

A romantic couple is shown in a close embrace. The man, on the left, is wearing a light-colored shirt and a dark tie, smiling warmly at the woman. The woman, on the right, has her hand resting on his shoulder and is looking off to the side with a bright, happy smile. She is wearing a dark, sleeveless top and a large, ornate necklace. The background is softly blurred, suggesting an indoor setting with warm lighting.

Ann McIntosh

The Surgeon's One Night to
FOREVER



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MEDICAL

Ann McIntosh

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The Surgeon's One Night To Forever / A. McIntosh —
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One Night in Mexico...Second chance in New York!ER doctor Liz Prudhomme is stunned that nomadic ex-army doc Cort Smith is her hospital's new trauma surgeon. Instantly she's transported back to that amazing night when he showed her unimaginable pleasure! Their passion is quickly reignited, and Cort realigns Liz's career-focused world. Before he moves on again can she help this sexy but damaged doc realise they have something worth staying for?

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"The author has done such a wonderful job at developing characters that you will fall in love with this story."

—*Goodreads* on *The Nurse's Pregnancy Miracle*

ANN MCINTOSH was born in the tropics, lived in the frozen north for a number of years, and now resides in sunny central Florida with her husband. She's a proud mama to three grown children, loves tea, crafting, animals (except reptiles!), bacon and the ocean. She believes in the power of romance to heal, inspire and provide hope in our complex world.

[Also by Ann McIntosh](#)

The Nurse's Pregnancy Miracle

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The Surgeon's One Night to Forever

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To Michael.

Your love and belief give me wings.

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CHAPTER ONE

A FRESH START. That was how Dr. Cort Smith thought of his position at Hepplewhite General.

A new beginning, far away from Denver, the snide remarks and pitying glances he'd gotten after being dumped by his fiancée just weeks before the wedding.

It was the type of move he now wished had been possible right after his honorable discharge from the army five years previously, but it hadn't been. He'd had a promise to fulfill, and now, having done so, was free to go on with his life.

The New York City job couldn't have come at a better time.

When he'd applied for the trauma surgeon position at Hepplewhite General, the board members who'd interviewed him had explained the hospital was undergoing a period of expansion and regeneration. There had been a sizable, anonymous donation, which, coming at exactly the right time, had allowed them to purchase land where an old warehouse had stood and begin construction to increase their capacity by twenty percent.

As the surrounding neighborhood was also undergoing some regentrification, they'd been able to raise additional funds to revamp the emergency room and surgical floor. Hepplewhite had always been rated a level two trauma center but the plan was for it to be upgraded to a level one, once all the improvements were finished. Cort didn't mind that things were in flux. Serving in the Army Medical Corps had made him pretty much immune to chaos and, since he'd wanted to move from Denver as soon as possible, taking the job had been a no-brainer.

Walking alongside Chief of Surgery Dr. Gregory Hammond, Cort tried to take in everything the older man said, although he knew, from experience, it was only with time that he'd remember it all.

"There have been, in the past, some...friction between the ER staff and the surgeons, but we're working assiduously to iron everything out before the expansion of the hospital is complete. Once we're upgraded to a level one trauma center, we must have things running smoothly."

"Of course."

No doubt he'd find out soon enough what types of friction Dr. Hammond referred to. Yet, in Cort's experience, there were always disputes between ER and Trauma, no matter how smoothly the hospital was run. That was just a product of human nature, and the instinctive need most doctors had to be in control.

They'd toured the surgical floor, and Cort was aware of the stares and murmurs of the staff as Dr. Hammond and he passed by, the searching glances of those he was introduced to. Not unusual, or unexpected, since everyone would want to check out the new surgeon, but he'd started to feel a bit like a specimen in a bottle. Something strange, like a teratoma, or a two-headed fetal pig—seldom seen and therefore gawk-worthy.

It didn't really bother him, though. He'd gone through too much in his life to be annoyed or made uncomfortable by others' curiosity.

Downstairs now, Dr. Hammond was showing him the construction zone, explaining what the various rooms still being built would be and how the new configuration would work.

"The expansion should be completed in about four to six months, and we'll be hiring new staff to fill the newly created positions in Trauma. There will be a slowdown in our emergency intake, so all the departments can be set up, and, as the board of directors indicated, you'll be assigned some general surgery cases to keep you busy."

Dr. Hammond turned down another corridor lined with heavy plastic sheets to contain the dust, beyond which a construction crew was working. There was a flurry of sound as an air hammer started up, and then the cacophony was overlaid by shouts.

“Hey, stop—stop—stop—*stop!*” followed by a string of curses so foul they would have made a sailor blush.

Dr. Hammond’s face took on the pained expression of a man not used to such salty language, and he picked up the pace, heading for the exit at the end of the corridor. Once on the other side of the door, the noise reduced to almost nothing, he jerked a thumb over his shoulder.

“Sorry about that. Huh, construction workers.”

His disgusted tone made Cort’s hackles rise, but he didn’t have time to say anything as just then the other man’s cell phone rang. Taking it out, Dr. Hammond glanced at the screen and was already moving away as he said, “Excuse me a moment, Smith. It’s my assistant.”

Cort sighed. His annoyance faded, to be replaced by amusement at the memory of the older man’s expression, but with it came familiar pain.

Brody had cursed like that all the time, even when he hadn’t been on a job site.

“My goodness, Brody. Not in front of the kids,” his wife, Jenna, would say after a particularly colorful outburst.

Hearing it had sometimes felt like going back in time to the foster home where Cort and Brody had met as teenagers. Except back then the admonition would usually come with a backhand slap from one of their foster parents too. Brody and Cort had always agreed that the place wasn’t the worst either of them had been in, but they had both been glad to age out of the system and leave it behind.

They’d stayed close, even when life had taken them in different directions, Cort to the army and Brody into construction. The only reason Cort had returned to Denver when he’d been on leave, rather than travel the world the way he’d always wanted to, had been to see Brody and Jenna. He’d stood as godfather for their son, had luckily been on leave and in the hospital waiting room when their daughter had been born. They’d been the closest thing to family he had.

Brody’s death had sent him reeling and, coming just before Cort had been due to reenlist, had seemed like a sign. How could he not have known his best friend had been in so much pain? He’d known, of course, about Brody’s original, job-related injury, but not that his best friend had descended into a full-blown opiate addiction. Jenna said she hadn’t known either, but that didn’t make it any easier to deal with. Cort felt as though he *should* have known, despite being so far away.

He’d always promised Brody to look after Jenna and the kids should anything happen, but leaving the army hadn’t been easy since it had been his life for so long. But there really hadn’t been an option, and he’d headed back to Denver when his tour was over and his contract had expired.

Now, in hindsight, he realized he’d been drifting along ever since.

Even getting engaged to Mimi had been done almost unthinkingly. She was Jenna’s cousin, and she and Cort had gotten close during the dark days following Brody’s death. It had felt good to be a part of Jenna’s wider family, and when Mimi had hinted it was time to get married, Cort had agreed without thinking too deeply about what that entailed.

