THE EMERGENCY DOCTOR'S CHOSEN WIFE

Molly Evans

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She stroked his face with her hand. “Thank you.”

“What for?” He pressed a kiss to her palm.

“Being there for me. I’m not good at needing anyone, or asking for help,” Gina said. “But I wanted to thank you.”

“You’re welcome. I know you’re very strong, and totally self-reliant, but sometimes we all need to lean on someone.” A stray tear escaped from her eye, and he wiped it away with his thumb. “I’m here if you need to lean on me. My shoulders can take it.”

Molly Evans has worked as a nurse from the age of nineteen. She’s worked in small rural hospitals, the Indian Health Service, and large research facilities all over the United States. After spending eight years as a Traveling Nurse, she settled down to write in her favourite place—Albuquerque, New Mexico. Within days she met her husband, and has been there ever since. With twenty-two years of nursing experience, she’s got a lot of material to use in her writing. She lives in the high desert with her family, three chameleons, two dogs, and has a passion for quilting in whatever spare time she has. Visit Molly at: www.mollyevans.com

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CHAPTER ONE

Hidden Valley, Virginia, U.S.A.

NURSE GINA RIDDLES stood in the parking lot and looked up at the hospital she had hoped never to enter again. Although necessary, returning here wasn't on her list of fun-filled things to do this summer. Being a travel nurse had been her dream, and she was living it. Over the last few years she'd been there and done it all. Trauma, open-heart surgery, research facilities and cutting-edge university hospitals. She'd worked in many cities and states, traveling as she'd never have been able to if working a permanent job. Travel nursing afforded her the opportunity to visit exotic places and still make a decent living. Coming back here brought her dreams to a screeching halt.

She had hoped she'd be in and out of her home town in a week but unfortunately settling her father's estate hadn't been as simple as she'd hoped. There was so much more involved than packing up his clothing and calling in a maid service.

The honk of a car horn distracted her, and she realized she was in the middle of the parking lot. She moved out of the way and took another look. A sleek, silver, late- model Porsche purred just feet away from her. The driver inched the car forward and zipped down the window.

"Hello. May I help you?"

Gina gulped and felt the thrill all the way to her toenails. Sitting there was the most fabulous-looking man she'd ever seen. Even from behind his designer sunglasses she could see the most piercing blue eyes that cut right through her. The man was gorgeous. Gina's tongue suddenly felt heavy and dry. She doubted she could carry on a conversation and hoped he didn't ask her anything too complicated. Wow. There had been no doctors like this when she had been here six years ago. Certainly none with wavy dark hair with tips kissed by the sun, darkly tanned and fit, like him.

"Are you lost?" he asked, and turned the car into a designated physician spot.

"No. I'm in the right place." His soft, smoky voice almost made her want to follow him around just to hear him speak again. Making a fool of herself the second she arrived at her new job was not the impression she wanted to make. She was a professional. Really. "Unfolded himself" was the only way to describe how he exited the shiny new car. With a leather briefcase in one hand and a white lab coat in the other, he looked down at her as if waiting for something. With one glance she knew he was someone important. He had that made-from-money look about him. The way he carried himself, the cut of his suit. Everything about him, even the exotic spicy fragrance that drifted on the morning air, whispered *Money*. He removed his sunglasses, and she knew exactly the kind of man he was.

His family was made from money, old Virginia money, a culture very different from her own. Another reminder of her past that she didn't need today.

"Yes. I'm heading inside, but wanted to take one last breath of fresh air before taking the plunge." She walked alongside him, determined to get through this temporary assignment as well as possible. It was just another job like all the others, right?

"I see. And you are…?" His brows lifted with the question, and he turned those blue eyes on her again.

She held out her hand, and he gave it a brief, firm shake. "Oh, sorry. Gina Riddles, travel nurse."

"Thomas Ferguson, medical director of the ER. Welcome aboard, Gina. This your first time in Virginia?" he asked, and led the way through the parking area to the staff entrance of the ER.

"No. I grew up here, but haven't been back for a few years." After this assignment was over she was gone. She wasn't staying in this place one second longer than absolutely necessary. Thank God this job was only temporary. She'd see her mother settled and then find another assignment, on an island somewhere maybe, where she could relax and catch up on her reading. Hawaii sounded good.

"Well, welcome back. Let's see about getting you to the charge nurse."

Gina followed him, trying to live in the moment, not her past. A past that threatened to take her back to the place she'd struggled so hard to leave. She tried not to listen to the erratic beating of her heart. Certainly, it had nothing to do with this man's unexpected presence and everything to do with her new job. At least that's what she tried to convince herself of as she stuck her backpack under the desk.

Thomas frowned as he watched Gina talk with Rhonda, the charge nurse. A redheaded beauty with flawless skin. Some hesitation in her blue eyes, though. Hopefully she'd be more than eye candy. Tall and physically fit, she looked like a runner and someone who might be able to keep up with him, biking in the mountains. Certainly he was old enough and wise enough not to be smitten by a first meeting with a beautiful woman, but there was something about her. Turning away, he entered his office, puzzled at the way such a short meeting had intrigued him.

Gina glanced up just as Thomas moved away. Her gaze lingered on his back.

"I see you've met our Dr Thomas," Rhonda said, a knowing smile on her face. "He's something, isn't he?"

"Oh, yeah," Gina said on a breath of a sigh.

Rhonda laughed, and Gina dragged her gaze away. "I'm so sorry. That was really rude, wasn't it?"

"No. Totally understandable. He's very easy on the eye."

"No kidding," Gina said, and snorted at that major understatement. "Now, where were we?"

