



JUDY
DUARTE

RACE TO THE
ALTAR



Cherish

Judy Duarte

Race To The Altar

«HarperCollins»

Duarte J.

Race To The Altar / J. Duarte — «HarperCollins»,

When race car driver Chase Mayfield found himself recovering from a car accident at our small-town hospital, the last thing he expected was to fall for the local Florence Nightingale. Who would have thought demure nurse Molly Edwards—the complete opposite of a man who lives on the edge—could lose her heart to a famous playboy? But after cautious Molly succumbed to a single night of passion, both she and Chase crashed headlong into a life-changing surprise: she's pregnant! Can Chase convince his favorite nurse that he's a risk well worth taking—for her and their baby? This reporter bets that Chase will soon be carrying his new bride over the finish line!

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Surely she wasn't pregnant.

Unable to help herself, Molly relived each stroke, each caress, each heated kiss until she missed Chase so badly she wanted to tell him she'd been wrong.

But she knew better than that.

With each second that silently tick-tocked through the room, time stretched and strained like a frayed rubber band, tighter and tighter until it was ready to snap.

Finally, a little pink dot formed, mocking every attempt Molly had made to convince herself she hadn't conceived. She blinked her eyes a couple of times, hoping to clear her vision, hoping to see that the result screen had remained blank.

But that bright pink spot wasn't going anywhere.

Molly sat on the commode for the longest time, peering at the testing apparatus and hoping for a different outcome until she was forced to accept the truth.

She was pregnant—with Chase Mayfield's baby.

Dear Reader,

Summer is a perfect time to read. With all the books available to you, I'm glad you chose *Race to the Altar*, the first story in my BRIGHTON VALLEY MEDICAL CENTER series.

Those who enjoyed reading THE TEXAS HOMECOMING books will get a chance to return to Brighton Valley and experience a medical setting this time around. But don't worry. You'll meet a few cowboys and ranchers, too!

I love a good western—whether it's a book, a movie or a song—and that's why many of my romances have a Texas setting. So grab a glass of sweet tea—or maybe a sarsaparilla—and escape to Brighton Valley for a guaranteed happy ending.

When you finish *Race to the Altar*, be sure to visit my Web site, www.JudyDuarte.com, and let me know what you thought of the story and the setting. I'd love to hear from you.

Wishing you romance,

Judy Duarte

Race To The Altar

Judy Duarte



www.millsandboon.co.uk

JUDY DUARTE

always knew there was a book inside her, but since English was her least favorite subject in school, she never considered herself a writer. An avid reader who enjoyed a happy ending, Judy couldn't shake the dream of creating a book of her own.

Her dream became a reality in March of 2002, when Silhouette Special Edition released her first book, *Cowboy Courage*. Since then, her stories have touched the hearts of readers around the world. In July of 2005, Judy won the prestigious Readers' Choice Award for *The Rich Man's Son*.

You can write to Judy c/o Silhouette Books, 233 Broadway, Suite 1001, New York, NY 10237. You can also contact her at JudyDuarte@sbcglobal.net, or through her Web site, www.judyduarte.com.

To the members
of the San Diego chapter of Romance Writers of America
for your friendship and support over the years,
as well as the wealth of knowledge I've gleaned
from your awesome workshops. You rock.

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Chapter One

Chase Mayfield left his sponsors in the den of the sprawling ranch house and headed for the front door, his temper just barely under control.

What the hell had that been? Some sort of intervention?

When he'd been summoned to the gentleman's ranch owned by Texas oilman Gerald Barden, he hadn't given it a second thought. He'd figured the men wanted to discuss the racing schedule, the competition and what they expected from their driver in the upcoming season, so he'd been surprised when they'd laid down the law about how he would conduct himself off the track from now on.

But Chase didn't like ultimatums—never had, never would.

Outside, the stars flickered overhead, and like the restless spirit that often swept through him, a warm summer breeze stirred up the leaves on the ground.

He wished he could kick that edgy spirit that had been a part of him since he'd been in diapers and had toddled after his older brothers, but he'd never been able to.

