Brian Banner in his alcohol fueled rage from hurting his only prodigal son. He hated me, and his hate ended her life for loving me." he said as he sniffed and then pressed on his closed eyelids again. Harper swiped her eyes on her shirt sleeve and continued to listen intently.

Chapter 13

Bruce couldn't believe he was hearing himself tell this story, cutting himself open to bleed in front of her. The last thing he had ever wanted from anyone was sympathy of any kind, but when he looked at her eyes what he saw was the same look she always had. Tears streaming down those round cheeks, she still looked at him with admiration, like he was some sort of hero.

"Maybe that's how it really started. The split personality, the other guy living within me all along after that, all that pent up anger manifesting itself. It happened to me when I was working on a gamma bomb in New Mexico for the Department of Defense. The day we tested it was the day I tried to leave this world." he sighed and said. "That dumb kid... I saw him just as the detonator began its countdown and I crossed the lines and fences, pushed him with everything I had. The bomb struck zero and that was it. Hulk appeared and I left, started practicing medicine abroad to keep him at bay." he said.

After a long pause Harper whispered, "So much pain. For so long." and her eyes squinted and tears dripped down her chin rolling from her lips.

"It hurt like hell," he said, his head tilting to the side, "but above that I felt amazed I was alive. I should have died."

"But he saved you. That has to mean something." she told him, her eyes serious and her brows pulled together, all sincerity in her voice.

Again he gave her a scoff, "Yeah, the big green radiation monster saved me. It wasn't the last time either. Month later I tried to eat a bullet, he spit it back out." and bitterness filled that intelligent and soft voice of his. Carefully, Harper crossed the room to him, his pain so heavy in her heart her footsteps felt like lead as she crossed the distance. There was still heat coming off his skin and feeling him breathe at such close proximity she had to touch him. Her palms planted tenderly against each of his cheeks pulling his tormented brown eyes to hers.

"We all have demons inside of us, Banner. Your father actually was one, and that doesn't make you anything like him. It's how we overcome our inner demons that make us human, and that's what I see when I look at you. Not a monster." she whispered. He closed his eyes and sighed at her words, unsure how to take them but feeling their weight filling his heaped up heart. Heavy with emotions and none of the right words to say he pressed his forehead to hers as she held his face, stooping low and feeling so overwhelmed. They stayed that way a long moment, his hands braced on the table, hers holding his face. It was more intimate than if they had been making love, his breath fanning her face, both their eyes closed as they simply shared in the pain and sadness. Finally, Bruce composed himself and carefully touched her hands, holding them against his chest when he lowered them from his jaw.

"I'm sorry I didn't tell you. I should have when you told me you had fallen in love with me." he whispered. Harper shook her head and stared at the little bit of his chest exposed before

she calmly whispered, "No matter what, I'm not afraid of you. Any part of you.". He pulled her close, pressed her face where she could feel his hard and steady heartbeat. He ran his fingers through the thin hair at the base of her skull and she heard him barely whisper against the top of her head, "You should be.".

Chapter 14

Chapter Summary

Well if you've been waiting for it, here is the smut! If not, you can skip it but I felt it was necessary at this point!

Her eyes looked up into his at the words and she simply shook her head. He released her and crossed the room, bracing his hands on the wall and breathing deep.

"The other guy, he appears when I'm angry, Harp. And seeing you like that, knowing they were going to kill you, made me so angry. It's worst than that though, I was afraid." he said, then lifted himself from the wall as he relived the scene and felt the rage coming back. He could tell if he kept replaying it, he would turn back into the Hulk right here and destroy their refuge. There was only one thing to do, and in quick strides he crossed the room to where she stood by the table. Quickly he placed his palms on her cheeks and kissed her fiercely and intensely. It was an instant rush of passion and desire, her tongue brushed his and her palms were flat against his chest. She gripped his shirt lapels fiercely and gave him the passion in return, deepening it and loving the way he held her face. It was not overpowering nor brutal, but tender, as if touching her gave him a reason to live. Her knees were quickly going weak and she had no intention of letting him stop.

Bruce pulled back just long enough to gaze fiercely into her whiskey colored eyes, searching for her answer. And as it had been for the last six months, he need not speak what his eyes easily communicated to her and only her. She nodded and in an instant his lips were back on hers, fire igniting and spreading through her veins, her breath hitching and he hands pulling the half done buttons of the shirt she had just helped him put on. Standing there fiercely nibbling his neck she felt his rough strong hands undo her khakis and then they were sliding from her hour glass hips. Once he saw her beautiful short legs again he found himself in a rush to see the rest and so he broke their kissing long enough to slide the v neck over her head.

Harper had never been more wet in her life, never knew she could be so turned on before sex. His lips on hers was making her tremble with excitement to feel the rest of him pressed against her with nothing between them. She was pulling him to his cot with her lips and her fingers inside the waist and of his jeans before he slid them off and laid her down on her back. His body covered hers as his forearms supported his weight and she dipped her fingers inside his boxers. He was hot and huge, causing her to tug on his bottom lip with her teeth as he began kissing her again. The stroke of her hand brought a delicious groan from his throat and as he rested his head against her shoulder he kissed and delicately nibbled her soft skin. Her sighs of pleasure nearly sent him coming into his boxers, having gone so long with no intimacy, without even seeing a naked woman. He was aroused to the point it was almost

painful. Carefully, he slid his boxers down and her boy shorts followed, allowing him to rest at the entrance to her body, her exhilarated and aroused pants blowing across his face.