Hours later, assigned to bring the next patient through Triage, she entered the waiting room. An elderly man rose on trembling knees and clasped a walking cane. Gina strode over to him and offered her arm. "I'm Gina, and I'll be your nurse for a while today." The man took her arm and leaned heavily on it. Unprepared for the movement, Gina compensated and clasped her arm around his thin waist to help support him through the waiting room. "Do you need a wheelchair? I can go get one if it would be easier for you."

"No. I've had too much sitting down as it is," he said. "I can walk that far," he went on, and after a slight hesitation he placed one arm over her shoulders for extra support.

After settling him in a cubicle, Gina started the obligatory history for any patient who entered. "What brings you in today?"

The man cleared his throat and looked away, clearly uncomfortable with whatever he was about to say. "I need a man doctor. Do you have one of them here?"

"A man doctor, hmm? I think we have one around, but I should tell him a little bit about what's going on." She tried to be as gentle as possible with her questions, but did need to get information out of him before dragging a doctor in to see him. "Is it a personal issue?"

"Very. Hasn't been a woman other than my wife seen my privates since I *was* a private. World War Two, you know."

"Gotcha. Is it OK if I check your blood pressure and pulse first so I can tell the doctor I did my job?" Gina asked, and pulled out a BP cuff.

"Sure," he said, and held out his arm, but remained standing beside the gurney.

"You're running a fever. Did you know that?" A temperature was a warning sign of something wrong. The flush to his cheeks didn't look good, and his pulse was irregular. Another sign of trouble.

This man definitely needed some help right away. Something in her, some finely tuned nursing instinct, told her there was more to his story.

"Yes, ma'am. Been feeling poorly for some time now." He shook his head in disgust. "Just thought it would go away eventually, but it hasn't."

"*What* did you think would go away?" she asked, and busied herself with her paperwork, hoping that by keeping her eyes averted he would tell her something that he couldn't say while facing her.

"I've got swelling where there shouldn't be any. My thigh and…groin are swollen something awful," he said, shifting his weight again.

Gina removed his shirt and put a patient gown on him, but he kept his pants on. "Can you sit on the gurney, or is it too painful?" Hopefully he could at least lie down and relieve some of the pressure on the groin area. "If you can't sit, I can help you to lie down, which probably will be more comfortable for you."

"I'll try," he said. After removing his trousers while keeping his modesty, Gina assisted him into a reclining position.

Mr Jones was sweating and breathing hard after getting onto the gurney. As a precaution she gave him oxygen. "Sometimes oxygen can help with the pain," she said, and connected the cardiac monitor and automatic blood-pressure cuff as well. One glance at the heart monitor, and she was certain that he was as stable as she could make him for the moment.

"I'll take anything at this point," he said, breathed deeply and then closed his eyes. The wrinkle between his brows deepened.

"Let me see who I can find for you." Hurrying toward the nurses'station, she almost collided with Dr Ferguson in the hallway. "Doctor? I've got a situation I could use your help with."

"Sure. What's the trouble?" Thomas asked, putting aside the chart he was reading and focusing on Gina.

"I've got a patient who's requesting a male physician. He's apparently very private and wouldn't allow me to examine him properly, but he says his groin is swollen, red and painful. He's also feverish, tachycardic, and in extreme pain. He can't sit very well." Gina hesitated as she watched him digest that information. "I think there's something seriously wrong with him."

"Anything else?" His blue eyes searched hers, his expression unreadable.

Gina swallowed, uncomfortable with his piercing regard. "At this point, no. That's all I've got." She knew she should have had more information to give him, but right now the patient needed the doctor's input.

"Lead the way. Any family with him?"

"No, but he is married." Gina led Thomas to the patient.

They entered the cubicle. "Mr Jones? This is Dr Ferguson. He's going to do a more thorough exam." Gina backed out of the way and pulled the curtain around them. "I'll wait outside to give you a bit more privacy. Call me if you need something." Gina tugged the curtain closed.

"So, what seems to be the trouble, Mr Jones? The nurse seemed to think it was of a…delicate nature." Thomas observed the man's flushed cheeks and glanced at the monitor, confirming Gina's assessment of stability.

"It is," Mr Jones said. "I have a…um…condition. It's too painful. I held out as long as I could, but I just don't know what to do about it anymore."

"Oh, I see. Well, how about I take a look?"

Thomas gloved up, preparing to examine the patient. When he eased the gown away, he cringed and tried to keep all expression from his face. *Good God.* He took a deep breath as he assessed the man's affected areas. The groin and upper thigh were red, the skin inflamed and hard as a rock. The left testicle was the size of a grapefruit. "What happened here?"

"I fell and a few days later this is what showed up." Mr Jones shook his head in disgust, but even that small movement seemed to give him pain.

There had to be more to the story than that. “You fell?” That wasn’t what his gut was telling him had happened to Mr Jones. Thomas’s suspicions were more along the lines of malignancy. The man might have a trauma as well, but that wasn’t the only thing wrong with him. Thomas sighed, knowing this wasn’t going to be an easy case. But then, easy cases rarely interested him. He liked the intricacies of complicated cases. He knew he should go into hematology or infectious diseases, but his heart was in emergency medicine and the excitement it brought.

“Tripped over the damned cat. Guess I need to get my eyeglass prescription changed, too. Didn’t even see her.” He winced as Thomas continued the exam.

This was no injury from a fall. Instinct and years of experience told Thomas it was much more than that. The lymph nodes in the left groin and tissue in the upper thigh were swollen, firm, red and painful to the touch. With a sigh, he stood upright. “I’d like to run some tests to figure out what’s going on and see if we can’t make you more comfortable with a little medication.” This wasn’t going to be a simple fix or an easy diagnosis. He was certain of it.