After climbing into the classic '63 Corvette he'd recently restored, Chase turned the ignition and pumped the gas pedal. When the engine responded with a well-tuned roar, he put the transmission into gear and started the long drive back to Houston, hoping to put some distance between him and his sponsors.

Chase had always lived life in the fast lane, both on and off the track. Hell, he didn't know how to live any other way; he didn't even want to.

Besides, he'd had his fill of people bossing him around while he was growing up. By the time he hit his teen years, he'd decided not to put up with it anymore.

For that reason alone, he was tempted to flip open his cell phone, call Gerald Barden back at the ranch and tell him and his cronies what they could do with their money. But he figured it was best to let things ride for a while. After all, Chase didn't have any other burning interests that left him many options.

Of course, settling down wasn't much of an option, either. Marriage certainly hadn't tamed the restlessness that plagued him, and neither had racing. Divorce might have ended his marriage, but racing and competition were in his blood.

Once on the open highway, Chase again pondered the ultimatum he'd been given.

"You're going to have to stay out of trouble and bars," Gerald had said. "We don't like the press you've been getting, son. If you don't fly under the media radar, you can kiss our money goodbye."

He'd wanted to remind Gerald and the others that he'd been racking up points and bringing them the kind of success they'd been hoping for. But over the years he'd gotten to know Gerald better than the man might even know himself—and he'd learned when to push his point and when to keep his mouth shut.

And this had clearly been a keep-your-mouth-shut night.

"Family's important to us," Gerald had tossed in for good measure.

It was important to Chase, too, but he doubted if anyone believed him. He hadn't been back home in ages. But he hadn't been up for an argument with the men who signed the checks. Not tonight.

About thirty-five minutes into his drive, he noticed a sign that said Now Entering Brighton Valley.

That wasn't right. Had he made a wrong turn? Where the hell was the county road?

A block ahead, a nearly burned-out neon bulb in a streetlight flickered, limiting his vision. He caught sight of several trash cans sitting curbside.

Chase glanced farther up the road, noting a big rig coming down the opposite side of the street.

Just as he realized he would need to make a U-turn so he could get back on the route to Houston, a small animal—a cat or a dog maybe?—darted out in the street, followed by a larger blur of pink. A child?

Chase had always been ready for the unexpected, especially on the road, but at this time of night he hadn't expected to see a kid playing outside. He hit the brakes, all the while watching the blonde pixie caught in the high beam of his headlights freeze, her eyes wide, her mouth gaped, her pink nightgown billowing and revealing bare feet.

His first reaction had been to pull to the right, but when another child on a bicycle whizzed into his path, the only choice he had was to turn sharply to the left, hoping to broadside the semi rather than hit it head-on.

He gripped the steering wheel as adrenaline pumped through him and threw his mind into slow-motion mode.

With no air bags, no roll bar and only a fiberglass car body, this crash wasn't going to be as easy to walk away from as the others had been.

Upon impact, pain exploded in his head, and then everything went black.

Molly Edwards sat at the nurses' desk in the emergency room at Brighton Valley Medical Center, hoping Karen Wylie would arrive and relieve her soon. Normally, Molly didn't work in the E.R.—or work the night shift, for that matter—but Karen had called in with some kind of family emergency, saying she'd be a couple of hours late.

Since the new hospital was struggling to stay afloat financially, there'd been a hiring freeze and the staff was stretched to the limit. So here Molly was, covering for Karen and holding down the E.R. fort.

There was one good thing about working in emergency, though. It was usually busy, and time flew by. But so far this evening had been fairly quiet.

Earlier, a couple of cowboys had come in after a friendly card game devolved into a brawl. None of the men had been injured seriously in the fight, but one had suffered chest pains and was now on the second floor, where he was being treated by the resident cardiologist.

A toddler who'd had a febrile seizure was in one of the pediatric beds, but he would be going home soon. Dr. Betsy Bramblett—or rather, Nielson—had tried to assure the worried parents that a sudden spike in temperature could cause convulsions in a small child, and that this particular type of seizure wasn't as dangerous as it might seem.