Suddenly he stopped to Harper's complete disappointment. She hoped he hadn't realized how drenched she was between her legs and her inner thighs.

"I don't have any condoms. I honestly never thought- I don't think I can have children. I'm sterile." he whispered.

Relieved she let out a sigh, "It's fine. I have the depo shot anyway." she whispered. "What did you think I was going to say?" he asked and noted the way an adorable blush crept over her breasts, neck and cheeks. "I thought... I don't know. I'm so turned on for you... I um... I'm really wet." she whispered, and he graced her with a groan of frustration before smiling.

"That's a very very good thing." and slowly he pressed his hips to hers and began easing himself inside of her. He could feel her walls clenching and thought he would faint at the hot tightness he felt encompassing his length. She felt better than he could have ever imagined, and as her thighs wrapped around him he felt them trembling.

Harper's body suddenly had a mind of its own as she felt Bruce entering her hot center. She wasn't sure who this wanton, love-making creature was that had suddenly surfaced but she liked it. She had fooled around once or twice with a fellow medical student, just to get rid of her virginity and see what all of the hype was about. The sex was okay but twice was more than enough for her and they stayed amazing friends. Nothing had felt so good though, as the man she loved lying over her and pushing his body into hers so intimately. She was shivering from the exhilaration it brought, her eyes closing at the tremor he wrought just by pushing inside of her. As he kept moving she realized he was deeper than her first time had ever gone, his length stretching inside of her until she felt full and had no clue how he would keep going. Her back arched from the cot of its own volition and finally his pelvis touched her lips and clit.

Bruce had never used being a doctor as a means to get laid, but right now with her, he would use his experience and knowledge of the female body to pleasure Harper beyond words. He flexed his glutes as he entered her to touch her inner spot and his pelvis pressed her enlarged bud and she shuddered. He was rewarded by the clenching of her walls again, and then the release in time with his thrusts. He was trying to go steady and keep his orgasm at bay until he gave her one first. Her moans and pants filled the air between them as he caressed her knee and thigh, held his palm over the top of her head in tenderness and held her eyes with his, the most connected he had been to another human being.

Her hips were pulling him in, moving and trying to hold his hard thick length as deep as possible. She loved the way he pounded into the special spot inside of her and felt her blood rushing so fast she was afraid she would faint. She was climbing higher and higher and those eyes, those brown wary eyes held hers. As her pleased moans and shouts increased in pace and volume he knew she was nearly there and carefully he leaned down to tug her nipple with his teeth before gazing up at her to watch her eyes flutter close and her orgasm spring upon her as he felt her hot liquid pour over him. It was beautiful. Harper felt it rip through her like the adrenaline rush from cliff diving, felt the blood pulsing between her legs hard and fast. The release caused her toes to curl and shudders wracked her body at the relief and pleasure

that went on and on for what seemed like minutes. She felt a delicate hum remaining in her veins as she came down smiling wickedly.

Forehead pressed to hers he kept moving, grinding into her as deep as he could go and feeling her tighten in time with his thrusts. His husky, soft voice was even sexier as he panted out his efforts to love her mercilessly. Her petite nails pulled on his shoulders and her wetness soaked him as he felt his orgasm spring upon him. He meant to hold out longer, give her a second orgasm but it was unstoppable and he fired his cum inside of her so hard he was almost embarrassed. It shot out hard as his balls tightened and he lengthened and hardened inside of her, filling her with his seed. His eyes squinted shut as he shook and finally exhaled as he collapsed on top of her.

Chapter 15

Contented, Harper held Bruce as he lay over her catching his breath. If this was what stopped him from turning into a big, green angry guy then she would volunteer every time, of that she was sure. He surprised her by the way he lifted his head from her shoulder and kissed her in the most tender and gentle way, a way that wasn't sexual or demanding, just careful and loving. She sighed as he laid beside her and laid a hand on her hip, his face close to her due to the size of the cot. His eyes were so brown and serious but she grinned at him anyway, never able to put into words how much it meant to her that he had opened up to her and told her about his past. She did not pity him for all he had gone through, she respected him even more and knew in her heart of hearts he was a genuinely good man.

Bruce felt happiness flooding him as she grinned at him, the likes of which he had never known. His Harper was beautiful, sweet, and intelligent, everything he had ever dreamed of in a woman, if he had allowed himself to dream such a thing after the accident. He couldn't help imagining a future with her, living abroad as doctors, maybe even adopting a baby to raise as their own. She would fill his life with the love he had been missing since his mother's death, and he'd be a damn better father than Brian Banner had been. Finally, he smiled back at Harper and kissed her temple. Naked and warm from their lovemaking, he pulled her nearer so her nose delicately touched his chest and with the stillness of the night they fell asleep, breathing low and their heartbeats matching rhythm in the middle of the night.