Three weeks before the wedding she’d called it off, saying she just didn’t think it would work out. That she’d realized she didn’t love him enough to be his wife, and she’d already found someone else.

After months of soul-searching, Cort knew he’d been unfair to Mimi. In a way, she’d been a crutch, holding him up after Brody’s death. An imperfect replacement for the companionship he’d lost.

Despite the embarrassment and hurt, he’d known she’d been right not to go through with it.

Brody had always been the one who’d longed for a family, for roots, while Cort had wanted to see as much of the world as possible. Perhaps the difference stemmed from the fact Brody had lived with his mother until the age of seven, and knew what it was like to be a part of a real family. Cort had never had that, and knew he wasn’t cut out to be a part of a family, didn’t even know how to be.

Apparently he wasn’t even fit to be a family member by proxy either since, soon after, Jenna too had cut him loose.

“Me and the kids, we’ll be fine,” she said, while they sat on her back step. “Mimi is a flake for waiting so long to break things off, and I know you’re just hanging around here because of us. Brody always said you wanted to see the world. Go. Do it.”

The sadness had weighed so heavily in his chest he’d been unable to even look at her. How many evenings like this had he and Brody sat in this same spot, beers in hand, talking? The twilight sky had gleamed between the branches, and a cool wind, harbinger of fall, had rustled the leaves, making them whisper and sigh. Her words had felt like another rejection, in no way softened by the squeeze of her fingers on his shoulder.

It was then he’d accepted that nothing good in life lasted. He was better off not getting attached, because to do so just brought heartache.

But this was a new day, full of potential and future adventure, and he wasn’t going to let the past encroach on it. Shrugging off his dark thoughts, Cort wandered along the corridor, away from the chief surgeon and the construction zone.

At the end of the corridor was a T-junction, with a bustling nurses’ station on his right and, as first one person and then the next turned to look at him, he once more became the cynosure of all eyes. Making eye contact with a few people, he nodded and smiled, until a noise to his left caught his attention, and he turned to look.

A woman stood at an exit door, holding a travel cup and tucking a cell phone under her chin. Something about her carriage, her profile made Cort’s heart stumble over itself. And, as she turned slightly to swipe her access card to open the door, for the second time in less than five minutes his world tilted on its axis.

It can’t be.

Yet, as she used her hip to push open the door and slip outside, he knew he wasn’t imagining things.

It definitely was the woman he’d met in Mexico, who’d given him the most sublime night of pleasure he’d ever had, and had then run out on him without a word.

Without even giving him her name.

Worse, he’d confided in her about being dumped just before his wedding. No doubt, with the way hospital grapevines worked, that tidbit of news would be on everyone’s lips by the following day.

A sour sensation filled his stomach, and all the anticipation regarding his new job leached away in an instant. It didn’t matter that he didn’t plan on staying at Hepplewhite very long. He’d only signed a one-year contract and, although the board had made it clear they hoped he’d renew at the end of that time, the plan was to move on to somewhere else. Have another adventure.

Right now, though, this felt less like an adventure and more like a mistake.

So much for a fresh start.

Cell phone held to her ear with one shoulder, Dr. Liz Prudhomme stepped out into the quiet of the staff parking lot and let the door swing shut behind her. Although there had been a midwinter thaw of sorts along the east coast, it was still cold, but after the dry heat of the hospital the damp chill felt good against her face. Grabbing the phone before it slipped, she found an alcove out of the wind and took a sip of her rapidly cooling coffee.

She normally didn’t make personal calls while on duty, but her mother had just flown in from Milan the day before and this was the first opportunity Liz had had to speak to her. With the time difference between New York and California, it was perfect. Her mother would have just finished breakfast.

“The dress is delightful. Giovanna picked a strapless mermaid gown, made completely of Guipure lace. It’s elegant and suits her so well. Although the designer isn’t one I would have chosen, I have to admit it is beautiful.”

In Liz's opinion, her future sister-in-law could wear a gunny sack and still look gorgeous. After all, Giovanna modeled for some of the world's best designers and probably wore a size negative three. Pulling off a dress like the one her mother was describing wouldn't be difficult for her at all.

Even if she wanted to, that wouldn't be the case for Liz. When it came to height and bone structure, she'd inherited her father's mostly Anglo-Saxon genes, rather than her mother's mix of Latin and Asian. She had a farm-girl sturdiness that once upon a time had been the bane of her existence. Now she was proud of her strength, and confident in her womanhood.

Most of the time.

Unless she let old insecurities rise up and blindside her.

But it wasn't jealousy making Liz feel out of sorts as she listened to her mother breathlessly give her all the details of the dress and their subsequent orgy of shopping. It was the usual feeling of inadequacy, knowing her ex-beauty-queen mother would have loved to have a daughter like Giovanna, rather than the one she had. Someone as passionate about fashion and decorating as Lorelei Prudhomme was herself. A daughter who could follow in her footsteps and excel at being a member of high society, not single-mindedly focused on her medical career.

Better to be useful than decorative.

Funny how often, at times like these, Nanny Hardy's voice popped into her head, reminding her of what was important. The nanny had left when Liz was eight, but her legacy was lasting.

"I don't know why they chose New York for the wedding." Lorelei sighed the special sigh that usually turned all members of her family to mush, and had them falling over themselves to give her whatever she wanted. She'd learned, however, that it didn't work on the strong-willed Giovanna. "It would have been so much nicer here in San Francisco."

Liz stifled a prickle of annoyance at hearing the same complaint for the hundredth time but just replied, "It's where Giovanna and Robbie wanted to have it."

"I know." There was no missing the pique in her mother's delicate tones. "But it's so inconvenient for us, really."

So said the woman who flew to Milan to look at a wedding dress, and help her future daughter-in-law shop for a trousseau! Liz shook her head silently, amusement making the corners of her lips quirk. Her anxiety, which always made itself known whenever she spoke to her mother, abated slightly. Taking another sip of her coffee, she swallowed her instinctive, somewhat snarky reply along with the strong brew.

"However, I'm sure it will be lovely. Giovanna has exquisite taste. Are you bringing anyone to the wedding?"

Caught off guard by the quick change of subject, although that was her mother's usual style of conversation, Liz said the first thing that came to mind. "Highly unlikely."

As her mother sighed again, Liz got that familiar sense of being not quite enough of a woman to suit.

Despite it being eight years since Liz had had a serious romantic relationship, her mother never stopped hoping, asking leading questions whenever the opportunity arose. Although she'd never say so to her mother, there was no way Liz was going down that painful road again. Lessons learned the first time around didn't have to be repeated, and Andrew had certainly taught her to keep her heart closed.

"Your father sends his love."