Thomas stepped outside the curtain, but he didn’t have to look far for Gina.

“So, did you figure out what’s going on with him?” she asked, and walked along beside him to the nurses’station.

“Unfortunately, I left my X-ray glasses at home today.” He picked up the chart and started writing. “Give him some morphine.” Thomas shuddered, sympathetic to Mr Jones’s plight. “Then complete lab work-up, X-rays, CT scan, urine culture and blood cultures. We’ll also probably have to set up a referral to the hematology- oncology team as well. Have the secretary find out if they can see him today. This looks pretty urgent.” Thomas scribbled quickly in the chart as he rattled the orders off to Gina.

“You think he’s got cancer, don’t you?” she asked, her eyes wide.

“I think he has *advanced* cancer, and doesn’t have a clue. Tripped over his cat and believes that brought on this condition,” Thomas said, and shook his head.

“Denial is a very powerful coping mechanism,” Gina said, thinking about her own situation with her parents. “It gets people through a lot of tough situations they couldn’t deal with otherwise.”

Thomas didn’t respond for a moment, but studied her wide, expressive eyes clouded with concern for her patient. The woman was gorgeous. Tall, slender, with curly red hair pulled back into a clip that somehow managed to almost contain the mass. Yeah, he’d seen that before. Not going near that again, no matter how attractive the package. Once was enough for him. Keeping things professional was his best strategy with the budding attraction he was starting to feel for Gina. “Are you *asking* me not to be judgmental?”

“Yes. For just a moment.” She bit her lip, hoping she wasn’t leaping off a cliff here.

“Well, you’re right,” he said, and scribbled some more on the chart, then handed it to her. “But I still think he has cancer.”

“Thank you, Doctor.” She nodded, sending the mass of curling ringlets bobbing.

“Thomas, please.”

She gave a quick smile. “Thomas, then.” She took the chart from him. “I’ll get started on these right away.”

Travel nurses. He just didn’t get that. Uprooting their lives every three months to go somewhere else and do it all over again. Having come from a family firmly entrenched in Virginia, wanderlust wasn’t in his genes. Travelers fulfilled staffing needs, and they certainly had one now. Returning to his charting, he forced himself not to watch Gina walk away, though looking at the back of her was just as attractive as looking at the front. With a sigh of disgust at the surge of hormones racing through his system, he reached for the phone and jerked it off the hook. Now was not the time for him to be falling for a coworker, especially one he’d just met.

Gina approached Mr Jones’s cubicle. “Knock, knock. Can I come in?” She peeked through the curtain.

"Yes, ma'am," Mr Jones responded. He lay with his eyes closed, his fingers laced and resting on his abdomen.

"The doctor's ordered some bloodwork and other tests," she said, and took his arm to look for a vein. "As soon as I get an IV started, I'll give you some pain medicine, too. You look like you could use a touch of it right now." In minutes she had the IV fluids going and injected the pain medicine. "Here comes the morphine. Just breathe slowly and let it go to work." Easing a patient's pain was the most important thing to her as a nurse. Sometimes the pain was physical, sometimes it was emotional. But she did whatever she could to help those in need. That's why she'd become a nurse. She focused on helping others and found a place where she fit in.

Within minutes Mr Jones started to relax and his heart rate decreased by twenty points. "That's better, isn't it?" Gina asked, and patted his arm in a soothing manner. "Now that you're a little more comfortable, I'm going to get you to Radiology for those other tests. Why don't you tell me a little about yourself while I take you over there?"

Several hours later, after all the tests were over, Gina brought Mr Jones back to the cubicle and searched for Thomas. She knocked on his office door. "Dr Ferguson? Um, Thomas? Mr Jones's tests are complete and ready for you to review."

Thomas set down the chart he had been reading. "I'm sure they're not good, but I'll be happy to look at them." He stood with a sigh, disturbed by the task ahead, knowing already what the results would be. Gina hesitated by the door, looking up at him, chewing on her lower lip as worry crept into her eyes. He wanted to put her at ease. He knew he could be demanding sometimes, but he just wanted what was in the patient's best interests. Not that she knew that, being so new to working here. "Something else on your mind?" he asked, and approached her, wanting to see if his reaction to her was any different than it had been this morning.

"I know it's not my place to tell you how to do your job, but…" Some doctors didn't appreciate interference, especially from someone they didn't know. But she wouldn't be acting in her patient's best interests if she didn't say something.

"But what?" Thomas raised a brow and nodded, realizing he was standing very close to her. He took a step back, adding just a little distance between them. "If you have something to say, say it. I appreciate the honesty." Especially after the games his ex had played. Honesty was a refreshing change.

"You have doom and gloom written all over you even before you go in there. He deserves your best face, even if it's not how you feel." Gina tensed, watching Thomas, waiting for him to tear into her. A moment passed, and he said nothing. Surprised that he didn't, Gina waited for him to answer.

"I'm not going to give him false hope if that's what you're asking," Thomas said, and met her gaze squarely. "That's not appropriate."

"If there's any hope at all, it's not false," she said, as they moved away from his office toward the cubicle. "Sometimes people need to have something to believe in, even if they know it's only temporary." Thomas walked along with her, contemplating her words.

"You sound pretty certain of that," he said, and stopped outside the cubicle.

"Unfortunately, I am. Comes from personal experience." Without elaborating further, she pushed aside the curtain. "We're back, Mr Jones."

"What's the word, Doctor?" he asked.

