

Doctor Moo

(May, 1995)

It really is over.

I never truly doubted myself. Honestly, I always knew I'd make it. But – as I've learned in thousands of ways, large and small – knowing and doing are two very different things.

It's over. Four years of endless work, and two or three hundred pages of reading a night, and ninety or hundred or hundred and ten hour workweeks on my clinical rotations – and having life and death in my very inexperienced hands.

And two and a half years of doing all that while trying to keep up with a dark-haired, green-eyed bundle of energy named Elizabeth Kathleen Alderson.

At the moment, I'm carrying her down the hallway of the administration floor in the medical school, her arms wrapped around my neck. She would rather be elsewhere.

"Milkshake!"

Of course she wants a milkshake. I'd like one, too. But I have paperwork to fill out for graduation, which I've forgotten to take care of for the last month. If I don't get it done today, I won't be able to walk with my classmates, and I've worked far too hard to miss that. Not to mention that my parents – and Brian – would never forgive me.

When I get to the main office, I see that I'm not the only one who's waited until the last minute. There are at least a dozen of my fellow students here filling out their graduation forms. Lizzie is unimpressed.

"Milkshake!"

A dozen heads turn, and I get a dozen knowing smiles. Everyone in my class knows Lizzie, and if there's one of them she hasn't managed to charm, I don't know about it.

"Soon, honey," I coo. "As soon as Mommy is done."

One of my classmates, Dominick, a fellow survivor of the first-year Introduction to Clinical Practice course with Dr. Morris, comes up and tickles Lizzie's chin. "Don't you want your mother to graduate?"

"I want milkshake!"

"She's got a one-track mind, doesn't she?" Dominick pats me on the back. "I can't *imagine* where she got it from."

I just shake my head; I've been known to be stubborn myself, on occasion. "Like I said, honey, as soon as we're finished here, we'll go and get a milkshake."

"Choc-choc-chocolate and pea butter!"

“Yes, honey, chocolate and peanut butter. I promise.” She really does take after me, doesn’t she? I tickle her and talk to her to try and keep her occupied – and quiet – so my fellow students can finish their paperwork in peace.

It mostly works, and twenty minutes later, I’m filling out my forms while Dominick very graciously amuses Lizzie. “Where’s your nose?” is pretty much guaranteed to occupy her for at least ten minutes at a time. According to my mother, it was my favorite game as a toddler, too.

I go over the forms three times, making sure I’ve dotted every “i” and crossed every “t.” Then I thank Dominick, and pick Lizzie up. “Wasn’t that fun, honey? Say thank you to Dominick.”

“Thank you. Milkshake!”

“Good luck,” Dominick says, ruffling Lizzie’s hair before he leaves. I grab my purse and get ready to head out myself, but before I do, my least favorite person in the whole school walks into the office.

Even after I saved his life – twice! – and then earned his respect by coming into his hospital room and openly challenging him, he still hasn’t had a single kind word for me in four years. I’ve told myself, over and over, that it’s a sign of respect. I even believe it. But that’s not the kind of respect I want, and I hope it’s not going to be the norm in my residency, or for the rest of my career.

“Dr. Morris,” I say, smiling just like I always do with him, even though it never does any good. I’d have thought he would lighten up after he became Dean of the school, back in the spring of my first year. Most people, when they achieve their lifelong goal, act pleased about it.

Not Dr. Morris. If anything, he became more sour once he got his dream job. Honestly, I’m kind of surprised that nobody else has tried to kill him during the three years he’s been in charge of the school.

“Mrs. Alderson,” he answers. “Tardy as ever, I see.”

Lizzie wriggles around in my arms, trying to get a look at Dr. Morris. “Ta-y. Ta-dy. Tady.” She’s so quick; she only has to hear something once or twice to pick it up and start repeating it. “Tady?”

“Tardy, honey. It means late.” Dr. Morris rolls his eyes. That’s fine. One more week, and I’ll never have to see him roll his eyes, or do anything else, ever again.

“I’ve said it many times, Mrs. Alderson. I thought you were a fool to try and have a child while you were in school,” he says, scowling. “My opinion has not changed. But,” the scowl relaxes, a little, “I will admit that you’ve managed your responsibilities adequately. You will graduate on time and in good standing,” he says. Then he peers closely at Lizzie for a few seconds before continuing, “And your child appears to be healthy and progressing normally.”

It takes me a moment to process what he said. It was a backhanded compliment, but it was a compliment all the same. And it deserves a response. I walk over to him, lean right in and kiss his cheek. “Thank you, Dr. Morris!”

His scowl returns, full force. “Really!”

“I couldn’t help myself, Dr. Morris. I’m sorry,” I say, fighting back laughter.

Lizzie doesn’t bother to try and fight her own reaction. She reaches out towards Dr. Morris, calling out as loudly as she can, “Doctor Moo! Doctor Moo!”

And now I can’t help myself; I break into giggles. Doctor Moo! It’s perfect. Obviously he doesn’t think so; he’s not just scowling now, he’s giving me – and Lizzie – a death stare. My daughter is unfazed. She’s still trying to wriggle out of my grasp, and I have to set her down on a chair before she escapes and falls onto the floor.

She pulls herself to her feet, hanging onto the armrest of the chair for support, and stares up at Dr. Morris. And then – oh, this is just the icing on the cake! – she sets her face into her best imitation of his icy glare. “Doctor Moo,” she repeats, in a low growl. “Doctor Moo!”

Dr. Morris just stands there for a minute, staring back at her, watching her imitate him. And then – I don’t believe I’m seeing this – he crouches down, getting to eye level with my daughter. “If you must do that, do it correctly, Miss Alderson.” He reaches out and tugs on her cheeks, pulling her face into a nastier expression, and then adds, “show your teeth,” while pulling her upper lip. “And never break eye contact.” He steps back. “Much better. You’re a quicker learner than your mother.”

He’s right – she’s now wearing exactly his trademark scowl. “Doctor Moo!”

I don’t know what to say. There are just no words, and Dr. Morris notices the fact. “Well, this is a first,” he says, turning his attention back to me. “You, speechless? How refreshing.” I want to – I don’t know. Thank him? Slap him? I settle for not doing anything at all, and letting him have the last word. “Yes, most refreshing,” he says, heading for the door. “I shall see you at graduation, Mrs. Alderson. Good day.”

Lizzie hops down off her chair and runs after him. She throws herself at him, clutching his leg. “Doctor Moo good day!”

He’s got one more surprise for me: he pats her head and says, “Good day to you as well, Elizabeth.” I didn’t think he even knew her first name – but of course he did all along. I still can’t think of a single thing to say; I just watch him detach my daughter from his leg and walk out of the office, smiling. I had no idea the man even had the capability to smile.

I guess Doctor Moo had one last lesson to teach me.