The muscles in Liz's neck and shoulders tightened so suddenly, so painfully she almost gasped aloud. Instead, she pressed her lips together for an instant and clenched her fingers around the cup. When she replied, it was years of practice that allowed her to keep her tone level.

"Tell him I said hello."

It was the best that she could do right now. The wounds were still too fresh, her sense of betrayal still too painful for anything more.

"Eliza..."

But that was all her mother said, and the silence stretched between them, filled with the ghosts of past mistakes and family secrets too long hidden. Liz wasn't surprised by her mother's inability to articulate whatever it was she wanted to say. Heart-to-hearts and speaking about emotional subjects weren't "done" in their family.

Things might be a damned sight better if they were but, after all these years, they wouldn't know where to start.

She was gripping the phone so hard her fingers were beginning to ache, mirroring the pain in her suddenly roiling stomach. She didn't have time for this. Not right now. Probably never.

"I have to get back inside, Mother. I'm still on duty. I'm glad you enjoyed your trip."

"Thank you, dear." Her mother spoke softly, almost wistfully, and Liz wondered if she, like her daughter, wished things could go back to the way they used to be. "We'll talk again soon."

Disconnecting the call, Liz thrust the phone into the pocket of her coat and turned her face up toward the murky sky, taking a deep breath, trying to relax.

It was actually funny, in a twisted type of way. She'd always been an outsider in the family, set apart. While she loved her parents, she'd often felt emotionally distant from them, while Robbie, three years her junior, had been the affectionate one, the glue holding the family together. The fact that he was adopted hadn't mattered. She'd been too young when he'd arrived to care, and had loved him, unconditionally, ever since.

Perhaps it was the thought of settling down with Giovanna and starting a family of his own that had prompted Robbie to ask for information about his biological parents. Whatever the reason, neither he nor Liz had been prepared for the answer, delivered one summer's evening last year while the family had spent a couple of days together at the beach house.

Robbie was Brant Prudhomme's biological son, conceived when Brant had had an affair not long after Liz's birth.

"We went through a bad patch," Lorelei had said, her still-beautiful face pale, her eyes damp. "But, in the end, we decided to make it work. And when Brant told me Robbie's mother was dying..."

"Your mother is a wonderful woman," Brant had interjected, in the tone Liz had known from experience meant the conversation was all but over. "I don't think either of you would argue that point."

Too stunned to say anything, or ask questions, Liz had watched her father walk out of the room, his back stiff and straight. Lorelei had looked suddenly more fragile but, as usual, it had been Robbie who'd gone to her, hugged her, and reassured her everything would be fine.

Liz hadn't shared his optimism. From that moment, her world had felt off kilter, and she doubted it would ever be completely put back to rights again. Knowing that her father, who Liz would have sworn was a good husband, had betrayed her mother's trust like that had devastated her.

What little faith she'd had in men had practically been destroyed.

Since that day, anger had lain like a rock in her chest. Why the situation affected her this way was something she was loath to look at too closely. All she knew was she couldn't deal with being around or speaking to her father yet. Maybe the anger would fade over time and she'd relent, but not yet. Sometimes that anger spilled over to her mother too, but Lorelei, for all her bustle and chattiness, had somehow always struck Liz as being in need of protection. Being careful not to let her know the extent of the rage her daughter felt was important.

Suddenly realizing her face tingled from the cold, Liz took one last deep breath and twisted her head from side to side, trying to work out the stiffness in her muscles. It was time to get back to work, to lose herself in the job she loved more than anything else in the world, at the hospital that held a special place in her heart.

Liz's great-grandfather had been one of the founding fathers of Hepplewhite General, which eventually had been named after him. When she'd completed her residency and applied there she

hadn't revealed her connection to the hospital, which had made winning the position that much more satisfying.

She was sure that somewhere, in the afterlife, her great-aunts had chuckled.

Her Great-Aunt Honoria had wanted to study medicine, but her father had refused to allow it. And when Liz's father had expressed reservations about his daughter going into what he'd described as "a grueling, heartbreaking profession" Honoria and her sister, Eliza, had paid for her schooling.

"Do what you want in life," Aunt Honoria had said. "Be useful, and don't allow your father, or any man, to dictate to you. Eliza and I wish we'd had the courage to do that ourselves."

The advice had been sound, and in line with what her nursemaid, Nanny Hardy, had taught her as a child. Heeding their collective guidance had led to her success, while the one time she'd not followed it had led to disaster and heartbreak.

No, she loved her work and Hepplewhite, with its associations with the past, and had made it the main focus of her life. Never had she been more grateful for how busy the ER kept her than now.

There was nothing like a full workload to keep the chaotic thoughts at bay. This winter had seen a particularly active flu season, still in full swing, and with the waves of snowstorms hitting New York City had come an uptick of heart attacks, slip-and-fall injuries and the like. The hospital staff wasn't immune to the flu either, and there were a few out sick, which increased everyone's workload.

As she swiped her badge to open the door, Liz's stomach rumbled. She'd been heading for the cafeteria a couple hours ago when a commotion in the ER waiting area had caught her attention. Four clearly frightened young men had been at the intake desk, supporting a fifth who'd appeared to be unconscious and bleeding from a facial wound. They had all been talking at once.

"He fell—"

"Momma's gonna kill us—"

"He won't wake up—"

Lunch forgotten, Liz had grabbed a nearby gurney and hit the electronic door opener, not waiting for an orderly. Even from a distance she had been able to see the youngster had needed immediate treatment.

As it turned out, the teens had cut school and somehow found their way past the protective fencing surrounding the hospital's ongoing construction project. Once there, her patient decided to use the equipment and building rubble to practice his parkour skills. Probably not the best of ideas, given the slick of ice that still covered some surfaces. It had cost him a broken jaw, a concussion and the kind of laceration that, without plastic surgery, would leave a disfiguring scar.

By the time she'd examined him, made sure he was stable and sent for the oral and plastic surgeons, she'd only had another two and a half hours before her twelve-hour shift would be finished. Rather than bother with a break, and cognizant of the full waiting room, she'd only taken enough time to call her mother.

Striding down the corridor toward the ER, Liz put her family drama, and its attendant pain, aside. There was no place for it here in the hospital, where all her attention had to be on her patients' well-being.

That was what was truly important.

On the way home she'd stop at her favorite diner and treat herself to an everything omelet with home fries. Just the thought made her mouth water and her stomach rumble again.

CHAPTER TWO

AFTER TAKING OFF her coat and making her way back to the ER, Liz noticed a certain buzz in the air that hadn't been there before she'd gone outside. Before she could ask one of the other doctors what was going on, she was called away to deal with a patient brought in by ambulance.

Paramedics had received a report of a man acting irrationally and, on arrival, had found Mr. Josiah Collins combative and uncooperative, with a severe laceration on his arm. Although they also said he'd calmed down quickly, and there'd been no problems with him since, there was something about the man's watchful quiescence and refusal to give much information that had Liz on high alert.