"Mr Jones, I believe it would be prudent to have you stay in the hospital for a day or two to undergo further evaluation." He leaned against the counter in the room and gave a mental sigh. "After the exam and looking at your preliminary test results, I'm thinking that you have cancer in your groin. It wasn't the fall that caused your injuries, but it certainly may have aggravated them."

"Cancer, eh?" Mr Jones said, and blinked several times as he digested the information. "That's a tough one." He rubbed his jaw with his work-callused hand.

"It certainly is. So if there are any treatment options, the oncologist will be able to give you a better prognosis than I can right now." Thomas hated bearing bad news, but it was part of the job. And Gina was right. If there was any hope at all, it wasn't false. He'd do well to remember that.

"OK. If you say so." Mr Jones closed his eyes. "I don't know what I'm going to tell Elizabeth. She's always leaned on me." The long sigh he emitted said it all.

"I'll call Admitting, then," Gina said quietly.

"Go ahead." Thomas watched as she carried out his orders. Calm, efficient, firm in her beliefs, and not afraid to express her opinion. Interesting combination.

"Got a room on the fourth floor." As Gina leaned over the counter to write, Thomas hesitated. There was something about her that made him want to stop and look. She was certainly attractive and obviously dedicated to her job, but that wasn't enough for him to really notice her. Was it the fiery red hair that was now half out of its clip, or the impish grin that had flitted over her face momentarily? Or was it the glimpse of unmasked vulnerability he had seen in her sparkling blue eyes when they had discussed Mr Jones's case? Maybe that was why she was a traveler, running away from something painful in her life. She'd alluded to it just moments ago. In any case, it wasn't any of his business, and he left the cubicle.

Gina finished writing up her chart and approached Mr Jones. "Hey, handsome. After I take you upstairs, I'll call your wife. She's probably worried about you by now." She knew he was probably trying to protect his wife, but now was not the time to keep this kind of information a secret. Sharing often brought people closer. Except in the case of her parents. But that was a whole different problem. "I'll just grab the paperwork on the way," she said, and stopped with him at the desk. "Are you through with that, Doctor?" she asked. "I'm about to take Mr Jones upstairs."

"Thomas, remember?"

"Sorry." She wrinkled her nose at the slip. "I'm not used to calling doctors by their first names. I'll try," she said, and colored lightly under his amused regard. She schooled herself not to react to that intense stare of his. She'd learned the lesson the hard way years ago that a nice pair of eyes didn't mean anything, and she wasn't about to step over the line again. Once was enough.

"Here you go." He handed her the bundle of mismatched paperwork that served as a chart. "I've added a few new orders for tomorrow."

"Thanks. I'll make sure to pass it along." Gina nodded and gave a quick glance back at Thomas, wondering what he was doing in this town. She knew about his family, and they were the kind that didn't just attend universities, they built them. No great university or research hospitals in Hidden Valley. Just a little town with a whole lot of nobodys in it. She gave a mental shrug. His life was none of her business. Getting curious about him would only bring trouble she didn't need. The phone rang, pulling her away from her thoughts. Thomas picked up the phone, and Gina moved off with the gurney toward the back hallway and the staff elevators.

After taking Mr Jones to his room, getting him settled in, giving the report to the floor nurse and finally returning to the ER, Gina was wiped out. The energy she had spent on her first day on the job had drained her physically and emotionally. Just stepping into this hospital again had made her sweat. She'd done her student nurse training here and had bolted for Richmond, sixty miles away, the day after graduation. From there, she'd taken off and had never looked back. Until now. Until her father's unexpected death had made it apparent that she'd had to come home. But being here was turning into a rope around her neck that was getting tighter and tighter.

Having been away from home for so long, she hadn't realized that things had gotten as bad as they had until it had been too late. Now she was stuck in a quagmire of lifelong guilt, unexpected financial responsibility, and emotional upheaval. She didn't want any of it, but there was no one else, unless she wanted to hand her mother over to the state of Virginia to manage, and that wasn't going to happen. She'd just have to put her feelings aside and deal with it.

Leather briefcase in hand, lab coat tossed carelessly over his shoulder, Thomas approached the nurses' station as he headed toward the door. "I thought you'd left already."

"Don't worry. I'm not going into overtime on my first day. I wanted to see Mr Jones settled upstairs and helped him call his wife." Collecting her backpack, she slung it on and walked with Thomas to the entrance.

"That was kind of you, and I wasn't concerned that you were going over your time."

"Thanks. He doesn't have anybody to be with him right now, so I stayed a few extra minutes. His wife doesn't see well enough at night to drive over here, so I talked to her for a few minutes on the phone." Gina sighed, attempting to shake off the emotions of the day, and tried not see how they mirrored her own life. "I'm beat."

"I'm sure it's been a long first day for you." Thomas held the door open for her.

"Yes, thanks." She started across the parking lot. Humidity in the spring was always oppressive, and it pressed down on her now. "I'll see you tomorrow."

"You're walking?" he asked, his brows raised in surprise.

"Yes. Good exercise." She started to wave, then hesitated as the frown on his face deepened. "What?"

"Gina, really, you shouldn't walk alone at night. That can be dangerous around here."

"It's just a few blocks, Doc. I'll be fine." She lowered her hand and watched as he approached her. Even in the dark, his presence was almost overwhelming. The light from nearby streetlights created shadows on his face that hadn't been there moments ago. The deep-set eyes were hidden and revealed nothing of his mood, and her heart beat a little quicker.

"Nonsense. Come on. I'll give you a ride home." He opened the door to his car and stowed his belongings in the back.

