

Brianna  
on the  
Brink

by  
Nicole McInnes

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*For my family.*



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# 1

## what not to do

HERE'S A LIST of what not to do when you're sixteen (and a half) and the guy you just went all the way with keels over from a heart attack on the floor of your sister's house:

1. Don't run screaming down the street in your underwear.  
Don't—I repeat: Do *not*—do this, no matter how tempting it might be. Things will only get much worse much faster if you do, and also you could end up being responsible for somebody dying unsupervised.
2. Don't call his wife immediately.  
Duh. Besides, the moment Derek's heart stops I'm still under the impression that he's single. Kind of like how, the moment *before* his heart stopped, he thought I was twenty-one. Let's just say it's complicated and leave it at that.
3. Don't assume he's only kidding and head into the kitchen for a bowl of Cherry Garcia, thinking he'll apologize later for freaking you out.

Of course you want to believe it's just a big prank when somebody falls over like they've had a heart attack. And of course you want his face to stop changing all those patriotic colors (from red to white to blue), because that is just flat-out creepy before it turns flat-out terrifying. And it's only natural for you to want him to turn to you and say "Gotcha!" or "Kidding!" or something like that.

Anyway. The room I rent at my sister Keisha's house is tiny. It was meant to be a laundry room, but Keisha and her boyfriend, Robby, keep the washer and dryer in the carport so they can rent the space to me. Well, "rent" is kind of a strong word for it, I guess. Basically, I wash the dishes, water the plants, and occasionally cook mac and cheese or noodles in Styrofoam cups for the three of us, and they let me stay. It sounds really nice of them, but honestly, the room is about the size of a tampon box.

I know something is wrong for real the second Derek sits up and shakes his head. "What the hell am I doing?" he says, more to himself than to me, and before I can answer—or even decide if I *should* answer—he scoots away toward the edge of the bed. Then he stands up for exactly one-point-five seconds before crashing to the floor without making a sound (other than a big *thwhack* as his head hits the bedside table). And believe me, nothing will make you feel helpless and alone faster than hearing someone's head do that.

I jump out of bed with the sheet clutched to my chest and crouch down next to where Derek is wedged between the bed and the wall to see if he can tell me what's wrong. But then I realize he can't do that because he isn't breathing, much less talking. So I shove the bed as far away from him as I can (a few inches max) and do my best to remember the CPR steps we learned in health last year. But I can't really remember them, and it isn't long before the whole thing starts to feel like a bad dream where everything moves in slow motion.

When I can tell for sure that Derek's lungs aren't going to start back up on their own, I run into my sister's kitchen and dial 911, because one of the things that sucks the most about having no money is not having a cell phone when I really need one. Normally I'd call Keisha herself (even though I know for a fact she'd beat the crap out of me for hooking up with a guy in her house), because she's cool as ice in a crisis. She and Robby are camping in Sedona for the weekend, though, which means there's no way for me to get ahold of her. And, sadly, there's no point whatsoever in calling our mother, Jolene, who lives only ten minutes away but who's about as useful as windshield wipers on a submarine because she's basically a walking crisis herself.

I hold the sheet closer to my chest and try to convince my fingers to stop shaking long enough to press those three magic numbers on the old wall phone with a twisty cord long enough to stretch into every room of the house. That cord is what lets me keep an eye on the doorway of my bedroom, and I watch Derek for any sign of movement while I wait for someone to answer. The sheet is still warm from what the two of us were doing in bed just a couple of minutes ago—not just hands and mouths at that point, but shoulders and bellies and thighs. Then I hear the 911 operator saying, "What's your emergency?"

After that, there's not much. I don't remember crying to the 911 operator that we needed help or telling her where I lived, but I must have done both because within a couple of minutes someone is pounding on the front door, and then the paramedics are right there in the house with me. They push in through the entryway and run through the living room with these big suitcases that I can only assume have all sorts of tools inside for bringing the newly dead back to life. I read their name badges as they shove past—Alec, Tony, Michael—and I know Keisha will gladly murder me if they break anything like the little ceramic penguin

figurine Robby gave her on their second date. The penguin has a crazy grin on its face, and it's holding a big heart between its flippers. It's supposed to be a heartwarming declaration of love, but it's always skeeved me out.