At dawn, they both awoke sleepily, their internal clocks used to the early mornings they'd had as of late. Bruce climbed from the cot and pulled on his discarded jeans and button down from the night before, pulling the door open he felt relief. The city seemed to be clear, probably thanks to the fact the Hulk had destroyed part of the terrorist group and left them as a warning splattered over the street and a building. In an instant he felt her arms wrapped around him from the back, her cheek resting against the spot between his shoulder blades. Closing the door he held her arms with one hand around his torso and turned smiling down into her golden upturned eyes.

"City's clear. Looks like no one else need die." he said happily and instantly she gave him a wide, toothy smile.

After a shower, they each had donned fresh clothing and made their way down the road with antibiotics and supplies. The streets were safe for now, but mostly silent, many people too wary to leave their homes just yet. In companionable silence they entered the apartment building and pulled on gloves to begin working. They were greeted enthusiastically, many women and children embracing them and crying tears of joy. Apparently they had thought something horrific had happened to the two doctors and were thankful they were alive.

Harper noted that no one else had died in the night, that most of the vitamins administered had kept the children stable even. The antibiotic was distributed with plenty left over and all in all they felt their day was a success. As much as they had wanted to stay, they had other patients at the refugee camps and two days without care could be detrimental in some cases.

With waves, hugs and lots of tears they set off to the end of the main street to the first of the two refugee camps.

It was a long day, but at Bruce's recommendation they had dinner at La Cantina and several tequila shots. They had nearly died, taken their relationship to the next level and saved dozens of families from malaria. To say they were overdue a small celebration was an understatement. They stayed until closing, Harper laughing adorably, her cheeks flushed from alcohol. Bruce noted the way her nose crinkled and her eyes squinted when something was truly funny. He'd do anything to make her laugh every single day for the rest of her life.

After the night before, Harper couldn't help her eagerness to return to the home base, but not to sleep at all. She had tasted wonderful with a man she adored, and she certainly wanted more. He made her body hum, her soul sing and her heart fly. In just a few short months she had loved more fiercely than most did in a lifetime. Despite the death and disease, the war and famine, she had found happiness in a place far away from home. She also didn't miss the way he looked at her as if she were his living breathing hope, as if her optimism was contagious. She felt braver with Bruce beside her, stronger and capable. She had confidence in herself and he was unearthing it.

Chapter 16

Bruce and Harper were eventually invited to assist at the Jamhuriat Hospital Hospital in Kabul, where many travelers brought their children to seek treatment for various diseases. It was a three hundred and fifty bed facility and although larger than the refugee camps, the doctors there were not quite as knowledgeable as Bruce. He was in his element here, and Harper found herself listening as intently as the other doctors to learn from him. He spoke with such calm and clarity, intelligent but in no way undermining the other. It was one of many things she loved about him, and while the local surgeons and practitioners asked questions, Harper sat in the back and simply watched as he ran his palms against each other as he spoke.

It occurred to her that he was so much more than his circumstances, so much more than the radiation poisoning. He was wonderful and smart, handsome but didn't know it of course. She'd never been in love like this, never knew she could be as passionate about one man as she was about practicing medicine. Looking at him she realized the gray in the waves of his hair were the product of the extreme mental stress he was constantly under, not because of age. For a man with a temper problem, he never used that as an excuse to be cold or shut off. He cared so much for people that would never really know the inner battle he faced everyday.

As the day wore on, Bruce felt Harper's eyes on him as he led the doctors around to discuss different treatments for different ailments throughout the hospital. The doctor translating kept up with him very well but after twelve hours he knew they were already to collapse. She gave him an encouraging smile, despite the weariness in her eyes and he thought it best then to end his lectures. Everyone dispersed, some going home for the night, some staying to put their new techniques into affect. Bruce noticed Harper had her fingers pressed to her forehead and eyes closed in a chair by the window.

"You okay, Harp?" he asked her when he was finally able to get away from the group still asking questions.

She jumped up and nodded, "Just a bit tired." she answered. He nodded and then pulled her from the chair by her hands, leading her out to the front doors of the hospital. Driving the military Jeep again they passed through Kabul, Iris playing in the background again.

"And I don't want the world to see me. 'Cause I don't think that they'd understand. When everything's made to be broken, I just want you to know who I am." Bruce mumbled quietly and Harper smiled. A song she had heard on the radio time and time again had never had so much meaning. It was like it was written by him. She smiled sleepily as the wind whipped by from the motion and he glanced over at her with a sweet halfway grin and a wink.

Once he had returned the military vehicle to its post, Bruce wrapped an arm around Harper's shoulders as they walked back home. The night was sparkling with stars again, and they both looked up briefly as they made the all familiar trek. Despite her immense exhaustion, once the door was open to the hut she grabbed Bruce and began kissing him, pulling the buttons of his shirt apart as quickly as her fingers would allow. His arousal pressed into her belly as his

fingers dove for her short strands and he kissed her back with fervor. He groaned as her teeth pulled his bottom and it made her efforts more urgent to get his pants down.