"Really, it's just a few…" Her throat went dry at the thought of sitting in that little car with such a big man, even if it was just a two-minute drive.

"Then, if it's close by, it won't take any time to deliver you home safely," he said. "I insist."

By his tone and stance, Gina knew there was no sense in arguing with the man, and she was too tired to put up a fight. "Oh, OK. But I really would have been fine. I've walked this town since I was a kid, even at night."

"Things have changed since you lived here. Even in the year since I've been here." Thomas walked around his car. "We've had drugs and gangs infiltrate the schools. Kids are getting into that stuff younger and younger. Not long ago one of our physicians was going to the parking garage and was attacked with a tire iron."

"Oh, my God. Is he or she OK?" Gina asked. "I had no idea stuff like that had been going on." Things like that hadn't happened when she'd been growing up. She'd obviously been way out of touch, more than she'd realized.

"It's a him, and he's OK. He's back at work now, but he was beaten pretty severely." Thomas opened the door for her.

Gina hesitated as she looked inside at the lush leather seats compared to her grungy scrubs.

"What's wrong? Not afraid to ride with me, are you?" A smile twitched at the corners of his mouth.

"No, it's not that," she said, and gave him a sidelong smile.

"What, then?"

"I'm afraid riding in this car will ruin me for all other cars."

Thomas laughed. "What do you drive?"

"I'm afraid to tell you." She tossed her backpack on the floor.

"Gina, I'm not that judgmental."

"OK. It's a Ford. A really old one, but it gets me where I need to go."

“Well, get in and enjoy the ride, even if it’s a short one.” He chuckled again as she slid into the leather seat with an appreciative groan.

“This should be illegal,” she said as he closed the door and went around to the other side.

“So, where to?” He looked across the narrow confines of the car and waited. Despite having never been in a car like this, she looked like she fit it perfectly. With her long legs stretched out in front of her and angled toward him, she looked like she could be in a car commercial. If it weren’t for the scrubs she wore.

“Oh, sorry. Take a left out of the parking lot,” she said, snapping her seat belt into place and settling into the seat. In minutes they arrived at her cottage. “Could you drive around the block a few times?”

“Why? Do you see someone who shouldn’t be there?” he asked and looked up the driveway.

“No. I just wanted to enjoy the ride a little longer. Riding in my car just won’t be the same.”

He pulled over to the curb and laughed out loud. Glancing in the rearview mirror, he zipped back onto the street. “Once more around the block, just for you,” he said. How often had any woman he’d known been made happy with a simple car ride? Never, was the simple answer.

Gina let out a giggle of pleasure that sent a shiver of reaction through him. Here, sitting in the car with nothing else between them, it was easy to forget the rest of his life. But a few minutes later he pulled back into her driveway and the momentary spell was broken. “Here you are,” he said, and parked the car.

“Thanks, Thomas. I’m sure I would have been fine walking—”

“But it’s better to make sure you got here in one piece. It was no trouble.” He glanced at her again, and she held his gaze and he felt himself reluctant to end their drive. “So how was your first day?”

Gina nodded and leaned her head back against the headrest. “Tiring, but good. I just feel so sorry for Mr Jones.”

“Yes, me too. But we’ll do whatever we can to help him. I’m sure you know that.” He hesitated just a moment. “And I do appreciate the correction you gave me. It’s easy to forget that a patient’s mental processes aren’t the same as ours.”

“Yes, it is easy to forget. I just hope there’s time for him.” She gathered her backpack from the floor and held it in her lap. “My father died of cancer recently, and by the time he was diagnosed it was already too late.” What had made her offer that information she didn’t know, but being in the car was like being in a secluded bubble where nothing else mattered. “Lord, I must be tired to talk about him.”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t know. Next time a patient like that comes in, ask to switch if you’re uncomfortable with the situation.” Thomas scanned her face, but didn’t see any obvious anxiety.

“It was OK.” Totally different types of men. Totally different types of situations. “My father and I were never close.”

Thomas watched the play of emotions across her face and wondered if she could really be as open and honest as she appeared to be. That would be such a refreshing change from the women in his social circles.

Leaning over, Gina reached for the seat belt fastener. Instead of releasing it, her fingers seemed to fumble and her hand started to sweat, slipping on the polished metal. “I can’t get it.”

“Let me see,” Thomas said, and reached for the buckle, brushing her hands with his. His strong fingers closed over hers and tugged. The buckle came free, and Gina pulled back.

The close proximity of his head to hers in the narrow confines of the vehicle gave her another tantalizing whiff of his cologne. The man smelled like a dream, and her heart fluttered wildly, reacting in ways she hadn’t reacted to a man in a long time.

“I guess I should go now.” She clutched her backpack to her as if it could protect her from the effect he was having on her. “Thanks again.”

"Well, good night, then. I'll watch until you're inside."

"Thanks…Thomas." Gina left the car and walked to her front door. She waved as she entered and locked it again behind her. In seconds she heard the car zoom away. She frowned. He wasn't what she had expected. Taking her home had been out of his way, despite what he had said. He hadn't had to do that. But she was glad he had.

CHAPTER TWO

AFTER rounds the next day, Thomas decided to visit Mr Jones. His room was across from the nurses'station, and Thomas picked up his chart, but kept an eye on the room. He could see Gina chatting with Mr Jones and an elderly woman Thomas assumed to be Mrs Jones.