And here's something you really don't want to have happen when you're sixteen (and a half) and the guy you just went all the way with keels over from a heart attack: you don't want the paramedics to start yelling at each other because Tony's "not moving fast enough" and Alec "needs to get his shit together and have the resuscitation kit totally prepared" after they clean out the rig. You don't want to have to scream, "In there! He's in there! God, please don't let him die!" while you point with a hand you can no longer feel to the room where a man is dying or maybe dead already.

You definitely don't want to have all the paramedics turn and stare at you like you're some little know-nothing skank wrapped up in a ratty bedsheet, the back of your hair all tangled so they know exactly what landed that poor guy on the floor of the bedroom in the first place.

And, you know, I can totally see how stupid of me this is, but even at that moment, with all those paramedics running around and the red cherry light from the ambulance flashing through the front window of Keisha's house, part of me is thinking things still might work out okay. I'm thinking the paramedics will go into the bedroom, do their thing, and then laugh in relief when Derek sits up and says, "Where am I? What's going on?"

And I'll be able to laugh right along with them while I shake my finger at Derek like a full-grown woman—like somebody's mother—and say, "You really gave us a scare, mister."

But that's not how things go at all, because I'm nowhere close to being a full-grown woman.

## 2

### next of kin

THE PARAMEDICS are yelling—at me, at Derek, and at each other.

“What’s his last name?” one of them—Tony, I think it is—asks me as the other two kneel over Derek and take turns pumping at his chest. “Come on! Come *on!*” they’re shouting. They’ve already had to drag him out into the narrow hallway to do CPR, since they couldn’t all fit in the laundry room.

“I don’t . . . I don’t know,” I answer. “I barely know him.” I can hear how high-pitched my voice is, but there’s nothing I can do to bring it down to normal.

“Do you know his home phone? Anyone we might call? Next of kin—you know, a close relative.” Tony says this like I wouldn’t know what “next of kin” means.

“No,” I say. “No.” The truth is I only met Derek a few hours ago, though one of the first things I said to him earlier tonight was that he looked familiar.

*Maybe we’re kindred spirits*, he said, looking right into my eyes. *Maybe we met in a past life.*

Tony starts going through the pockets of the pants Derek was

wearing before he wasn't wearing them anymore. They're khakis, and I allow myself a couple of seconds to remember how I unbuttoned them after we got to Keisha's house, letting them fall to the floor while we stood next to the bed, our mouths already finding each other, me already trusting him completely.

"Got some ID," Tony says, holding a brown leather wallet up to the other two, who are sitting back on their heels and breathing hard (*Why are you stopping?* I want to scream at them).

Michael nods, wipes his forehead. "We got a pulse," he says, "but it's thready. Let's load this guy the hell up."

At some point after that I must have thrown on my clothes and grabbed my purse, because the next thing I know I'm trying to get my sister's old beater of a Nissan started. The paramedics have already closed the back doors of the ambulance, and I frantically turn the key in the ignition while pounding the steering wheel with my other hand and saying the magic words that I'm pretty sure got Derek's thready pulse back—"Comeoncomeoncomeon . . ."

At the same moment the Nissan groans to life, the ambulance pulls away from the curb in front of me, siren blaring. It takes me forever to get the car up to fifty, but that's how fast I'm going (in a twenty-five-mile-per-hour zone) when I finally catch up to Alec, Tony, and Michael and blast through the last red light before the hospital right behind them. When they turn into the Emergency Personnel Only lane, I drive around the crowded patients and visitors lot, the half-bald tires squealing, until I finally find a space. After that, it takes only seconds for me to sprint across the pavement toward the ER entrance, where glass doors whoosh open to let me through.

There's a check-in station just inside the building, and I keep running until my hands hit the narrow counter and my breath fogs up the security glass. An overweight woman with bags under her eyes sits typing at a computer on the other side of the window,

and I tap on the glass to get her attention. She looks at me for a second, just long enough to open the window a few inches, and then her eyes go back to the screen. “Can I help you?”