As if he could feel her need he backed her against the counter in the makeshift kitchen once her pants were down past her ankles as well as her panties. She gave him a seductive smile that nearly brought him to his knees and pulled her t-shirt over her head. He made quick work of her bra and kissed her breasts tenderly once they were exposed. He was so hard he thought he might burst before he'd even made love to her, and quickly realized it wasn't just his celibacy that made him so aroused at the slightest touch, it was uniquely Harper. He could smell her vanilla sandalwood soap and his lust would burn through him. Her tiny hands were stroking him in soft but sure measures, pumping him as he stood between her knees with her bare bottom resting on the counter.

Harper was so ready for him her body was aching with the emptiness inside, her lips pulsing with desperate need. His calloused fingers pulled her thighs around his hips and she shivered at the touch before he was sinking his enlarged head inside of her. Then his fingers moved to the roundness of her behind and when he deepened in her walls she bit into his shoulder a soft whimper escaping her throat. For a moment they remained connected just like that, feeling their bodies joining in the most intimate way possible. Bruce grasped her neck and looked longingly into her eyes, soft and brown, his chest heaving with his pants of arousal.

"I love you." he whispered, his lips nearly pressed to hers, only a breath between them.

"I love you, Banner." she moaned and at the delightful sound he found himself withdrawing before forcing himself back in. One arm was braced around her back while the other had his fingers into her plump cheek, holding her off the counter as he began a rhythm. Stroking her tight, wet walls and pressing into her inner spot he felt her growing more and more drenched around him. He couldn't help but moan slightly between his short breaths. He carried her to his cot before exiting her body and joining her on the small bed. Raising up on his knees, Harper turned her back to his chest and he kissed her shoulders and licked the perfect indent of her spine, causing her to cry out in surprise and lust.

Keeping her on her knees he lifted her onto his lap and felt her knees part to accommodate his thighs. His right arm reached around her belly began playing with her folds, massaging her engorged bud and causing her slickness to touch his legs. He eased her down onto him from behind, felt himself hit her deep and hearing her cry of delight. Riding her he began building his pace, the massaging of her tightness driving him over the edge in seconds. His other arm held her breasts as he played with the two most sensitive parts of her body, one with his fingers, the other with his member. Sweat glistened her gorgeous olive skin as her felt her nails digging into his thighs and he knew she was about to cum.

Harper's body went into a tailspin, her orgasm taking her by storm and nearly stealing her breath. She trembled from head to toe and the waves came over and over again until she thought she might faint from the overwhelming relief she felt at the release. She screamed as his head pressed into her over sensitive inner button, and soon he was following her. She felt his length stiffen as he shot hot liquid into her, his cum mixing with hers and his breath pounding against her shoulder blade. He shouted loudly as his orgasm took him and remained inside of her, holding her silky back to his chest as they heaved to catch their breaths again.

"You're everything I ever wanted." he whispered as his eyes gazed into hers while she was wrapped in his arms near slumber.

"I will always love you. Always." she whispered back.

Chapter 17

Harper was surprised the following day when her head was still aching, as well as many of the muscles throughout her chest and back. She chalked her body aches up to the physically demanding lovemaking she had shared with Bruce the night before. His smile was delightful to arise to, even if he seemed shocked at first when he found her still curled against him. It was as if he thought their reality was simply a dream, and that he would wake to find he was still alone. She made him completely at ease with her presence alone, made her smile by simply breathing in his vicinity.

In the days that followed they carried on as they always had, refugees coming and going. Working at the hospitals when they were asked and treating as many patients as possible. Harper continued delivering babies throughout Kabul as Bruce waited like an anxious father himself by the door, in case she needed his guidance. They laughed and occasionally played, tickling and teasing one another in between their more serious research sessions. Harper had been shipped several books by Dr. Collins who had included a letter stating she needed to take her board exams as soon as she returned.

"Will you come back?" Bruce asked as she took a few notes on a lunch break in the cabin. She looked up at him grinning broadly, then she bit her lip and looked down at the pen in her hand.

"Is that something... you would want?" before her golden eyes met his again. Bruce chose his words carefully, biting back the smile threatening to give him away. He tilted his head to the side, pretending to consider the idea, as if having her with him for the rest of his life hadn't been all he'd dreamed of.

"Well I was thinking, maybe after the diploma ceremony we could have dinner. I haven't had sushi in years and L.A. has some of the best. We could grab some dinner before we fly back." he said, so nonchalantly he thought he might burst from the excitement he was holding in. In seconds she had crossed the room and thrown her arms and legs around his torso, embracing him and laughing so joyfully he thought his chest was going to burst from all of the happy. He knew she'd be wishing her parents could be there, but he wanted to show his support in anyway he could. He'd been off of the map for so long he was sure he could go stateside for a few days unnoticed before disappearing again. It was the perfect plan.

That night Harper lay awake with chills and a blasting headache again, unable to get rid of it lately. She had concealed the pain from Bruce really well so far, and it had to stay that way. He would just worry and she had promised herself from day one he would never need to baby her or look after her. She was a capable grown woman, and so she pushed fluids down as much as possible and continued her vitamins as if nothing were amiss. The next morning when she brushed her teeth, she noted the white foam had turned a pale pink from bleeding in her gums and shook this off as simply too vigorous of brushing. Before she could realize it she had shut Bruce out, staying in to study when he would do some of his rounds and putting on her best smile when she could around the pounding in her head.