Looking through the chart, Thomas read the final test results, which clearly indicated the worst possible news for Mr Jones. He thought about Gina's desire for more time for the man and was sorry that there was little of it left for Mr Jones. The oncologist's note indicated severe disease, recommended a few radiation treatments for comfort, but prognosis was poor at this stage. End- stage cancer with metastases in the lymph, lungs and bone. A CAT scan of the brain was negative. At least that was a somewhat positive note.

There were times that Thomas hated being right, and this was one of them. Looking up at Gina as she threw her head back and laughed, he wondered if she knew. Bearing bad news was something he hated, but it was part of the job of being a physician.

Leaving the desk, he approached Mr Jones's room just as Gina turned. The surprise on her face was obvious, but then there was that impish grin again.

"Hi, Doc. Come on in," she said, then turned to Mr Jones. "Dr Ferguson is here to see you, Harold."

"Harold?" Thomas said and stepped into the room, his brows raised at her familiarity with the patient.

"Yep. We're official friends now," Gina said. "And this is Elizabeth, his wife."

"She's just a delight, Doctor. I feel better just talking to her," Mr Jones said and patted Gina's hand.

"I see." He cleared his throat and assessed Harold's face. Indeed, he did look more relaxed than he had on admission. Having his wife support him through such a time would help him so much. "I see the oncologist was here. Did he have a talk with you?"

"Yes. He gave me the news you started to last night. All bad. But at my age I don't think I'm going to be attempting any treatment." Harold shook his head. "I've lived a good life and want to just make the most of the time I have left." He turned to Elizabeth and they shared an intimate look.

Thomas almost felt an intruder as he watched the loving interaction between them. He watched as Gina looked away, too. There was certainly more to her than met the eye. She wasn't just a beautiful redhead pretending to be a nurse. That she cared about people was obvious. But was she overstepping her role as a nurse, not holding her own professional boundaries?

"My affairs are in order. Having survived two wars, I figured I was pushing my luck already. Now I just want to go home with Elizabeth and not be in pain." Harold nodded, reinforcing his own decision.

"That's right," Elizabeth said, and wiped her eyes. "None of us live for ever. I want him home with me as long as possible."

"That sounds like a very good plan," Thomas agreed. "If there is anything we can do to help you, please, let us know."

"Gina said you people could set me up with help at home. Now that my pain is almost gone, I'd like to get out of here as soon as possible." Harold smiled, eager to convince Thomas of his sincerity.

"Home hospice would be a great service. I'm going to drop in and see him now and then," Gina said, and stood. "Well, I'd better get back to work," she said. "Doc's not paying me to sit and talk all day." She gave Harold's hand a squeeze. "See you soon."

Gina and Thomas departed, approaching the elevator in silence. Gina pushed the button and stared at the numbers on the panel. This man made her uncomfortable. Just standing with him, waiting for the ancient elevator, had her stomach churning. Something about him was very attractive to her, but knowing who he was and the type of lifestyle he came from made her squash any attraction that was beginning to form. She reached out to press the button again. “Why is this thing so slow?”

“Why are you in such a hurry?” he asked, more convinced than ever that there was more to Gina’s story than she was letting on. Bad marriage? Bad divorce, like him?

The elevator doors opened, and they stepped into it. “Are you OK?” Thomas asked, observing her closely. She wouldn’t meet his gaze, and she hugged her arms around her middle.

“I spent quite a bit of time with Mr Jones, and I just need to get back to the ER. I don’t want to get off on the wrong foot on my second day here.” Gina shoved her hands into her lab coat and fidgeted in the narrow space. He didn’t want to make her any more uncomfortable than she already was, but there was definitely something bothering her.

“That’s not a problem. It’s been quiet this morning.” He hesitated, then looked at her. “You seem a little on edge, though. Are you sure you’re OK?”

Gina gave him a surprised glance. “What makes you ask that?”

He shrugged. “I read people well.”

“And you’re reading something into me?” She’d only been here two days and already she was falling into the same trap she’d fallen into years ago. No way was that happening again.

Before she could respond, the doors to the elevator opened.

“Gina! Thomas!” Rhonda cried, and motioned for them to hurry. “Trauma coming through the door right now.”

Thomas and Gina raced behind Rhonda. Rhonda ushered the family members away and left just the medical team to work on the patient, a young male who appeared to be about sixteen years of age.

Gina hooked up the cardiac monitor and oxygen and started an IV in his blood-covered hand. Though he was unresponsive she talked to him anyway, telling him what she was doing.

“Who knows what happened?” Thomas asked.

“The mother is here, but she’s pretty upset,” the respiratory therapist said.

“Get her in here,” Thomas said, and placed his stethoscope over the patient’s chest. “We need as much information from her as possible.”

Gina picked up the phone and called the nurses’ station. “We need the mother—now.”

Seconds later Rhonda escorted a woman near hysterics into the trauma room.

“What happened to your son?” Thomas asked, not looking up as he continued to examine his patient.

“I don’t know! Someone dumped him in my driveway looking like this, and I brought him straight here.” She sobbed into her hands. “Is he awake?”

“Not yet,” Rhonda said. “They’re going to be working on him for a while yet.”

“This looks like a gang beating,” Gina said, and shot a glance at the mother. “I’ve seen this in other cities. From what you said last night,” she added to Thomas, “our little town can’t avoid it for ever.”

“My son is *not* in a gang,” the mother protested, glaring at Gina. “We don’t have gangs here. Hidden Valley is too small.”

“Richmond’s not that far away.” Gina knew it, she’d seen it, and hoped this mother would face her son’s problems quickly. Denial would only get her so far and then she’d have to face it or deal with the consequences down the line.

“No. It can’t be,” she cried, and shook her head. “He’s just a boy.”