Dawn McGregor, the nurse who'd answered the phone moments ago, was sitting to the right of Molly, jotting down notes. When she ended her communication with paramedics en route to the hospital, she got to her feet. "Get ready for another accident victim. A guy driving a sports car collided with a semi truck. The trucker's fine, just a little shook up. He declined treatment, but the sports car driver has a head injury, lacerations and possible fractures."

Molly couldn't help but wince. She hated dealing with the aftermath of a car accident, especially in a triage setting. Twelve years ago, when she was seventeen, she'd lost her parents and her brother in a head-on collision.

After a high school football game, they'd left San Antonio and were headed to Brighton Valley to visit her grandparents. Along the way, a reckless driver had run a red light and careened into the family minivan. Her father had died upon impact, and her mother had been DOA. Jimmy, her younger brother, had clung to life for nearly two days before he died from his injuries, leaving Molly as the only survivor.

She'd been injured, of course, but not seriously. For some inexplicable reason the corner of the backseat where she'd been dozing with her favorite pillow had been spared the brunt of the impact. Most people had called it a miracle, but she tended to see it as a weird twist of fate that had spared her rather than the others.

For the longest time she'd felt guilty—for insisting they leave when they did, for sleeping through it, for practically walking away from it. She'd also been devastated by the loss, but she'd eventually worked through the grief, thanks to the love and support of her grandparents.

Two years later, when Gramps suffered a heart attack, which—thank God—hadn't been fatal, the hospital experience had had a positive effect on Molly. She'd gained a real appreciation for healthcare professionals during her visits to him, and soon after he was discharged she'd decided to pursue a nursing degree, hoping to be able to help people in pain and to comfort families who were suffering. It gave her a purpose, a reason to be alive.

While she no longer let her own personal tragedy drag her down, she had to admit it was the main reason she didn't work in the E.R. on a regular basis—too many feelings of *déjà vu*.

Molly closed the chart she'd been working on and scanned the room to see if Karen had clocked in yet. She hoped so, because she was eager to go home and get some sleep before returning to the hospital to start her shift at 6:00 a.m. But Karen was nowhere in sight, which meant Molly would be called upon to help with the incoming accident victim.

Oh, well. It was all in a day's work.

"What's the victim's ETA?" Molly asked Dawn.

"Three minutes, maybe less."

"Thanks. I'll give Dr. Nielson a heads-up."

Dawn handed Molly the slip of paper on which she'd written the patient's vitals, including blood pressure, respiration, pulse rate and other pertinent details.

Molly took note of it all as she headed toward the toddler's bed. She glanced up in time to see Betsy Nielson draw aside the blue privacy curtain and leave the child's bedside.

"Doctor," Molly said, "we have a car accident victim coming in—a male, twenty-nine years old and unconscious. He has lacerations, possible fractures and a head injury. The ETA is approximately two minutes."

"All right. Only one victim?"

"Yes, the driver of a Corvette. The trucker wasn't hurt."

The doctor and nurse made their way to the triage area, and moments later the automatic door swung open. Two EMTs rushed in with the patient on a gurney, and the E.R. staff kicked into high gear.

Molly had been expecting the worst, and she'd been right. The driver of the sports car was still unconscious. His eyes were bruised and swollen, and blood from a laceration over his left brow covered most of his face.

Since Karen would be relieving her soon, she stepped back to allow Dawn to join the doctor, then worked with the paramedics as they recited their findings and their treatment en route.

Dr. Nielson, whom Molly referred to as Betsy when they weren't working, listened intently while she made a methodical assessment of the man's injuries.

"Cut off his clothes," Betsy told Dawn, as the two continued to examine the patient.

When the transfer of information was complete, Molly turned to the E.R. drama unfolding and watched Dr. Nielson work. Even with the blood cleaned from his battered face, it was difficult to imagine what he'd looked like before the collision. Handsome, she suspected. And she couldn't quell her curiosity about him.

Joe Villa, the ambulance driver, handed Molly a plastic bag holding the man's wallet. "His ID says his name is Chase Mayfield. I wonder if he's the race car driver."

Molly wouldn't know. She didn't follow sports and wasn't into cars. In fact, ever since the accident, she'd been uneasy whenever she got behind the wheel.

