**Ten**

The pain started in Adam’s chest. It was dull yet persistent. The sensation didn’t radiate though, so it really didn’t concern Adam that much. And it wasn’t really a pain. It was more of a pressure like the numbing ache of rogue heartburn. Adam couldn’t remember when it had started; a few days ago at best. Since the feeling was random and inconsistent, Adam didn’t deem it necessary to contact his doctor. Heart attacks for men his age weren’t uncommon, but Adam had annual physicals and was in stellar shape.

Unfortunately none of these rationalizations comforted him at the present moment. Instead the anguish over his condition worsened the pressure. His chest was heavy; his breathing shallow. Adam just couldn’t inhale deeply enough to relieve the strain. This was a major concern, especially now. His first day at The Prescription Center was starting in less than ten minutes.

When Adam walked out of Shaw Drug for the last time, he thought he would never step foot in another pharmacy. That was unrealistic. He needed to work. He had responsibilities. The desire to never do pharmacy again was quite inviting, but he was a proud man. He had a family to support. Besides the gig he had ironed out with Wes at The Prescription Center was a sweet deal. They met the week before to discuss the details. It was sometime that day the pressure started, although Adam never correlated the two events.

Adam planned on training during the last few days of school so he would be up and running when Wes needed vacations covered. Adam would then have a schedule and be able to line up sitters for the kids when both he and Val worked. He was still drawing money from Shaw. So the money he earned from Wes was going to be reserved for summer fun and those transitional rainy days that Val said weren’t behind them just yet.

He checked the clock. Five minutes to go.

His mind raced to avoid focusing on the increased tension. Normally when he needed to relax, Adam focused on his breathing. Since breathing was the root of the problem at this particular moment in time, Adam became even more flustered.

A wave of dizziness overcame him. He closed his eyes and slowly massaged his temples. It was early June. His seasonal allergies hadn’t bothered him that much as of late, but then he realized he had forgotten to take his medication the night before. Immediately he was consoled, knowing that it was probably the allergies causing the pressure. The problem was solved. Or so he thought.

He opened his eyes and exhaled slowly. The space next to The Prescription Center was occupied by a lawyer. Adam immediately thought of Davis. It had been a week since they decided to proceed with the lawsuit. Surprisingly enough, Adam was not overwhelmed as he had been when he and Davis first met. Adam succumbed to the fact that there would be so much he just wouldn’t understand. He was comfortable with that. Luckily Val had asked Davis the one question that Adam had always forgotten - payment. Davis informed them that he would take payment upon settlement. Although the percentage was steep, there was a cap on the amount he could potentially receive. The financial burden of the lawsuit had all but disappeared.

The complaints had been served. A twenty-one to twenty-eight day time frame for a response was mandated by law. Davis informed Adam he would need to be patient. It was going to be a long haul.

Out of the corner of his eye Adam saw someone enter the pharmacy through the front door. He checked the time again.

“Shit,” Adam exclaimed, scrambling to gather the few things he needed then exiting his car. His daydreaming did wonders to relieve the pressure. However, he was later than he wanted to be on his first day.

Once inside, Adam greeted the front cashier by name and hurried to the pharmacy. Wes was helping the elderly man who had entered just a few minutes before Adam. As Adam approached, Wes looked up and acknowledged Adam with a forced smile. Adam slowed his pace until he came to a halt, then busied himself in the nearby aisle. He wanted to give Wes his space as he finished the interaction with the elderly man. When the volume of Wes’s voice increased, Adam casually stepped forward curious to hear what the scuffle was about.

*Old habits died hard,* Adam thought Still Adam wanted to know exactly what was going on for no reason at all.

Immediately, the pressure returned. Adam clutched his sternum.

“Damn allergies,” he cursed softly, attempting to massage the area.

“Look here, Wes, … .” the old man started again. Adam didn’t want to hear anything after that. For the old man’s voice was bitter with contempt. Adam took a few steps back. But like the beating heart in Poe’s chilling tale, the old man’s voice followed. It seemed that the farther away Adam moved, the voice seemed louder and louder, echoing in harrowing shrillness throughout the entire store.

Then it stopped.

Adam became dizzy again. He steadied himself grabbing the shelf in front of him. He tried to catch his breath but couldn’t. The reverse actually occurred. His breathing became faster and more erratic. Sweat beaded around his brow. The pressure turned to a tightness. It choked him. He massaged his neck, which did little good. His hand moved along the curvature of his jaw line before it came to rest on the knot of his tie. Cursing softly, he loosened the tie. The slightest bit of relief was achieved.

As he rested, he vaguely heard Wes say goodbye to the customer. The elderly man walked down the aisle next to Adam. The pungent smell of the man’s aftershave wafted with unsuspecting harm. With brutish force it seemed to sucker punch Adam in the stomach. He winced pain.. A wave of nausea overcame him.

“Well, that’s not a fun way to start the morning, now is it?” Wes commented as he approached Adam.

Adam hurried to gather himself as best he could, then turned toward Wes. “I’m sorry, I didn’t hear what you said.”

“It was nothing, really.” Wes was rearranging some items on a shelf. “Just that a cranky customer at 9 o’clock in the morning sets a bad tone for the day.” Wes turned and looked directly at Adam. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah.” Apparently his attempt to compose himself was quite feeble. “I’m fine.”

“No offense, but you don’t look so good.”

“I think it’s just my allergies. Silly me. A pharmacist forgetting to take his daily meds.” Adam pretended to shoot himself in the forehead with an imaginary gun.

The abrupt movement provoked another wave of dizziness. He reached for the shelf and turned away.

“Adam, I really think it could be more than just allergies. There’s no rush on your training. Go home and … . Call me tomorrow. We can work something else out.”

*But this isn’t supposed to happen.* Adam wanted to protest. *I’m fine. It’s just my stupid allergies*.

“Wes,” a female voice from behind the pharmacy counter called. “You have a doctor’s office on the line.”

Wes acknowledged the woman with a wave of his hand.

“Adam, I should get that. Will you be able to get home okay?”

The comment, although sincere, insulted Adam. *I’m not an invalid*, he sneered to himself. *Of course I can drive home*.

Adam stood erect and proud. Placed the most candid smile he could muster on his face and looked Wes squarely in the eye. “I’m fine, thanks. I‘ll talk with you tomorrow.”