“I’m sorry this is such a shock for you. But I just cut off his clothing and found this.” Gina exposed the markings on his deltoid for her to see herself.

The mother gasped and pointed a trembling finger at the tattoo clearly defined on her son's arm. "I don't know what that is, but it's not a gang."

"Has he been using any drugs that you're aware of?" Gina spread the boy's fingers apart, examining them for signs of drug use, but found nothing.

"No." She shook her head and looked as if her world was about to fall apart. "I don't know what's going on."

"Right now we need to focus on stabilizing him. We'll work out the details later," Thomas said. "Rhonda, why don't you take her back to the waiting room?"

"I'll come get you when you can see him, I promise," Gina said, trying to offer the woman some support, though thinking of her son this way was obviously painful. "What's his name?"

"Terrence," the mother whispered. After touching his shoulder, she leaned heavily on Rhonda as they left the trauma room.

"Well, Terrence," Thomas said to the unresponsive patient, "you're in a world of trouble." He turned to Gina. "Let's get a CAT scan. I'm concerned that he hasn't roused at all." He checked Terrence's pupils with a penlight, looking for a response.

"He's had quite a wallop on the back of the head. He may be just concussed or he could have a brain injury," Gina said.

"Absolutely," Thomas replied. He liked the way she thought, processing the possibilities quickly. Obviously a nurse of some experience and ability to think through all the possible scenarios. Good qualities to have in an ER nurse in a small town. Someone who had been around and could snap into emergency mode when the need arose, but be content with the smaller issues of every ER, like the flu, cuts and broken arms. Nurses like that were hard to find. Thomas would have to review Gina's temporary contract and see if he could get her to extend her stay. She'd only been there two days, but working with a nurse with her skills would only make his job easier.

Within the hour Gina handed the boy over to the OR team. Brain surgery was indicated for him immediately.

Gina returned to the trauma room to clean it. Traumas always created a lot of trash.

Thomas found her there, banging drawers, clanging things around and making a lot of noise. He stepped into the room. "What are you doing?" he asked, and looked around. The room looked worse than when the patient had been in there.

"Cleaning," she said, and avoided looking at him. "This room is a disaster." She gathered up the dressing materials that had landed on the floor. "You're a very sloppy doctor, by the way." She gave him a sidelong glance.

"What? I'm not." He frowned at her assessment of his character.

"You are," she said with a smile. "I can see you didn't go to college on a basketball scholarship."

"I didn't, but—"

"You threw a lot of things on the floor and now *I* have to pick them up." She reached for another handful of trash from the floor. "This is so gross. I think you should do it."

He stepped closer, placing himself inches away from her. She was flirting with him! And he liked it. Hiding a grin, he waited for her to turn round. "I tried for the trash can and missed. That's not sloppy. That's just bad aim."

"Like I said, no basketball scholarship for you." She turned and gasped. She hadn't expected him to be so close to her and her heart took off. She tried to back up, but her legs wouldn't move.

"Want some help with this?" he asked.

"You want to help me?" She glanced down at his attire of crisply pressed white shirt that probably cost more than a day's pay and the navy linen slacks that bore a neat pleat. "You don't want to get blood on your shirt. I can handle this, thanks." The way his mouth moved, one corner of it twitching up, made her want to reach out and touch it, to see if it was as warm as it looked. She swallowed. This attraction was getting a little too serious a little too fast.

He took a step back. “I’m not bothered. Why should you be?”

“Seriously, this is my job, and I’d feel guilty if you helped me. You don’t want to be responsible for my guilt, do you?” Despite the mental warning to herself, she couldn’t help liking his reply.

“Gina, I’ve done my share of dirty jobs as an intern and resident. A little bit of gauze isn’t going to bother me.”

“I know. But just the same. I’ve got it.” She looked down at the mess around her. “It’s a shame, isn’t it?”

Thomas instinctively knew exactly what she meant. “It is. Some kids learn the hard way, and I think he’s one of them.”

“His mom’s in for a whole lot of heartbreak, isn’t she?” Gina asked, already knowing the answer.

“She is. But hopefully she won’t have to face it alone.” He watched her stuff the gauze into the trash can. “Are you OK?”

“Putting a kid back together gets old sometimes, ya know?” A sigh came from her. “It seems like everywhere I go I put the same kids back together for the same things all the time. Just once I’d like to see them do well.”

“Yes. I know. Emergency medicine can be a bit overwhelming at times. Nurses burn out in ICU and ER more frequently than any other area.” He watched her with those striking blue eyes. “You make sure to take breaks, don’t you?”

“Yes. That’s why I don’t work in the same area all the time, but change back and forth to stay fresh.” Returning to her task, she stuffed more trash in the garbage can.

“Relax, will you? Let someone else get the trash. You don’t have to do everything.”

“It makes life easier on Housekeeping if I can at least help.”

“Certainly. But the trash isn’t what’s bothering you. Everything is just fine. Terrence is off to surgery and there aren’t any other emergencies right now, so why don’t you take a break?” He tried to coax a smile out of her, put her mind at ease. “I could use a break, too.”

“I can’t,” she said, as she carried on tidying. “When one job’s done, there’s always another waiting.”

“Come on. Trauma can be tough on people. The patient, the family…*and* the staff,” Thomas said, and took a step closer to her, invading her space again, putting more pressure on her until she looked up at him.

She frowned and glared at him, but couldn’t hold it and cracked a grin, feeling the heat of a blush in her neck. “What? Don’t you have a laceration somewhere to suture?”

“Nope, I’m fresh out.” The sassy edge to her voice made him smile. She was a refreshing change from people who knew who he was, what his family was, and sought to ingratiate themselves to him. Gina didn’t care who he was, and he liked that.