She ordered blood tests, and stitched the laceration. Then, signaling to one of the nurses to join her, she stepped out and walked a few paces along the corridor leading to the ER nurses' station.

"Put a rush on those samples. I need those results, stat, so I can know whether he's on something or is just having a psychotic break. And have one of the security personnel keep an eye on him, please."

"Yes Dr. Prudhomme."

The nurse immediately started off, but paused as Liz said, "And, Stella? Nice job on that thoracotomy patient earlier. I appreciate it."

With a smile and a nod of acknowledgement, Stella went on her way, and Liz walked toward the nurses' station.

There was no need for her to elaborate. Stella knew to what she was referring. The patient had been awake, alert and in extreme pain. Taking advantage of the brief thaw, he'd been working on a roof and slipped, the fall causing chest trauma and fractures to both arms and one leg. Already distressed, he'd grown more distraught as a massive hemothorax had caused blood to fill his chest cavity, compressing his lungs and making breathing increasingly difficult.

Inserting a chest tube was a great deal easier to do when the patient was unconscious and Liz had been prepared to have a difficult time of it until Stella, with impeccable timing, had distracted the patient, held his attention and kept him calm through the painful procedure. Stella's intuition and ability to connect quickly and effectively with the patient deserved acknowledgement.

Liz was more than aware of her own shortcomings in the human interaction arena. Her lack of affectionate gestures, her cool contemplation of, and reaction to, life had been pointed out repeatedly, and not as positive traits. She wasn't into giving constant praise for every little thing. They all had their jobs to do, from the ER doctors and trauma surgeons to the orderlies. She didn't expect congratulations for every correct diagnosis she made or course of treatment she set in motion, and neither should anyone else for doing their job.

However, she also knew her reputation was one of a hard-assed, unsmiling witch. It was true, and she had no complaints on that score. However, just because she didn't make nice with everyone, it didn't mean she didn't care about the people she worked with.

It was just simpler not to care *too* much, not build friendships and relationships that could, potentially, interfere with her job. She already had close friends from her university days. Although they were now scattered across the globe, Liz really didn't see any need to make new ones.

She was heading to the nurses' station to get a jump on her charting when she was interrupted by a nurse informing her that her young parkour patient's mother had arrived, and was in the waiting room.

Her stomach rumbled again, reminding her she'd been on duty for eleven and a half hours and hadn't ingested anything more than a couple of energy bars and half a cup of coffee. It was just one of those days.

Micah Johnston's mother was by turns livid at her son and scared about his prognosis, and it took some time to calm her down. As soon as she'd escorted the lady to her son's cubicle to speak to the surgeons, Liz strode purposefully once more toward the nearest nurses' station.

She really had to get her charting done ASAP, so maybe, just maybe, she could leave the hospital on time and stop her stomach from devouring itself.

"Ah, there she is. Liz, a moment please."

Damn it!

She turned toward Gregory Hammond's voice, biting back a growl of annoyance at being waylaid once more. Luckily she'd assumed a politely questioning expression because, as she looked at the man walking next to the chief of surgery, her face, along with the rest of her body, froze.

There was no mistaking his carriage, the set of his head, the clear-cut features of the man she'd had a glorious one-night stand with in Mexico. To suddenly see him again, when she'd thought she never would, made her head feel light and her legs weak.

How could she not recognize him? First off, he was tall. Tall enough that she, five-ten in her stockinged feet, had to look up at him, a rarity indeed, and he carried himself with easy assurance, his back militarily straight, his strides long and strong.

Second, although she wouldn't classify him as handsome, there was something compelling about his face. It was wide, with a prominent nose and deep-set, hooded eyes. A firm chin and mouth rounded out the picture. From a distance she'd been attracted, but it was seeing him up close that had cemented her interest. His eyes were spectacular. Dark amber in the center, shading to brown around the edge of the iris, they were serious and hinted at the kind of intelligence Liz always found appealing.

Heat rushed from her toes to the top of her head as her gaze was captured and transfixed by those unforgettable eyes, partially masked behind lowered lids. They gleamed, and she wasn't sure what the glint in them was. Anger? Annoyance? Amusement?

Her heart went into overdrive, a mixture of irritation and mortification rushing through her in an instant.

Then all the years of training drummed into her by her mother and tutors arose to come to her rescue. Inner heat was replaced by cold tension, but she refused to allow it to show. Straightening her back and lifting her chin, she tore her gaze away from his companion and gratefully turned her attention to Gregory Hammond.

"Liz, I want you to meet our newest trauma surgeon, Dr. Cort Smith. Dr. Smith, this is Dr. Liz Prudhomme, one of our fine ER practitioners."

Politeness dictated she look at Dr. Smith again, but it took considerable effort to make herself do it. Her brain was racing as fast as her heart, wondering if he was about to say they'd already met; if somehow he would make it clear their involvement had been of the intimate kind.

There were plenty of men who wouldn't be able to resist doing so, just to up their reputations as ladies' men.

But Cort Smith just stuck out his hand and said, politely, "How do you do, Dr. Prudhomme?"

Just the sound of that deep voice, so familiar and arousing, made her wish she were a hundred miles away. How could he be so cool, while she wanted to run for the hills? It was tempting to focus on his Adam's apple or chin, rather than meet those compelling eyes again, but that would be the coward's way out, so she met his gaze with what she hoped was a calm one of her own.

"Very well, thank you," she replied, as she took his hand. A *zing* of electricity rushed up her arm, and she tugged her hand away as swiftly as she could without being rude.

The corners of Cort Smith's mouth twitched, making Liz want to smack him.

"Dr. Smith starts his first full day tomorrow," Gregory said. He seemed oblivious to the tension swirling between herself and Cort, which Liz swore was so thick she could taste it. "I hope you'll take whatever time is necessary to point him in the right direction while he gets settled."

She'd point him right out the door, if she had her way! But Liz only nodded, and decided the politic answer was best. "Of course."

Thankfully, before the voluble Gregory could get chatting again, Stella interrupted.

"Dr. Prudhomme, I have the lab reports on Mr. Collins."

"Thank you." Her relief was almost strong enough to make her smile, but not quite. With a quick, "If you gentlemen will excuse me," she hightailed it away as fast as she could without actually running.

Why did it feel as though the universe had decided her previously nice, orderly existence was too good to be true, and was throwing her curveballs left, right and center?

Cort watched Liz Prudhomme walk away, amazed at how unruffled she'd been by a meeting he'd found hard to face with aplomb. Besides a reddening of the tips of her ears when she'd turned and seen him, there had been no other discernible reaction to show she'd even recognized him.

After he'd caught sight of her at the door earlier, he'd tried to convince himself it wasn't really the woman he'd spent the night with in Mexico. For the last seven months he'd been so hung up on the memory of that encounter he'd dreamt about her almost constantly, and had thought, erroneously, he'd glimpsed her in crowds at least a hundred times.

