



KINARD

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

MELISSA STEVENS

“What do you mean you can’t hear that?” Kinard couldn’t help his amazed tone. He’d finally traced out the high-pitched squeal that had been driving him nuts for days. It came from the light fixture in the ten-foot ceiling. The trouble was, no one else could hear it.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about. I don’t hear anything out of the ordinary.” Deanna, the newest nurse in the ER shook her head and looked at him out of the corner of her eye. She thought he was nuts, he could tell.

Kinard frowned. How could he be the only one? He’d already thought it was just his ears, but he only heard it here, at the nurse’s station, not in any of the rooms or at home.

Tilting his head back he stared up at the offending bulb. How much trouble would he get in if he found a way to climb up there and remove just the one?

“I don’t recommend it.” Her voice made him turn back to her.

“Recommend what?” Kinard narrowed his eyes, wondering if she’d somehow read his mind.

“Climbing up there or attempting grand theft light bulb. The complexity of the endeavor makes it inadvisable.”

Kinard blinked and looked at her a little more closely. Why on earth was she talking like that?

“It’s not that hard. It’s just a light bulb.” He looked back up at the fixture again.

“True, but it’s about ten feet up. You’ll need a ladder, or some other way to reach it, and that’s just the first problem.”

Kinard didn’t look her way, just kept staring at the bulb as if he could stare it into submission.

“If you were able to find a way to get up there, get it set up and climb up, without being stopped by staff, security or administration, and that’s a big if, then you’ve got to figure out which one it is, and pull it. Pulling one of those bulbs isn’t the same as pulling a bulb at home, plus, it will be hot.”

“Once I was up there, I’d be able tell which one by where the sound is coming from, just like I finally figured out it’s that fixture.” He took his attention from the light fixture above them and looked at her with a frown.

“I’m not actually going to do it, but fantasizing about it helps. Do I look like a total moron to you?”

She lifted one shoulder in a universal who knows gesture. “I figure I had to be crazy to voluntarily take on the ER, so as far as I know, you could be too. But this is only my second shift in here, so how would I know for sure?”

Kinard narrowed his eyes and watched her a moment longer.

"I'm Kinard, Chris Kinard. I've been working the ER here for about three years. I knew you were new but not that new." He gave his last name first because that's how he thought of himself, that's what people called him. Not here, not really. But his brothers. The other members of the Demented Souls.

"I'm not really new, just new to the ER. I used to work in ICU but I needed a break. I can take the patients, but it was the families that wore me down. The kids sitting there for days, waiting for a parent or sibling that's just not going to get better." She shook her head. "It was more than I could handle. I think I can handle this a little better." She glanced around the room. "I know we will get a lot who won't make it, who never have a chance, and there will be families around, but I won't get to know those families, then have to experience their loss, over and over and over. The ER is get them in, get them treated and move on. At least that's what I'm hoping for."

"In a lot of ways it is. But there are some you'll get to know. We have a decent number of frequent fliers. Both people who are looking for drugs and or attention, and people who are just chronically ill. Those you'll recognize after a while." Kinard made a point of checking her name tag. "Welcome to the emergency room, Deanna. Am I saying that right?"

"Oh, sorry. I forgot. Yes, it's Deanna Gilmour. How could I have forgotten that part?" she shook her head and laughed at herself. "I guess I'm just a little flustered today."

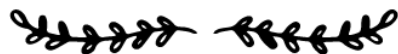
"It happens." He looked her up and down, not trying to be lewd but noticing for the first time she was tall, almost as tall as he was.

"I bet if you were to stand on my shoulders you could reach that bulb for me."

Deanna frowned. "But I don't hear it. I'd have no way of knowing which one."

That made him frown. She had a point. He didn't like it but she was right. And there was no way he was going to suggest he stand on her shoulders. He might not be the best guy around, but he didn't mistreat women, and he had no use for men who did. Still, he wanted to get that bulb to shut the hell up, he just had to figure out how.

"I need hands in here!" a doctor called out from inside a room. Kinard jumped to lend a hand, Deanna right beside him.



By the end of his shift, Kinard was exhausted. His feet ached and he wanted nothing more than to go home, soak them in hot water then put them up for a few hours. But he had other things to do first.

He made his way out of the hospital on auto pilot, avoiding walking into people and things on instinct rather than with intent or real attention.

In the lot he took one look at the car he almost exclusively drove back and forth to work, and wished it was his bike.

"Isn't that luck?" Deanna's voice broke into Kinard's daze.

"What?" He blinked and gave his head a slight shake, hoping to clear out the fog of exhaustion. Finally he spotted her. Deanna stood

beside the car parked next to his. Her hood was up and she stood with her hands on her hips as she smiled at him.

"I was just hoping someone would come along, someone who might be inclined to help me."

"What's wrong?"

"I'm an idiot, that's what." She shook her head then continued. "I left the interior light on and drained the battery. Can I talk you out of a jump?"

Kinard lifted one brow and stared at her a second. He'd like to jump her all right, but not in the way she meant.

"I don't know if I've got any cables, let me check."

"I've got some." She hurried to the driver's door, which stood open and did something he couldn't see, but from the way her trunk popped open, he assumed she'd hit the button to release it.

"Let me take a look." He went to the front of the car to see where her battery was and if he'd have to move his vehicle to get the cables to reach.

He took a look and thought they might be in luck, if his battery was where he thought it was. He popped his own hood and was lifting it as Deanna made it back with the cables.

"Let me start this so we don't both end up dead, then we'll see if we can get you running again."

It didn't take long, Kinard hooked up the cables and had her try to start it, to his relief her little sedan turned right over and purred like a kitten. He couldn't help the triumphant grin as he unhooked the cables, first from her car, then his own and coiled them up to be put away.

"Thanks so much. I don't know what I would have done without your help."

"Someone would have come along. But if you do this often, I advise getting the roadside assistance with your auto insurance. It's usually only a couple dollars a month and they'll rescue you from a lot of different trouble.

"I'll look into, thanks. In the meantime, can I buy you dinner for your trouble?"

"No need. I would have done it for anyone."

"But I feel bad, besides, I wanted to talk. A little get to know the new co-worker, a little bit of get your advice so I don't get in over my head. Please?"

Kinard started to say no. He just wanted to get out of these clothes and relax. On the other hand, he wouldn't mind getting to know her a little better.

"All right. But I'd like to change first. I'll meet you somewhere in an hour? Hour and a half?"

"How close is your place?" Deanna tilted her head to one side.

"This time of day? Fifteen to twenty minutes."

"Me too, I'm in that direction." She motioned vaguely northeast.

"Are you close?"

Kinard blinked. "I'm near Orange Grove and 1st. Why?"

"You like Italian?"

"Sure."

"How about Guiseppe's? It's on Oracle, between Rudasill and Orange Grove. How about," she glanced at her watch, "seven? That's a little over an hour and a half from now."

"Sounds good. I guess I'll see you then." He nodded down at her car. "Make sure you let this run for at least thirty minutes before you turn it off."

"Will do." Deanna went to her driver's door. She watched him for a moment then ducked inside. Kinard watched as she backed out of her space and left, then got in his own car and headed home.

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