She dropped her shoulders and released a pent-up breath. “OK. Coffee sounds good. But I need to get rid of this stuff first,” she said. “I don’t want to leave everything for Housekeeping. That’s not fair.”

Thomas smiled, glad she had accepted his offer. “Five minutes, in the staffroom, or I’ll hunt you down.”

She grinned. “Good enough.”

Thomas hesitated. When she smiled like that she was absolutely stunning. With a quick nod he left her to her task, not wanting to think where this association could head. They were just coworkers sharing a bit of coffee and conversation, right?

Minutes later Gina entered the staff room to the fragrance of an exotic blend of coffee. “Oh, what’s that?” she asked, and sniffed appreciatively. “That’s not hospital coffee, is it?” The smell was making her mouth water. Thomas smiled, and Gina’s knees threatened to go weak. Oh, he was almost making her mouth water, too.

“This is my secret office stash.” He shook his head. “Now you know my deep, dark secret.”

"There are some perks to being the medical director, I see."

"So, how do you take yours?" Thomas asked.

"Loads of cream and a touch of sweetener, thanks," Gina said, and accepted the mug from him. For a moment or two she forgot who he was, what he was, and it felt just like two people having a coffee together. Like normal people would. Then she remembered. There was nothing normal about a man like Thomas.

"This isn't your first time in this hospital, is it?" Thomas asked.

Surprised, Gina's brows shot up. "What makes you say that?"

"For a traveler, you seem to know your way around this hospital very well." Thomas gave a smile. "And your résumé shows that you did your nurse's training here. I looked."

"Cheat. I went to the university program here in Hidden Valley. Then I left right after graduation." Couldn't wait to get out, in fact. And had never thought she'd be back. "Seems like a long time ago."

"Ever think of coming back?" Thomas sipped his coffee and contemplated her. "Being a travel nurse must have its appeal, but when you're ready to settle down, had you thought of coming back here? You have family here, I assume."

Gina cleared her throat and toyed with the cup handle. "My mother's here, but I hadn't thought of returning on a permanent basis." She shrugged and chanced a look at him. "Nothing in my life is permanent, which is why I'm a temporary nurse." Making things permanent meant giving up things she wasn't prepared to give up at this point in her life.

"I see."

Changing the topic, Gina needed to direct the focus away from herself. Sharing personal information didn't come easily. "Your turn, Doc. What brings you to Hidden Valley? If you'll forgive the observation, this doesn't seem like your kind of place."

"Me?" Why *had* he come here? He hadn't thought about it for a long time. To get away? To run away? Not so unlike Gina, he thought. "My life…changed abruptly about a year ago, and I needed a quiet place to think." He paused. Was that really it? "Hidden Valley is a good place to do that."

"Not much to do in a town this size except think, is there? After that, then what? On to bigger and better things?" Gina asked.

"Something like that." But had he thought about what would happen after this? He'd assumed that one day he'd leave, but didn't have any immediate plans to return to the bosom of his family. Being away from them was actually a refreshing change from their high hopes and higher expectations.

"I know what you mean. If you stay here too long, you forget what else is out there." There were so many things she wanted to see and do. But underneath it all she knew there was a loneliness that lingered over her life, no matter where she went. Gina glanced away, unable to hold his vibrant gaze. The man saw things too quickly, too clearly, and she would do well to remember that around him. "But this is a nice place for the summer. After that I'll figure out what I want to do. Traveling does take a lot of energy, having to uproot myself every three months and go somewhere new. But for the most part I like it."

"Why don't you think about staying here for a couple of extra months?" Thomas asked. "Our hospital needs good nurses who know the community, and you certainly fit the need. And you could visit with your mother for a while." He paused. "I'm assuming, of course, that you and your mother get along."

Gina hesitated. "I don't even want to think about it right now. For the time being I want try to relax a little, take a few trips to the mountains, and not have to worry about anything more." Wouldn't that be a lovely change? Not worrying? That's all she'd done since she'd been a kid old enough to figure out what had been going on between her parents. At first she'd been afraid they would divorce, then she'd been afraid they'd stay together. The situation had been no-win from the start. Why they'd

stayed together for so many years when they obviously hadn't liked each other remained a mystery to her.

"Fair enough," Thomas said, and they chatted about the hospital until they finished their coffee.

Gina looked away from his intense stare, not liking the way he made her feel. Having a squishy, excited feeling in her stomach for the boss was not good. If things had been different, if they'd had more in common than a job, a shared passion for medicine, if not for her past and his status she might have been able to look into his eyes with honest interest. But she couldn't. Staying away from him was probably her best strategy to avoid repeating her mistakes. Mistakes that had almost cost her dearly.

She returned the mug to the sink and looked at a flyer posted on the message board.

"Are you going?" Thomas asked as he joined her.

"What is it?" She hadn't seen anything of interest.

"It's a fund-raiser for the cancer center. The staff go together to have a little off-time fun together, get dressed up, and raise money for a good cause."

"Since I'm not really part of the staff, I'll probably opt out." Gina's heart rate returned to semi-normal, and she returned to her chair.

"This will be my first time to participate as I've only been here a year, but it's my understanding that the event has been going on for a long time. So us newbies should make an effort to go and be part of the team." Thomas watched her. "What do you think?"

"Uh…no. Why don't I work to relieve any staff member that wants to go?" She shrugged, trying hastily to think up an excuse. Events like that gave her hives. "Travelers usually fill staffing shortages. I don't mind staying behind. Someone has to mind the store."

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