And she looked different, with her brown hair pulled back into a simple ponytail instead of in a sleek bob to below her chin. The streak of aqua she'd had framing one side of her face was gone too, but they were definitely the same strong features he'd committed to memory. Those mesmerizing, mossy-green eyes, almond-shaped and thick-lashed, had the same steady, controlled gaze that had attracted him before.

She wouldn't be classified as beautiful by most people's standards. Tall, solidly built, with strong shoulders and wide hips, she was anything but model skinny. From a distance, she would seem the perfect fit for the girl next door, or the sidekick in a romantic movie. But once a person saw her up close, Cort knew they couldn't see her in either role.

Her face was too strong, with high cheekbones, lips a trifle thinner than were fashionable, and a chin that hinted at a stubborn, willful nature. Here was a woman unused and unwilling to bend and, although he admired strength of character, he'd always been attracted to a softer type. Until the night they'd slept together, and she'd proved strength when yielded for desire brought more pleasure than he'd ever imagined.

Yet even if he'd still been unsure whether it was her or not, once he heard her speak there could be no question. Despite its careful control, her voice was still rich and decadent, like Cherries Jubilee without the brandy burnt off, and hearing it had made goose bumps race along his spine. Realizing it absolutely was her had filled him with a mixture of disbelief, horror and unwanted excitement. Life would be a lot simpler if she'd stayed just a memory and attendant fantasy, not a flesh-and-blood person he had to work with.

And always remember how she'd run out on him that night without a word.

"Liz is a fine practitioner. One of our best diagnosticians," Gregory was saying. "And although some of the staff seem to find her rather standoffish, we've never had any complaints from patients about either her standard of care or bedside manner."

Standoffish? He could only hope she would be standoffish with him too. Against his will and best intentions, already the memory of having her, flushed and damp with pleasure in his bed was threatening to push everything else out of his head.

"And I have to warn you she will not stand for any nonsense when it comes to proper protocol." Gregory started walking again, and Cort fell in beside him. "Not that she should, you understand, but she's particularly unforgiving when it comes to our surgeons overstepping their boundaries."

Ah, so she was at least one of the sources of the "friction" Dr. Hammond had spoken of earlier. He was searching for the correct way to ask for more information when a howling cry arose from

down the hall. It was followed swiftly by a metallic crash and a shout. Instinct had Cort running toward the noise, following Liz as she disappeared, also at a run, around a corner.

She was closer to the commotion, but he had the advantage of longer legs, so he was only two steps behind her when she dashed into one of the cubicles.

Everything seemed to slow down, allowing him to take in the large man thrashing about on the bed, a security guard struggling to restrain him. Liz sprang forward just as the patient's arm swung back, and Cort bit back a curse, knowing he was too far away to stop her from getting hit...

Liz twisted away from the flailing fist, the move so graceful and efficient Cort could hardly believe it, then she grabbed the patient's wrist.

The man went rigid, all the fight going out of him, as though Liz's touch sucked it away. The guard quickly secured one wrist with a restraint cuff while Liz secured the other, and Cort got to work putting ankle belts in place, assisted by a nurse who'd come in behind him.

"I know you're frightened." Patient secured, Liz leaned over him, spoke to him with what Cort recognized from their time together in Mexico as habitual directness. There wasn't a hint of stress in her voice, and Cort, whose system still hummed with adrenaline, mentally shook his head at her cool. "But we're going to help you."

Cort backed out of the room as Liz started giving orders to the nurses. He wasn't even supposed to be there, and he wondered if he'd already earned a strike with her, given her strictness on protocol.

Dr. Hammond was down the hall, speaking into his phone again, so Cort waited outside the patient's cubicle for Liz to come out. Might as well take whatever she had to say on the chin and apologize if necessary, rather than let it fester or have her formally complain.

When she stepped out of the room she paused, allowing the nurses to pass them before she spoke.

"It wasn't necessary for you to jump in like that. We have exceptionally well-trained staff here, and rushing to the rescue every time there's a hint of excitement isn't within your purview."

He shrugged, and stuck his hands in the pockets of his lab coat, annoyed once more at how unconcerned she was about seeing him again. He felt as though there was an eggbeater running amok in his stomach. "It was instinct. The sound of a fight and a kidney dish hitting the floor will always bring me running." She'd warned him off clearly: the patient inside that room had nothing to do with him. So, just to needle her, he asked, "Do you have a diagnosis?"

The look she gave him was level, but he was sure there was a flash of annoyance behind her veiled glance. Which was why he was surprised when, after a moment, she actually replied.

"Just got the labs back. There are trace amounts of clozapine in his system. I think he stopped taking his medication and is having a schizophrenic episode. The psych team is on its way down." Her gaze dared him to express an opinion, and he figured it was time to change the subject, even before she added, with a touch of ice in her tone, "Nothing more either of us can do right now."

If he hadn't figured it out before, now he knew for sure. Dr. Liz Prudhomme was as tough as rebar and cooler than a mountain spring. Yet under that realization was the still clear image of her in Mexico, vulnerable to his every touch. It took every ounce of willpower to lock the memory away again. He had to deal with her simply as a new colleague, a potentially difficult one at that, in the place he'd chosen to start over. Whatever had happened between them in the honeymoon suite in Mexico had no bearing on the here and now. Yet he felt he owed it to himself, and to her, to clear the air.

"Listen." Cort lowered his voice. "I wasn't sure you'd want anyone to know we'd met before. I was trying to be discreet."

"That's fine." The steady gaze didn't waver, but the ice in her voice was solid now. "I keep my private life private, so I... I actually appreciate it."

That little hesitation tugged at his chest, although he wasn't sure why. Perhaps it had something to do with its incongruity, given her air of total confidence. Without thought, he said, "Well, I'd rather

the staff here didn't know I'd been dumped right before my wedding too, so being discreet is pretty easy for me."

She didn't reply, except with a lift of her eyebrows and a sideways tilt of her head, which he interpreted as a dismissive gesture, before she turned to walk away. He should leave it at that, yet the urge to keep hearing that Cherries Jubilee voice was hard to ignore, no matter how aggravating she was.

She was already a few strides down the hall when he called after her, "What was that wrist lock you used? Aikido?"

That brought her up short, and those telling eyebrows rose again as she paused and looked back at him. "Hapkido. You're a martial artist?"

"Used to be, full on, until I got accepted into med school. Kept involved while I was in the army too." He held out his hands and flexed his fingers. "But I've stopped sparring, since I don't want to break anything, although that didn't end my fascination."

For a moment she didn't reply, seemed to be staring at his hands, then she looked back up at him. "Huh. Wimp."

Wow, she didn't pull any punches, did she? But he couldn't help the smile tugging at his lips. "Want to test that hypothesis sometime?"

Liz just shook her head, but the corner of her mouth twitched. "I'd kick your butt."

"No doubt," he replied, making no attempt to stop her this time when she moved away. "I've no doubt at all."