Chapter 18

Chapter Summary

So I was definitely listening to Run to the Water by Live writing this chapter. I can't really explain why but it fit to me. I also listened to Wild Horses, the version by the Indigo Girls. So find it on Youtube if you'd like.

Thanks for reading!

Bruce admired Harper's determination as she studied over and over again for her doctorate exam. He even understood her pushing him away a bit, her work had always been so important to her. Often when he'd return from his rounds at nightfall, she'd be fast asleep in her cot already. Carefully he'd kiss her goodnight and turn himself in for the night in his own bed. Since she had first come to work with him, since he'd first read her medical essay, he'd admired her tenacity and love for medicine. When he couldn't sleep, he'd lie awake and dream of their adventures up and coming, returning to the states for her doctorate ceremony, sushi and what a life they would have moving around and practicing medicine, the adventures they'd go on and sights they'd see. For the first time in his life he was imaging a nearly normal life.

Harper was studying, but when she could she was trying to diagnose her own symptoms. The bleeding in her gums had worsened, the headache had become a normal part of her daily presence and her stomach never felt right. There was a plethora of possibilities considering the places they had been to, she had been exposed to more than malaria. She had no idea what was wrong, but as her fevers pitched she knew it was only a matter of time before Bruce knew. As she crammed one night as much as she could for her exam, she resolved to tell him the next day, if it was serious early detection would be best. Just as the thought came she felt an intense sharp pain in her lower abdomen, a blinding pain so intense and she was pretty sure something wet had spread across her legs. The pain in her cranium hit stronger and she passed out, unable to rise from her cot.

It was eerily quiet and dark in the living space, and although he could never explain how, he knew something was terribly wrong. He crossed the room quickly to Harper's bed, her small hand lying limp over the side of her cot. From his vantage point she looked like she had fallen asleep, book in her lap and chest moving in restful breaths. Upon closer inspection, his breathing, his world, his heart all stopped. He lifted the forgotten book from her thighs and found from the waist down she was soaked in blood. Bruce's hands shook violently as the book tumbled from his grasp and he stumble to lean over her and touch her face. She was scorching hot, her skin pale and vacant of its lovely color, only her cheeks remaining bright in the dark.

"Harp? Harper, baby? Wake up please!" he begged her, gripping her shoulders and quickly trying to find out what he would do. He couldn't diagnose her here, couldn't treat her in the dark like this. He knew he would have to get her to the Jamhuriat hospital but first he would need to get her wrapped up. His panic spurred him into an automatic mode, as if he were watching himself take care of her, first by filling a basin with water and grabbing a clean wash cloth. He had to think of her as his patient, remain calm and clear minded to treat her. Removing her pajama shorts with tenderness he began to clean the blood from her pale soft skin. He swallowed hard as tears filled his eyes but he blinked them back, determined to handle this situation with calm.

Bruce's hands trembled as he dug through his emergency kit and found a fleece blanket in a sealed plastic bag. Opening it he saw Harper's eyes flutter open and gently urged her to sit up, setting the blanket aside to ease her up with her head resting against the wall. He placed a hand on her cheek and stared at her a long moment, his fears and desperation mounting with a ferocity. As carefully but as quickly as his trembling hands would allow, he wrapped Harper in the blanket like a child, and cradled her face to his chest to carry her out of the front door. She was so small, so light in his arms, and he could feel the heat of her fever as her cheek lay against his chest. He felt his heart seizing up as his legs carried him down the main road, knowing he had a long way to go but unwilling to stop at any point. He stayed in a state of shock and anxiety as he made the journey, his legs never protesting from the adrenaline pulsing through his veins.

In his state of panic, he feared he could feel her life force leaving her, and so in the silence of the night he began whispering to her, "I'm so sorry, Harp. If I did this to you. I would never-. Never hurt you. How about that exam? You're ready. I know you are. I've been with you for months now, you're the best doctor I've ever seen. You'll be okay, baby. We've got sushi to eat and adventures to have." he said, never stopping until the hospital was within his sights, they would run a biopsy and blood work and they should be able to diagnose this within the hour. Then he could start treating her and everything would be okay. He kept repeating it in his head over and over. Bruce had never believed in a God before, because what kind of God let him be the son of that bastard Brian Banner and then let that same young boy watch him mother's murder at six years old. But in that moment, he prayed for her to just be alright.

Chapter 19

Harper's fever was escalating to a level that was critical and could cause permanent damage to her brain if not lowered quickly. He carefully lowered her into an ice bath and as the nurse started an IV, Bruce lowered to his knees next to her and held her hand hanging over the lip. He closed his lids tightly to force his tears back and pressed his lips to her hand, the skin soft and hot, small and frail. She let out a soft whimper of pain and he saw the flick of gold as she opened her eyes, now red rimmed and dark beneath them. He quickly smiled at her, despite his tears and rubbed the back of her hand and kissed it again.

"Bruce?" she whispered, her voice weak and strained.

"Hey, hey Harp. There she is." he said.

"Am I dying, Banner?" she asked, her face braver than he would have thought.