“Is he okay?” I demand. “Is he alive?”

“Patient name?” she asks without even bothering to look away from the monitor.

“Derek,” I say, panting. “Derek . . . I don’t know his last name. But they just brought him in. Tony and Alec and . . . I don’t remember the third guy’s name.”

She looks at me then, looks at me with pity or impatience, I can’t quite tell which. She probably deals with people like me every day. “You’re obviously not family.”

I look down. “No.” And as soon as I say it, I know I should have lied and said yes. But maybe lying would have added more bad luck to this night, which already seems to be overflowing with it.

“You can sit over there,” tired typing lady says, jerking her head toward some plastic-covered chairs and benches. “Nurse’ll come out and tell you when there’s news.”

Most of the people in the waiting room are staring up at a TV mounted high on a wall like they’re ER regulars, like this is just something they do on Friday nights. And I can see why, because the place is somehow comforting, with its fluorescent lights and neutral wallpaper, even if everyone here is either scared or sad or angry or in shock. It’s almost like the building was made big enough and strong enough to hold the worst feelings in the world. Some people stare into the air in front of them with no expression at all, snapping out of it only when the Authorized Personnel Only doors next to the check-in desk swing open and a nurse comes into the waiting room to call out a last name. I find a seat near the glass doors and sit there watching Conan with the others.

Every once in a while there's a *whoosh* to my left as someone new comes in. Sometimes they come in all relaxed—happy, even—as is the case with a homeless-looking guy with a bandage on his hand who calls out, “Hey there, Maggie,” to the woman at the check-in station before taking a seat. And sometimes there's a huge, noisy rush, like when a bald guy comes in screaming that the stab wound he got last week is infected and will somebody please put him out of his misery *now*. He's holding his side, his tear-streaked face scrunched up in pain, and our eyes meet for half a second as he looks around for someplace to sit.

And it is during that half second that my own tears finally come—tears of fear and stress and exhaustion and not knowing what to do next other than just sit and wait while Conan's audience laughs in the background. A Navajo lady sitting on the bench to my right and decked out in generations, probably, of family turquoise passes me a box of tissues without saying a word.

After about twenty minutes, a doctor and a nurse come out through the Authorized Personnel Only doors, their heads tilted toward each other. Both have paper masks hanging under their chins, like just moments before they pulled them from over their mouths but haven't bothered to take them off. The doctor says something in a low voice to the nurse, who nods and looks around the waiting room. Maybe they're looking for someone who belongs to Derek, I think—someone, anyone, other than the teenage girl sitting next to the exit, the girl with smeared makeup, messy bed hair, and G-U-I-L-T scrawled across her forehead in invisible ink.

“Plain,” the nurse calls out, but nobody in the waiting room stands.

Instead, as if in response, the glass entrance doors of the ER open again.

I glance up and see, of all people, my English teacher. And my first bizarre thought is this: *The school must have heard I was in*

*trouble, and the counselors must have been busy, so instead they sent Plain Jane (not her real name, obviously).*

She is moving fast, unwinding one of her endless scarves from around her neck and looking around like she's lost something, her eyes wide. "Did you say Playne?" she asks the nurse, who nods. "Well, I'm here," Plain Jane says. "Where is he? Where's my husband?"

My second thought is *Oh, crap. Now I know where I've seen Derek before.*

Plain Jane still hasn't seen me sitting there, but I know she will if I don't do something quick. So I stand up, looking at the floor so my hair falls over my puffy face. I can hear the doctor and the nurse speaking to Plain Jane in low voices as I move toward the exit.

And I'd be home free at this point if it wasn't for Maggie, the check-in lady, who slides open her glass security window and points at me. "She's here for him, too," Maggie calls out to the three of them, no doubt thinking she's doing me a favor.

The next thing I hear is "Miss?" It's the doctor, calling to me.

But rather than answer him, I keep walking, ignoring all the eyes and thinking some new magic words: *You don't see me, you don't see me, you don't see me.* Slipping through the doors, I leave a trail of soggy Kleenex behind me as I hit the parking lot and break into a run.