She did, of course, own a car, but she preferred to ride her bike around town, saving the vehicle to use on rainy days.

“It’s hard to imagine a celebrity like that being in Brighton Valley,” Sheila Conway, the senior EMT, said.

“Yes, but he was driving a classic old Corvette,” Joe reminded her. “That tells me he appreciates speed and a fast car.”

“Maybe so.” Sheila crossed her arms. “But he won’t be zipping around town in that Corvette anymore. It’s little more than a mangled mess now.”

Molly hadn’t recognized the name at all, so it was anyone’s guess if he was the same guy.

If he really was a race car driver, one thing that she did know was that he was a man who normally cheated death on the track. A man who had no fear. Or, if he did, he’d learned to control it.

Unable to help herself, she opened the plastic bag and pulled out Chase’s ID. His driver’s license photo wasn’t all that remarkable, but then most of them weren’t.

His black, unruly curls were matted with blood now. And his eyes, which his ID said were blue, were swollen shut.

What had they looked like before?

According to his ID, he was six feet tall, a hundred and ninety pounds. He had a birthday coming on October seventeenth.

He’d be thirty. But that’s about all she could assess, other than he’d probably been an attractive man when he’d started out today.

Her curiosity continued to build, which was strange. Normally she kept a professional distance from her patients, yet for some reason she was drawn to this one. And that was crazy, since there were several good reasons to excuse herself now that the paramedics were packing up and preparing to leave.

“By the way,” Sheila added, “there’s a kid coming in, too. He has a laceration on his left leg which may need stitches, as well as a possible fracture of the wrist. His guardian is driving him in.”

“Was he involved in the accident?” Molly asked.

“He was looking for his little sister, who’d chased after a runaway cat. When he saw the collision, he lost his balance and fell off his bike.”

Molly nodded, then returned her attention to the man on the gurney—Chase Mayfield.

“He’s coming to,” Betsy said. “Hi, Chase. You’re in a hospital. You’ve been in an accident. I’m Dr. Nielson. How are you feeling?”

He grimaced.

“Your injuries aren’t life threatening,” Betsy told him, “but we’re going to run a few tests. We also want to keep you in the ICU tonight for observation.”

His only response was a moan.

Betsy went on to probe and clean his head wound. After telling him what she was about to do, she began stitching it shut.

Dawn, who’d ordered an MRI, reentered the room just as Betsy finished the last of ten or twelve sutures over Chase’s left eye. “Doctor, the boy arrived and is waiting with his guardian.”

Betsy nodded. “I’ll be finished here in a few minutes.”

The man moaned again.

“Chase?” Betsy asked.

No response.

“Wake up, Mr. Mayfield.”

Chase cracked open his good eye. “Where...what...?”

“You’re in the hospital,” Betsy told him again. “You were involved in an accident. Do you remember?”

He seemed to be trying to process the information. “Oh...yeah.”

“Can you tell me what happened?” the doctor asked.

Molly knew Betsy wasn't interested in details of the accident. She was actually trying to assess the extent of his head injury and his cognitive function.

"A dog...a kid...a truck..." His eyes opened momentarily, then closed again. "I had to pick one..."

He'd opted for the truck, Molly concluded.

"Good choice," Betsy said. "At least, for the sake of the kid and the dog."

Chase grumbled. Or perhaps it was a groan.

"Rumor has it you might be the Chase Mayfield," Betsy said. "The race car driver."

"Rumor has a big mouth."

So, Molly thought, he had a sense of humor. And apparently, he was the man in question. She drew closer to the bed. "Karen still hasn't arrived, Doctor. So I can finish cleaning him up and put on his gown."

"Thanks, Molly. I really appreciate you coming in to pinch hit like this."

"No problem." She glanced at the patient.

He opened his eyes. Well, actually, he opened the one that wasn't completely swelled shut, and it was the prettiest shade of blue Molly had ever seen. Like the color of the stone in her mother's sapphire ring.

"We can transport you to Houston," Betsy told him, "if you'd rather be in a larger hospital."

"No." Chase turned to the doctor and reached out, grabbing Molly's arm by mistake, gripping her with an intensity that shot her adrenaline through the roof. "I don't want to go to the city."