"What? Of course not, baby. We're going to get you better, okay?" he said, tears lingering on the edge of his lashes. She smiled weakly, her lips cracked and pale and then her eyes closed again, her head lolling to the side. His hands were shaking and his heart was in his stomach, an emptiness filling him. He would forever remember the fear and helplessness he felt in that exact moment, her life hanging in the balance. Drawing blood he sent it off with another nurse to run tests to diagnose the illness burning through her tiny body and when her fever dropped, he put her in a gown. When he lifted her into one of the empty hospital beds, she felt lighter than air and tiny against his chest.

When his patience ran out he entered the biology lab and took over where her blood was being run against the base to determine the virus within. Under the microscope and when the chemical reacted greenish brown to her blood it felt like the weight of the world had been thrown at his stomach. Crimean-Congo hemorrhagic fever. That explained the blood he found below her waist and the headaches he thought were from stress and her cramming for her doctorate. He knew she had gone untreated for weeks, and he knew her mortality rate had nearly doubled. As his anger tried to release as the green guy, he found a way to fight it down. He wouldn't be able to save her if Hulk showed up, he would only destroy her chances.

Harper was in and out, her body warming to beat the virus within her and leaving her weak to her bones making it a chore to breathe. She wasn't sure if she would survive, but what she did know was that Bruce had barely left her side. She could hear his husky soft voice despite her fevered brain, could feel those big, warm calloused hands holding hers. A needle tore her skin briefly and a burning, fiery liquid was injected into her blood, but he was steady and as gentle as he could be. Even in her sick and near death state she could feel how very much he loved her. It was so very obvious in his care, in the words he said and in his inability to leave her side.

It was twenty-four hours exactly from the moment Bruce had found Harper covered in blood on her cot before she awoke. In that time she had received several rounds of a powerful

antibiotic and was kept on fluids every hour. He never took his eyes off of her, did not sleep, couldn't eat. All he could do was watch her. His hopes were lifted when the color returned to her face, not as much as he was used to but it was certainly a good sign. Her sleep seemed more peaceful, her fever residing and putting an end to her pitiful whimpers and heart wrenching thrashing. Her pain had instantly become his pain, they were connected, he and Harper and, like with true love, he ached to see her as she was, to know her suffering and be unable to take it away immediately was unbearable.

Chapter 20

Chapter Summary

For this chapter, if you're interested I was listening to Ron Pope Shoot Out the Lights.

When Harper opened her eyes she realized she was at the Jamhuriat hospital where she had watched Bruce lead the doctor's in new techniques in care. She felt so tired and so weak she could hardly hold her eyes open, and she felt an overwhelming peace in her heart. Bruce was at her bedside, but he wasn't looking at her in that exact moment. His lovely, dark brown eyes were gazing out of the nearby window, his head slightly turned and his brows pulled down. A thin shadow of stubble lay across his jaw and beneath his eyes were shadows of worry and sleep deprivation, and her heart ached for him. She knew she should have told him something was wrong when the headaches started, but a deeper part of her told her this was how it was supposed to be. She loved waking up to him, loved the way he had made her feel since she first met him.

Her throat was dry so instead of speaking, she reached for him, his chair so close to her bed her fingers could just brush the back of his hand resting on her bed sheet. The touch seemed to electrify him, because he jumped and smiled at her instantly. He stood and ran a hand down her hair and the side of her face, kissing her on the temple and holding her there close to him a moment. The relief flooding through him was so powerful he could have fallen to his knees in gratitude. He knew her recovery would take time, this fever virus was serious, but for now she had conquered the worst of it. Regaining her strength and getting back on her feet would take time, but he was honored to be the one to hold her hand the whole way.

"How are you feeling?" he asked her, his voice a low and soft whisper, his hand on the side of her head and his body leaning over hers protectively.

"Better." she whispered hoarsely, "But tired. So very tired." she said and he frowned slightly. Nodding his head he checked her pulse and vitals and feeling her forehead decided she was at least stable for now. Bruce didn't like what he didn't know and this disease was new to him, he had not yet encountered it in his patients until now. He was so serious, his brows furrowed and his eyes hard and determined and she gave him a small smile despite the weakness seeping through her, sleep threatening to pull her under once again.

"You're tired, handsome. You should get some sleep." she whispered as he finished inspecting her.

He smiled at her lovingly and then pursed his lips, "Me? Nah. I don't need sleep." he chuckled, knowing she could see how haggard he probably looked. She grinned at him affectionately and ran her fingers across the stubble on his jaw and reveling in the feel of it.

"Doctor's orders." she whispered when his weary eyes finally met hers, and carefully she slid to one side of the bed she was in and smiled mischievously. And for just a tiny moment he saw her as she was the night of her birthday, laughing as they toasted a shot of tequila and asked for another round. It made his heart lighter. Chuckling he shook his head and knew he was fighting a losing battle.

"I really shouldn't. You should rest some more." he answered her. She shook her head softly from side to side and twisted her fingers in her lap.

"I'd sleep so much better in your arms. You'd sleep better in this bed." and her eyebrow quirked adorably. He knew it was because she knew she had a firm and impossible argument. How he longed to hold her, cradle her to him and feel her resting on his chest. He had the notion that the closer he was to her physically the better he could make her recovery.