And it occurred to him, as he watched that delectable body disappear around the corner, she could do a great deal more than just kick his butt physically.

If he was stupid enough to let her.

CHAPTER THREE

"I SHOT HIM," the patient moaned, her voice distorted not just by the oxygen mask but also her severe facial injuries. "I shot him."

It was all she'd said since she'd been brought in, over and over again, no matter what Liz asked her. She'd barely reacted to any of the procedures they'd done to try to stabilize her condition, despite the additional pain they must have caused her.

"Kaitlin, where hurts the most?"

"I shot him. I shot him."

"Any word from Trauma?" Liz asked the room at large.

"I'm here."

Cort Smith dumped a bloody surgical gown into the bin by the door, and paused to drag on a fresh one. "What do we have?"

Even as focused as she was on her patient, Liz's heart did a little dip when she heard his voice.

I'll get used to having him around.

That was what Liz had been telling herself repeatedly since the day Cort strode back into her life but, a month on, she still had a visceral reaction every time she saw him. Having to work with him presented another layer to her problem, since she found herself sometimes having to fight to concentrate.

The movements of his hands, the calm, soothing quality of his deep voice when he spoke to patients, did things to her insides. They brought to mind the way he'd touched her so masterfully as he'd murmured in her ear that night so long ago, telling her to come.

It was extremely annoying and she once more resolved to ignore it. The badly beaten and stabbed woman in front of her deserved all her concentration.

"Twenty-four-year-old Kaitlin Hayle, facial trauma and multiple penetrating wounds to thorax and abdomen, both anterior and posterior. Limited lung sounds on the right when brought in; chest tube inserted."

As she continued to bring him up to speed, she chafed at the delay having to do so caused. It was information she'd already transmitted to Dr. Yuen, and she was surprised that Cort had attended. Normally the doctor she'd spoken to initially would be the one to come down. Something had caused the change in procedure, and therefore the delay, and she wasn't happy about it.

One thing Liz could readily admit to with Dr. Smith, though, was how thorough he was.

"Hey, Kaitlin," he said, in that deep, calm voice, while checking her pupils. "My name is Dr. Smith. I'm going to be examining you, okay?"

"I shot him."

Cort continued his methodical examination, working his way down to the two penetrating wounds on Kaitlin's thorax.

"They look to be at least two inches deep," Liz said, as he started palpating the area around the first wound. "And that one seems to angle downward."

Having examined both the anterior wounds, he merely said, "Roll her," so he could examine the posterior one.

Once he was through, he moved back to the head of the table and leaned over the patient. "Kaitlin, I'm going to have to operate. You have internal injuries that have to be repaired. We'll take good care of you, okay?"

Kaitlin's gaze flickered to Cort's face, and stayed there for a moment. Then, surprisingly, she said, "Okay. Okay."

"Good girl," he replied, giving her shoulder a quick squeeze.

The shock must be wearing off, thanks to the drip, Liz thought a little sourly. How else to explain his ability to get through to their patient when she hadn't been able to at all?

With a little jerk of his head, Cort beckoned Liz to the far side of the room, out of Kaitlin's earshot.

"I want her to have a CT scan before I go in. She seems stable enough to take the time, and I'll have a better idea of what I'm facing before I open her up."

"I'll call up to Radiology right now," Liz replied. "And I'll go up with her."

"Thanks." He gave her a half smile. "I'll keep an eye on her vitals while you're gone."

As she turned away to go to the phone, Liz was annoyed with herself all over again.

Why was it his smiles, even half ones, made her want to smile back? She wasn't the smiling type at all, and yet something about him made her almost wish she were.

She'd been careful to keep him firmly at arm's length and act with the utmost professionalism toward him, determined to eventually exorcise the hyperawareness she experienced around him. It was aggravating in the extreme that the rest of the Hepplewhite staff seemed equally determined to keep Cort in the center of the gossip mill, and she could hardly move without hearing someone say his name.

Just that morning, when she'd been in the line at the cafeteria, there had been a couple of nurses in front of her talking about him, as though there was nothing else of any interest to chat about.

"He's been here for a while, what have you been able to find out about him?"

Liz knew who Marcie was talking about even before Trisha answered.

"Nothing but what I was able to find in the Cramer General website archives. Served in the army and got his training through it. Honorably discharged about five years ago and went straight to Cramer."

"That's it? Do we even know if he's married or not?"

Trisha shook her head, disgruntlement clear in her tone when she replied, "He's real nice, but a clam when it comes to talking about himself."

"Even with you, Miss Southern Charm?" Marcie snickered. "I'm surprised you don't have him spilling his guts over some sweet potato pie and a mint julep."

"Ha-ha-ha," Trisha replied, as she elbowed her friend and they both laughed.

Liz too was surprised that Trisha hadn't had any luck. The nurse was petite, almost elfin, with the most beautiful dark mocha complexion and the face of an angel. Plus, she had the kind of voice Liz remembered, as a teen, wishing she had. It was as sweet and light as fresh whipped cream, not low and raspy, like its owner subsisted on a diet of rusty nails and rye whiskey. Mind you, a voice like Trisha's would sound pretty stupid coming from her, who was almost a foot taller and nowhere near petite.

As she relayed Cort's request to Radiology, she resolved once more do something about how often she thought about him, dreamed about being with him in Mexico. She was loath to admit it, even to herself, but he'd turned her inside out that night, given her an experience she'd never had before.

Maybe because of her forthright nature, men seemed to assume she'd be demanding in bed and, since it was the best way to get the satisfaction she deserved, she usually was. However, Cort Smith had taken masterful control of her body, coaxing her to new erotic heights and making her have to reevaluate what it was she truly desired. When she'd snuck out of his room in the early hours of the morning, it hadn't just been because she'd had a flight to catch. She'd been awash in pleasure so intense as to be frightening.

There was no secret enjoyment in the fact she knew more about the sexy doctor than anyone else at the hospital. Intimate facts that still made her skin heat and her libido go through the roof. Instead, the knowledge she possessed just made working with him harder. Trying to view him just as a colleague was difficult in the extreme, but she was determined to do just that.

Hopefully, the more she had to interact with him, the more likely the annoying attraction she still felt would wither away.

“There.” Cort pointed to where the CT images of Kaitlin’s body were on the screen. “Definite laceration to the liver. And...” He was aware of Liz leaning closer, her attention focused on the movement of his finger, and for a split second lost his train of thought.

“Is that fluid around the stomach?” she asked.

“And air,” he replied, pulling himself together. He was about to operate to try to save a young woman’s life. There was no time for loss of concentration, no matter the source. What he was seeing on the CT scan indicated the internal injuries were probably quite extensive.

And they were. What he had estimated would be an hour-long operation stretched to two and a half hours, as he discovered Kaitlin’s diaphragm and stomach, as well as her liver, had been damaged. As he cauterized and stitched, he reflected on how lucky the young woman had been.