"No problem," the doctor said. "You can stay here, if you'd rather."

"I don't—" he winced "—want word to get out...about this...if it can be helped."

"We'll do what we can to ensure your privacy," Betsy assured him. "But there were witnesses to the accident. The media could find out, although we certainly won't make any statements, if that's what you're concerned about."

"I want to...fly under the radar." He opened his eye a crack. "Use my middle name, Raymond, instead of Chase. Maybe that'll throw people off."

"We'll issue a request for discretion." Betsy turned to Molly. "I'll let you take it from here. I'll order some Demerol and let ICU know he's on his way up."

"All right."

Chase closed his eyes and blew out a sigh.

"Is there someone I can call for you?" Molly asked. "Someone who's expecting you at home?"

"No." He blew out another ragged breath. "Damn, my head...hurts."

"Dr. Nielson is ordering pain meds. I'll go and get it for you."

Ten minutes later, after giving Chase an injection, Molly had managed to fill out the forms and have Mr. Mayfield formally admitted to the hospital—under his middle name, Raymond.

She'd returned to his bedside to tell him, but he'd fallen asleep—his eyes were shut, his breathing even.

Good, she thought. He'd feel better in dreamland.

She reached into the cupboard and took out one of the hospital gowns. Then she proceeded to pull down the sheet to Chase's waist, noting the broad shoulders, the sprinkle of dark hair across his chest, the well-defined abs, the...

Oh, wow. The whisper of a sexual rush buzzed through her veins, and she did her best to shake it off.

She'd seen countless naked men in her life—professionally speaking, of course—but she'd never had a purely feminine response to a patient.

Until this moment.

Doing her best to ignore the unwelcome physical reaction, she slipped his arms through the gown, then proceeded to lift his shoulder just enough to tie at least one of the strings.

“Ow. What’re you doing?”

Startled, she gently rolled him back on the mattress. “Getting you dressed.”

Did he realize his nakedness had unbalanced her?

Surely not.

“You dozed for a few minutes,” she said, trying to get her mind back on track. “How are you feeling now?”

“Like I...got hit by a...Mack truck.”

“I think you did.” She smiled at his joke, letting down her guard just a little. “A sense of humor should help you recover quickly, so I’m glad your funny bone wasn’t fractured.”

“What do you know? A pretty nurse...and witty, too. I...like that...in a woman.” He managed a faint smile.

She couldn’t help but wonder what one of his smiles would have looked like before his face had been swollen and bruised.

His eyes—well, the one that had actually opened—closed again. She hoped that meant he was really drifting off to la-la land.

She sure hoped so. She really needed to be done with this shift, done with him. She didn’t like the unprofessional turn her thoughts had taken. So she straightened, eager to pass him on to another nurse. One who knew how to keep her feminine side in check.

Before she could pull the curtain aside, Betsy peeked in on them. “How’s he doing?”

“I’d say he’s on the road to mend.”

“Good. If all goes well in ICU tonight, we’ll be sending him to the third floor in the morning.”

So much for being able to pass him off to someone else. That’s where Molly would be tomorrow, and with her luck, she’d probably be assigned to his room for at least part of the time he was in the hospital. Unless, of course, she could figure out a way to talk her way out of it.

“I promised to do what I could to protect his identity from the media,” Betsy said. “So I’m reluctant to let anyone else come in close contact with him.”

“How are you going to do that?”

“I’m going to suggest that he be assigned to you for the entire time he’s here. That should be the easiest way to maintain confidentiality.”

Molly tried not to roll her eyes or object. “How long do you expect that to be?”

“A week maybe, unless there are complications.” Betsy’s gaze intensified. “Do you have a problem with this, Molly?”

“No, not at all.” She was a professional. She did her job and took care of whatever patient had been assigned to her.

It’s just that this patient was different. According to the paramedics who’d brought him in, he’d been speeding and had, at least indirectly, caused a young boy to be injured. So Chase and his accident brought back a painful sense of déjà vu.

She could deal with that, she supposed.

As she walked around to the side of the gurney, kicking off the brake, he reached out and clamped a hand on her wrist. The hint of a smile crossed his battered face. “No speeding, okay?”