Bruce slid the shoes from his feet and the button down from his shoulders, leaving him in a white cotton t-shirt underneath and his usual khakis. He could not deny how wonderful he knew the hospital bed would feel, how soft it would be and how easy it would be to drift to sleep with Harper in his arms. Gently he lay next to her on his side, and with his chest level with her nose she looked up at him and grinned sleepily. Her fingers softly touched his chest along his sternum, her fingertips moving in little circles, the touch so simple and so meaningful. He closed his eyes and breathed deeply, exhaling his worry and fears for the moment in hopes of some rest. Cradled against his chest, she could no longer leave her eyes open and drifted off, knowing he would soon follow, his arms relaxing a tad with every passing breath as he held her in his arms as if sheltering her from the world.

Chapter 21

Sometime in the middle of the night Harper became restless and agitated, and tried with great effort to remain still listening to Bruce's deep and restful breathing. But as it had been since they began residing together, he felt it and awoke shortly after. Sweetly, he smiled down at her, the moonlight from the window of the private hospital room dancing and casting shadows across her lovely face in the night.

"Are you alright, Harper?" he asked softly. She merely grinned and nodded.

"I'm just having a hard time sleeping. There's so much I want to tell you, so much I need to say." she said, her golden eyes blinking up into his.

"Well, there's no time like the present. It feels like we are the only two people in the world." he answered.

"I can never put into words everything you have done for me, you know? You've taught me incredible things during our time here, and I am and will be a better doctor for it. Meeting you was the most incredible thing to happen to me, getting to love you was more than I dared to dream of. I want to spend eternity in your arms, Bruce. I want to spend my life by your side and you have made me braver and stronger than I knew I could be." Harper told him, her eyes never leaving his, her breath pressing on his chest as she spoke softly and with gravity.

"Mia Harper, you had all of that in you all along. I only wanted to reveal that to you. I want you to always remember, you got yourself here to me. Your medical journals, your wonderful bedside manner and the heart that beats in your chest. You chose to be a better doctor than those around you and before you. All of that led you to me, you did all of that on your own. And I am the lucky one." he said back, his brows furrowing.

"I just want you to know, you're a good man Bruce Banner. You'd make a wonderful father, you're an incredible lover and partner. And I cannot wait to see the things you do." she said, sliding her hand up to touch his cheek and then press her lips to his.

"What we're going to do." he told her with his sideways grin. Sleepily she nodded and drifted back to sleep in his arms, Bruce watching her only a moment before following her back into a restful slumber.

As the sun was about to rise, the sky barely violet in the moments before dawn, Bruce felt her ribs and torso shaking under his hands. Fogged with the depth of his sleep it took him a minute too long to finally look into her face and find the color had left her skin again. From her nose a river of bright crimson flowed across her perfect skin. He began to jump from the hospital bed, but she used all of her strength to hold him in place, pulling his tormented brown eyes to her golden ones. In those bright depths he did not see fear nor panic, but acceptance and peace. And in that exact second he felt his entire chest caving in, his heart breaking like someone was driving an ax from his shoulder to sternum.

"No, no, no, please. Not like this." he begged, tears flowing from his eyes.

Her voice was hoarse as her breathing seized momentarily and she said, "Sing... me... a song, ...please?". Sobbing he shook his head trying to think of what he could possibly bring himself to say in that moment. How could he sing to her when he couldn't even breathe around the ripping, tearing fire like acid in his body. Softly, she nodded her head before finally whispering, "Y- You know." and he did.

"A-and I don't want the w-world to see me
'Cause I d-don't think that they'd... understand.
When everything's made to be br-broken
I just... want you to know who I am." he breathed out the words, not a song but a soft staccato that still brought a smile to those lips he had planned on spending the rest of his life kissing.

"I love you, oh Mia Harper how I love you. I love you so much. So very much. Who will I be without you?" he sobbed looking at her, her head cradled on his forearm as he held her body like a child's across his lap.

"You'll be my hero. Just as you have always been, the man who conquered his demons. I love you too, Bruce. Without end. Without end." she wheezed and then the crimson flowed across her jaw line from her nose, and her breathing became harsher and shallower. Bruce kissed her forehead, touched her hair, rocked her and held her and tried to memorize the lights in her eyes and the delight of her body in his arms.

When her last breath exhaled, he was no longer in one piece. He was shattering, he was dying he was sure of it. She closed her eyes and was limp in his arms, her blood on his shirt and all he could do was sit there. He couldn't move, could not let her go, because that would mean she was really gone. When a nurse found him she notified the other staff, and he was pulled away from her so she could be placed where she could be stored to be shipped home, to be buried.

Bruce Banner felt everything, pain and sadness, but most importantly fury. And in that moment he had to run, to leave that hospital as quickly as possible. His eyes went black and his skin was turning green. He ran as fast as he could, in hopes of causing minimal damage as the Hulk emerged and began wrecking his havoc at losing the one woman he could recognize. The one woman who made him more of a man, than a monster.

Chapter 22

Chapter Summary

If you're interested I felt like Over the Love by Florence and the Machine set the mood from this.