He wasn’t really surprised to come out of surgery and see Liz waiting to hear the outcome. Yet as he took a few moments to take off his surgical gear and wash up, his awareness of her just on the other side of the doors was disconcerting.

Settling in at Hepplewhite, in New York City itself, had been difficult enough, but every time he came into contact with Dr. Liz Prudhomme it intensified his sense of disorientation. Which was funny, in a weird rather than amusing sort of way, since it was something she’d said to him in Mexico that had prompted his move from Colorado.

Although they’d just met, he’d found himself telling her about being jilted only weeks before the wedding. What she’d said to him had lingered in his mind.

Sometimes, when life seems to be screwed up, you need to take a chance on the change that’s been forced on you, you know? Figure out what it would take to make the crappy stuff into an asset, or a benefit. Maybe you’ve had a lucky escape, being dumped. I don’t know, but now’s the time for you to make a new, better plan. That’s what I do when life tries to mess with me, anyway.

On reflection, her advice had made perfect sense. Wasn’t he the poster child for overcoming? For taking whatever effluvium life flung at him and making something worthwhile out of it? In comparison to all he’d been through, being jilted was, in the final analysis, insignificant. It was nothing when weighed against being abandoned as a baby, surviving the foster-care system, or losing his best friend. It was even small potatoes when compared to the depression that had blanketed him following Brody’s death. What it had done, though, was underscore how much he’d been drifting along through life.

The job at Cramer had been a sound choice, given his desire to be close to Jenna and the kids, and, although demanding, strangely easy after being deployed. He’d done well but after Mimi’s defection had decided to reactivate his childhood wish to travel the world, get to know new places intimately, before moving on to the next. And where better to start than in New York City?

It had seemed a perfect plan, until he’d found himself working with Liz Prudhomme and had realized he’d not just made a change but turned his entire life upside down.

He couldn’t make her out.

While he’d never heard her be rude, there was a distance between her and the world, a wall created of solemn, clear-eyed looks and cool professionalism. Although being the epitome of calm whenever they worked together, occasionally she’d glance at him, and all the arousal he tried to suppress rushed through him anew. For him, the spirit of the woman he’d had in his bed hovered in the back of his mind continually. A ghostly fantasy, flushed and excited, her body bowing and twisting with ecstasy yearned for and then achieved.

He’d give anything to be rid of those memories and the fantasies they inspired, but not even seeing her in her usual milieu, which was anything but sexy, helped.

If anything, it made her more fascinating. Every time he met those clear green eyes, or saw her striding purposefully through the hospital, it enticed him further.

Apparently, along with all his other issues, he was a masochist too. If that weren't the case, surely it would be easy to push aside the attraction he still felt? And it wasn't just the sexual appeal either. Something about that self-containment of hers interested him. Maybe in it he saw an echo of his own distance from others, and couldn't help wondering where hers sprang from.

Whatever the reasons, it made dealing with her a constant strain, and now he wished she'd simply called up to the surgical floor to find out how the operation had gone, rather than waiting around. With a sigh of resignation he pushed through the doors into the corridor beyond.

She was in street clothes, a pair of jeans that fit her curves perfectly and a coral sweater that somehow made her skin glow. A handbag, the size of a small suitcase, was on her shoulder, and she carried her winter jacket over one arm. Apparently she was about to go home.

"How did it go?" she asked, with habitual directness.

"Pretty well," he replied, before giving her a more detailed account of the injuries he'd found and repaired. "I think she'll make a full recovery."

Liz glanced down the hall, toward the waiting area. "The police are waiting to speak to her. Apparently, she did shoot her boyfriend. I didn't realize he'd been brought in too, not long before she was."

Cort nodded. "Initially I was treating him, and then Dr. Hammond told Dr. Yuen to take over and sent me down to attend on Kaitlin."

Dr. Yuen was young, newly licensed and not as experienced as Cort with the types of multiple injuries Kaitlin had experienced. The younger doctor had seemed nonplussed to have been pulled away from such an interesting case, but what the chief of surgery decreed went.

Liz's face tightened for an instant, then smoothed out again. "Well, the boyfriend survived, and is telling the cops she shot him, and he was just defending himself when he beat and stabbed her. It'll be interesting to see how it all pans out."

"I'll let you know if I hear anything," he said. "It'll probably take a while for the cops to figure it out."

Liz nodded, turning on her heel. "Thanks. I'm on my way out, so I'll see you."

"See you," he replied to her retreating back, leaving him watching the enticing sway of her hips for a few moments before he caught himself and went to talk to the police.

CHAPTER FOUR

CORT WAS JUST doing his job, Liz thought sourly a week later, but that didn't stop her wishing he was doing it somewhere else. No matter his intent, his presence sure didn't improve productivity in the ER department.

She was sitting at a computer, doing some research, when Cort came down to speak to one of the other physicians about a case. It was slower in the department. While the emergency room was being revamped and expanded, there was less traffic, with more serious cases being routed to other hospitals in the area. Cort had been asked to take on more general surgery cases until things picked up again, and had apparently agreed without demurring. Right now he was consulting with Dr. Durham and a steady stream of nurses was coming by, each one lingering for what Liz considered to be an unconscionable time within gawking range.

He was a menace!

And why was he hanging about so long too? Surely he had rounds to do up on the surgical floor?

Yet all the gossip she'd heard about him so far was still of the glowing variety, not even counting the comments about his looks. The nurses loved him, had no complaints about either the way he handled his patients or how he dealt with staff, and they were usually the first to grumble and moan about the surgeons. Her own co-workers in the ER department also seemed happy with how he interacted with them. Even Durham, the crankiest of them all, was right at this very minute grinning like a demented fool at Cort Smith.

Mind you, it was fairly rare to find a surgeon who was content to take a wait-and-see approach when the patient might, in the end, still need an op. From the conversation going on between Durham and Smith, that was exactly the situation they were discussing. Keeping her gaze on the screen in front of her didn't stop her from listening in.

"I'll be going off shift in about twenty minutes," Cort said. "But if Mrs. McClacken's obstruction doesn't sort itself out, I've briefed Dr. Morrison, and he's prepared to do the operation."

Durham snorted, his version of a laugh. "She'll be disappointed you're not operating."

Liz wanted to snort too, but not with laughter. She was too exhausted to find it funny, and blamed her sleepless nights squarely on Cort Smith. It was all too ridiculous, like working with a blasted rock star, having him around. Everyone wanted a piece of him. Not her, though, she reminded herself stoutly, despite the memories that had her tossing and turning at night, equal parts aroused and furious. It made having to see him every day a torment.

Worse, his easygoing manner and smiling demeanor reminded her of Andrew. Charming, lovable Andrew, who'd had everyone falling over themselves to please him, even Liz. But what he'd wanted from her had been so much more than she'd been able to give. He'd complained she wasn't affectionate enough, and the memory of being told she was too cold and controlled for him still stung all these years later.