“I’ll keep it under a hundred,” she said as she maneuvered the gurney out the door and into the hall.

“Be careful,” he said. “I don’t like to ride in the passenger seat.”

Interestingly enough, neither did Molly. She’d been asleep when her family’s minivan had spun out of control and ran off the road, unable to shout out a warning or grab the wheel.

Not a day went by that she didn’t ask herself what would have happened if she’d been the one driving, if she’d been alert instead of asleep. Would she have been able to steer clear of an accident?

Would her family be alive today?

She guessed she would never know for sure, but either way, she didn't trust anyone behind the wheel except herself.

"Are you married?" he asked.

"No."

"Got a boyfriend?"

"Not at the moment." She glanced down at the battered face of her victim, wondering if he was flirting with her or if the concussion and the Demerol were making him chatty.

"Guess that makes it my lucky day," he said.

"It wasn't lucky earlier." She couldn't help chuckling as she pushed the gurney down the hall.

"How's the kid?" he asked.

"Which one?"

"Both, I guess."

From what she understood, a little girl had dashed outside and into the street, chasing after a cat that ran away. And her brother went after her on his bicycle. "You didn't hit either of them. The girl is fine, and her brother fell off his bike. He may have broken his wrist, but nothing serious."

As Molly continued pushing the gurney toward the elevator that would take them to ICU, one of the wheels froze then wobbled.

"Watch it," he said. "One accident tonight is all I can handle."

"Don't worry. I'll be very careful." And she wasn't just talking about transporting him through the hospital corridors. Whether she was willing to admit it or not, she found herself drawn to the race car driver whose lifestyle should be a great big turn-off to a woman who didn't like to take any unnecessary risks. A patient who'd been battered in an automobile wreck and whose cuts and bruises ought to make him completely unattractive.

So what was with the unexpected feminine interest in Chase Mayfield, a man sure to make her life miserable?

Chapter Two

Chase had no idea what time he'd been transported from the ICU to a room on the third floor, but since the sun was pouring through his window, damn near blinding him, he knew it was well after dawn.

He'd had to ask the tall, spindly orderly who'd brought him here to pull the blinds so his head wouldn't explode.

As soon as the room had been darkened and Chase could see out of his good eye, he searched for the blonde nurse who'd undressed him last night. If she'd worn a name tag, he hadn't noticed, but he suspected he would recognize her if he saw her again—no matter how lousy his vision was.

As he looked around, he spotted a TV, a tray table and a monitor of some kind, but Blondie was nowhere in sight. Instead, another, rather nondescript nurse came to check on him, pour him water and point out the TV remote and the call button, as if he gave a squat about all that now.

"Can I get you anything else?" she asked.

He didn't suspect a new head was possible. "No, I'm okay."

Moments later he dozed off again, only to be awakened by a male nurse who was the size of a Dallas Cowboys linebacker.

Or had there been two of them merging into one?

"Raymond?" one or both of them asked.

"Yeah, that's me." Chase blinked and looked again. Okay, it was just one guy, and maybe he wasn't all that big after all.

"I've come to get some blood, Raymond."

Maybe it was the man's quest for blood, but Chase could have sworn he'd detected a Bela Lugosi accent and wondered if he ought to have someone bring him some garlic.

No, it had to be the Demerol they'd given him. If Bela started flying through his room or hanging upside down from the ceiling, he'd have to refuse any more shots.

Chase lifted his arm about an inch off the bed, then let it drop to the mattress. "I'd help, but my body isn't at a hundred percent."

"No problem." Bela placed a blue plastic tote box full of lab paraphernalia on the tray table. Next he took a green band of rubber, wrapped it around the top of Chase's arm and twisted until it pinched. Then he jabbed and poked at a vein a couple of times until he finally struck blood. "There. That wasn't too bad, was it?"

"Bad enough." Chase's head hurt like hell, and every bone in his body felt as though it had been run over by a steamroller. A needle stabbing into his arm just added insult to injury.

If he'd been at all able, he would have busted out of here and gone home to Houston, but as it was he had about as much fight left in him as a baby bunny.