In the aftermath of the destruction he wrought, a few abandoned buildings leveled and power sources shredded, Bruce returned to the cabin to gather his belongings. He'd have to move again, of course. Leave to another country and start over with everything. He would make his way out of Afghanistan, then work through Pakistan for a few months before stopping in India for at least a year. Focusing on all of this kept the hulk inside and now that he was empty of his rage he could only feel pain. It was a deep ache, worst than any hunger or poison he'd ever felt. Bruce felt as if he was being ripped apart limb from limb, but slowly as if he were made of stretchy material that would simply stretch and pull.

He opened the door to the place they'd slept, his eyes falling on her blood stained cot and his throat tightened painfully. His body was sore and exhaustion was taking its hold, so that when he crossed the room all he could do was sit beside his bed and feel the emptiness around him. He'd lost loved ones before, had been the first one the doctors spoke to one when his mother was determined deceased. But he'd held Mia in his arms, felt her last breath across his face. Bruce closed his eyes to feel the warmth of her in his arms again, and hear the beauty of her laughter. Her sweet voice, intelligent and sincere in his ears as she told him how she loved him. He fell apart as a new wave of pain and torment ripped through him, burning from his chest to stomach, making his legs numb.

He rose and walked over to the place where her things were tossed, her bag and toiletries. He resisted the urge to smell the body wash she used, knowing it would just be a scent without her warm skin behind it. The dress he's bought her was inside, the pink scarf, but what his hand fell on next was a flimsy and smashed cardboard box. He fished it out carefully and didn't have to know Arabic to know what it held inside. It was a white box with the image of two white sticks on the outside, one positive and one negative to show the difference. The tests were unopened and he doubled over in his pain, because she had reason to believe she was carrying his child, and since she was a doctor it must have been very evident and very early. But he'd never know, would never find out. With his palm pressed to his eyes he let it all out on that wooden floor, his tears hot and flowing between his fingers, he was in hell and there was absolutely no way out.

Dr. Collins received the telephone call about his intern in the dead of night and could barely choke out his response that it was okay to send the body to St. Josephine's before funeral arrangements could be made. As he hung up and set his phone on the nightstand, the file

caught his eye. It was the research and data on the weapon X project. There was a private government phone number inside should anyone be recommended for further experimentation. Fingers trembling he entered the keys and the phone began to dial, which he thought perhaps he'd better call back in the morning, it was rude to phone anyone at this hour. Scientists or no. To his surprise he was connected by a deep male voice that startled him at first.

"I have your next patient." he said hoarsely, waiting for the voice on the other line to respond.

"Why are they worthy?" the voice asked carefully.

"She is good. The best person I know. And her life was cut too short!" he said, biting out the words of his last sentence. For a moment he thought perhaps the other person had hung up on him, but instead his call had been transferred by a light female voice. It was to her Dr. Collins conveyed the flight information for the body, and he was given an address in New Mexico. He would arrive there to sign over the potential patient and they would begin their work immediately.

Bruce shouldered his backpack, Harper's journal tucked safely inside so he could carry a piece of her with him for the rest of his life. A doctors without borders group arrived two weeks later to take over his refugee camps. Buying the military jeep they'd driven in many times, Iris playing as if it were somehow stuck on repeat, he drove across the dessert towards Pakistan. When the sun set and the light fell over the dash just right, he could feel her in the car next to him, the pale pink scarf blowing lightly in the breeze from the speed of the jeep, her golden eyes shimmering like firelight behind a glass of whiskey. It hurt like hell, he knew it always would, but when he felt her there with him he also felt peace and could imagine her pressing those soft lips to the horrible pain in his chest, like his heart was pumping sulfuric acid instead of blood through his body. He would forever be madly in love with Mia Harper.

Chapter 23

The lab was brightly lit and surged with the power and energy of the various machines used to reprise molecular make ups and to keep a life form stable under vast radiation. A tiny, pale form lay in the middle of a table in the room, her hair dull and lifeless as the bangs fell across her forehead. Dr. Collins stood behind an observatory glass in the control room, looking down at the most promising young doctor he had ever known. He bit the side of his thumb to relieve his nerves and anxiety at the experiment soon to transpire. He always thought he was a man with strong morals, a man who didn't dare to play God, a man who could keep himself abject from the spiritual side of dying. Yet, here he stood waiting to see if tissue could be restored, if Mia Harper could be brought back to life.

The Weapon X program wanted to experiment with the strength and multitude of sound waves, to see how effectively the absence of sound entirely could stop a nuclear bomb mid explosion. The idea was that a single being could absorb all the sound waves within a certain parameter, and then send them back out as a means to stop chaos and war. While incredibly painful and uncomfortable, it was a method of warfare that would require no guns or missiles. She would be more than a weapon, but a beacon of hope that might end blood shed.

She was hooked to a machine that would restore her cells before they attempted to resurrect her, so she would be as life like and as human as possible. In a few weeks her skin color was returned to its olive like shade as if she had never died. Her skin was perfect and pristine, no more blemishes or freckles. Her hair was once again shiny and dark, lifelike to touch although the process caused it to lengthen to around her chin. Once the body was restored by its cells they preserved it, frozen as Steve Rogers had been before he was brought out as the Captain. In the following months they would begin experimenting with the absorption chemicals to perfect their formula. Under her files and charts, the scientists began referring to their patient as the Sovereign of Silence.

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