It wasn't that she hadn't loved him. She had, so much so that she had been tempted, when he'd asked, to give up her studies and travel with him in Europe. Yet, in the end, Andrew had broken her heart and gone off on his own, preferring adventure to a life with her, and leaving her to pick up the pieces of her life the best way she could. There had been a corner of her heart still hoping he would come back, say he'd been wrong and she was all he'd ever need, but it hadn't happened. Would never happen as, before they'd been able to mend the rift, he'd been killed in a motorcycle accident in Germany.

Durham had gone but now one of the nurses was asking Cort something, gazing up at him as though she'd just discovered religion and it was the Church of Smith. It was the same way women of all ages had stared at Andrew, and the similarity made Liz's stomach clench.

Forcing her gaze back down to the monitor, she tried to push aside the painful thoughts, but one thing remained clear. Staying away from Cort Smith as much as possible was the very best thing she could do, for her sanity, if nothing else.

“Excuse me, Dr. Prudhomme.”

Liz looked up on hearing her name, but didn’t recognize the young man standing beside her. “Yes?”

“Mrs. Lister, in HR, asked me to let you know that there are some changes being made to the credential verification process. She noticed it’s been over nine months since your trip to Mexico and, since you tend to go on a medical mission trip once a year, she wanted you to be aware of the changes.”

In her peripheral vision, she noticed Cort’s head turn, as though he were looking at her, and she knew the mention of Mexico had attracted his attention. Her toes curled in her sneakers, heat bloomed in her belly, and it took all her concentration not to glance his way. Just the mention of her trip threatened to overwhelm her with all the memories she was trying so hard to suppress.

“Oh, thanks.” She kept her voice level and her focus on the man in front of her. “Could you tell Mrs. Lister I don’t have a trip planned right now, but ask her to email me the new protocol so I have it on hand?”

“Sure, Dr. Prudhomme.”

As he walked away, she turned her attention back to the website on myasthenia gravis. Committing to memory the information she wanted, she signed out of the system, but before she could get up, her cell phone pinged with an incoming text message, and she took it out to look.

Robbie, reminding her about her promise to attend a fundraising luncheon in his place the following day, since he was in London with Giovanna.

It made her annoyance peak.

When her great-aunts had left the majority of their wealth in a philanthropic fund and had named Liz as the trustee, she’d balked at the responsibility. Yet she owed them a debt and had known she couldn’t refuse. Not only had they funded her schooling without hesitation, they’d also been a refuge for her, stalwart in their support of her ambitions when her parents had tried to talk her out of pursuing a medical career.

As a compromise, Robbie had agreed to sit on the board and become the face of the trust, which had made sense, since his financial contacts and experience would be invaluable. Not to mention how much more easily he mixed and mingled in the high social circles her family frequented.

But he was all caught up in the preparations for his wedding and, not unreasonably, wanted to spend as much time as possible with Giovanna. London Fashion Week was about to start, and he’d promised to be there while his fiancée modeled for a new, haute couture designer. Liz didn’t blame him, but having to dress up and press the flesh while talking about nonprofits, investments and the like wasn’t anywhere near the top of her favorite things list.

More like at the bottom.

Shoving her phone into her pocket, she tried not to look, but found her gaze drawn straight back to Cort. He was still listening to the nurse, but his attention was on Liz, and she couldn’t help wondering if he, like her, had been drawn back into thoughts of their night together.

Dragging her gaze away from his, she got up. There were patients waiting for her, and putting some distance between her and Cort would be a very good thing just then. Liz pushed in her chair and had only taken a couple of steps when a nurse called out.

“Incoming baby, found in a dumpster. Hypothermic, unresponsive. Cops aren’t waiting for the ambulance. They’re bringing it in themselves.”

Immediately Liz was moving, training taking over. With a glance at the board, she barked, “Room two. Sanjay, heat lamp and thermal blankets. Marion, warm saline and an oxygen hood. Jessica, call up to Pediatrics and have them on standby.”

Then, as she set off at a run for the ambulance bay, she realized Cort was ahead of her, rushing to meet the incoming police car as though he were wearing a cape and only he could save the patient.

Oh, hell, no.

This was the kind of usurpation that shouldn't be allowed. There was absolutely no reason for him to be involved, and she didn't care if it was an instinctive reaction to hearing it was a child coming in. He couldn't be allowed to overreach his purview. Not on her watch.

He was sprinting toward the intake door and, with a burst of speed, she caught up to him just as he was going through it. The cold slapped her face, hard, stealing her breath for a moment, but then, with the sound of sirens screaming closer, she came up beside him. As she pulled on a pair of gloves, she said in her firmest voice, "Dr. Smith, you're not—"

Cort Smith turned and glanced down at her, and whatever she was planning to say next caught in her suddenly bone-dry throat.

There was an expression on his face she'd never seen before, and yet instinctively recognized. The blank stare spoke of hyper-focus, the tightness of mouth and jaw heralded not an unwillingness to yield but an inability. Curling her fingers into fists so tight she could feel her short nails through her gloves, she realized the futility of trying to block him from treating the child.

He turned away as the police car fishtailed on the thin slick of snow at the entrance to the bay, dismissing her, and Liz took a calming breath.

Later. She'd take him to task later.

The police car's front passenger door flew open even before the vehicle came to a complete stop, and a burly officer swung out. He looked to be hugging himself, holding his winter jacket closed as the wind caught the edge of the emergency blanket hanging down from below the edge of the coat, making it crackle and shimmer in the harsh lights.

Cort didn't try to take the child out of its warm cocoon but rushed the officer into the hospital.

"Room two," Liz called out, a step behind them.

"Homeless guy said he heard a noise from inside the dumpster, fished the baby out while someone called us." Even though he was running, the officer's voice was steady, factual. "Took us three minutes to get to the scene from the time the call came in. I thought I felt a pulse when we first got there, but there's been no movement or sound since. I think it's a newborn, but I'm not sure."

Cort swung through the door, guiding the officer, and Liz made no attempt to take the child, knowing Cort would do it, compelled as he was by some unknown force to take the lead. Instead, she moved quickly to the far side of the examination table, looking for the position of the heat lamp, making sure everything she needed was in place.

Cort unwrapped the child from the emergency blanket and the smelly fleece one beneath. The baby was tiny, smaller than she'd expected, and Liz pushed aside the stab of grief and fear she felt on seeing the fragile, exposed skin red from hypothermia. As the nurse lifted the baby to whisk away the blankets, Liz cut away the footie pajamas and then pulled off the diaper, revealing the gender.

A little girl.

Gauging the heat from the lamp, she pulled it slightly closer, warming the air around the table a bit more.

With a glance at her watch, she called out, "Someone call for a neonate team to attend, stat." In a quieter voice she continued, "Umbilical stump still attached, inexpertly tied off and cut. I estimate her to be about two days old."

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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