After Bela left, a wave of nausea swept through him, turning his stomach inside out. He wondered if he ought to ring for the nurse. Instead, he decided to wait it out, knowing that he was having a hard time staying awake anyway.

He'd no more than faded off again when someone came in with a tray of food and announced it was lunchtime. It was a teenage girl with her brown hair in a ponytail and wearing a pink-and-white-striped dress. She took the plastic domed lid off a plate, sending a smorgasbord of fumes straight to his nostrils.

"Oh, God," he said.

"Do you need some help?"

"Yeah. Take it away. Just looking at it makes me feel like I'm going to puke."

"I'll tell your nurse. Maybe they can give you something for that."

Whatever.

The next time Chase heard footsteps he cracked open an eye, the one that actually worked, and caught sight of the pretty blonde nurse who'd worked on him last night.

"Chase?" she asked.

"Call me Raymond. And if you told me your name, I've forgotten."

"I'm Molly, and I'll be your nurse today. How are you feeling?"

He turned his head toward the lull of her voice, only to feel a sharp pull in his neck. "Like hell. But maybe I'll recover now that you're back. That other nurse—Bela or whatever his name is—has it in for me."

"His name is Eric, and he's a lab tech." She neared his bed, took his wrist in her fingers and felt for a pulse. "What makes you think he doesn't like you?"

"He kept stabbing me with a dull needle."

"Sometimes the veins are hard to find."

Chase grimaced, then tried to roll to his side and reach for the bed rail. "Ow. Damn, that hurts."

"What's the matter?"

"I'm going to need help getting to the bathroom."

"I don't think Dr. Nielson wants you up yet. I'll get you a bedpan."

"Don't bother. I'd rather hold it until my eyes turn yellow than use one of those again." Especially with Nurse Molly holding it.

She smiled, and her eyes—green or blue? It was hard to tell with impaired vision—glimmered. "We can try a catheter."

"Not if you want to live to tell about it."

She laughed, a melodious lilt that at any other time might have charmed his socks off. But now? Well, the pain and the whole damn situation had done a number on his sense of humor. But he had to admit that the blonde Florence Nightingale beat the heck out of Bela or the candy striper.

"I'll call one of the male nurses or an orderly to come and help," she said.

He'd never had what they call a shy bladder, but something told him that might even be worse.

"How long have I been in this room?" he asked. "It feels like a week."

Molly looked at her wristwatch, a no-nonsense type with a leather band. "About forty-five minutes."

She walked to a whiteboard on the wall, pulled out a black marker and wrote her first name, followed by a phone number. "This is my pager number. The call button will bring anyone at the nurses' desk. But if you need me, give me a call, and I'll come as soon as I can."

That seemed easy enough.

"I know that you wanted to 'fly under the radar,'" she said, "but are you sure there isn't someone we should tell that you're here? Parents, sister, girlfriend, neighbor?"

"Not unless I'm dying."

"No pets at the house that need to be fed?" she asked.

"Nope." He turned his head toward her, even though it hurt his neck to do so. "Are you just a soft-hearted nurse? Or are you trying to ask in a subtle way if I'm attached?"

"Actually, you're not all that attractive right now. And any sign of personality or charm is nonexistent. So, no, I wasn't quizzing you for personal reasons."

"Too bad." He tossed her a painfully crooked grin, sorry that he wasn't at his best and wondering what she saw when she looked at him.

Molly studied her battered patient, trying to imagine the photo on the ID she'd seen last night—dark, curly hair that hadn't been matted from bed rest, expressive blue eyes that actually opened and blinked.

If she knew what was good for her, she'd be a lot more focused on what he looked like now. A nurse had no business being attracted to her patient. And Molly, especially, didn't need to be intrigued by a race car driver who'd probably had more than his share of women.

Yet she couldn't help getting involved in a little flirtatious banter. "So what's a nice guy like you doing in a place like this?"

"Are you trying to hit on me?" There was the hint of a grin on his face.

Molly laughed. "Sorry. I'm not into the footloose, reckless type. I was just trying to make conversation."

"Too bad," he said. "It would be nice to have my own private duty nurse, especially a pretty blonde."

"Something tells me, with your occupation, you probably ought to have your own mobile medical unit."

"Actually, I'm a very good driver."

She crossed her arms, a smile stealing across her face. "Those lumps and cuts and bruises suggest otherwise."

"It could have been worse."

A lot worse. He could have died—or one of the children could have.

As though reading her thoughts, he asked, "So how's that kid doing? The one who was riding the bike?"

"I'm sure he's okay."

"Did he have to stay in the hospital?"

"I don't think so."

"Can you find out for me? I need to know."

"I'll see what I can do."

He obviously cared about the kid. After all, he'd avoided the children and had chosen to slam into the semi instead. And his follow-up interest in the boy was touching.

She couldn't help thinking of him as a hero, the reckless and rebellious sort, like Han Solo in the first set of Star Wars movies.

So what made this guy tick?

She walked around the bed and opened the blinds, only to get an immediate complaint.

"Hey, what are you doing? Trying to kill me? The glare hurts my head."

"Sorry."

"They were closed for a reason."

She twisted the control rod, darkening the room again. "Do you need something for pain? I'll check the chart, and if it's time for more, I'll bring it in."

"I don't want whatever they've been shooting into my IV. It's messing with my mind. I hear people talking around my bed, but when I look, there's no one there. So I'd rather suck it up."

A tough guy, she thought, rebellious and surly, but with a tender heart. "There's other medication we can give you that isn't as strong. So there's no need for you to suffer."

"Right now I'd feel better if I could just sleep it off."

With the extent of his injuries and the seriousness of the concussion, she didn't think he'd wake up feeling any better. "All right, I'll leave you alone for a while so you can go back to sleep. I'll come in to check on you later."

She glanced at his monitor, noting the numbers were within normal range, and checked his IV drip. Everything was as it should be, so she headed for the door. But before leaving his room, she took one last look at her patient.

And for the second time in minutes, she wondered who the real Chase Mayfield was.

Shaking off her curiosity, she stepped out the door and returned to the third-floor nurses' desk, where Dr. Nielson sat, jotting down notes in a patient's chart.

Just last year, when Betsy took over Doc Graham's practice in Brighton Valley, Molly had been the first nurse she'd hired. They'd worked together only one day before the two became friends.

"How's Mr. Mayfield doing?" Betsy asked.

"He's complaining about the effects of the Demerol. Can we switch him to something else?"

"Sure, if that's what he wants. I'll write up an order for some Vicodin."

"By the way," Molly said, "he was wondering about the boy's condition. I didn't stick around the E.R. last night to find out, but I suspected that he'd been treated and released."

"Tommy Haines? Yes, he broke his wrist and knocked the growth plate out of whack, so I called in Dr. Jessup from orthopedics."

"Other than that, I take it there weren't any other complications and he went home?"

"No, that was it." Betsy closed the chart she'd been working on and turned to Molly. "No other physical complications."

"What do you mean?"

"His mother is struggling just to pay the rent and to put food on the table, so she hasn't been able to keep up on the medical insurance premiums for him and his younger sister. That's why she declined riding in the ambulance. She didn't want to get hit with another bill she couldn't pay."

So there was another cost for Brighton Valley Medical Center to absorb, Molly thought. Not that it was a biggie, but every dollar added up.

BVMC was a new hospital that had had its grand opening a year or so ago. In a sense, it was up and running and doing very well. But it was struggling to stay afloat financially in a community that couldn't quite support a medical facility at the present. However, if the population continued to grow as the investors hoped it would, the hospital would be in much better financial shape next year.

"I'll contribute toward the boy's medical bill," Molly said.

"Again?" Betsy leaned a hip against the nurses' desk and crossed her arms. "You can't keep paying toward every indigent case we get."

"I know. But I've got the money, and it makes me feel good to help. Besides, BVMC doesn't need to drop further into the red. I'm just looking out for my job and my livelihood."

"There's got to be a better investment for your money," Betsy said. "Like a new car or that vacation you've never taken."

Maybe so, but Molly lived a simple life; it was just her and her cat, Rusty, at home, so her savings account was healthy. In addition, there'd been a major insurance settlement following the accident that most people didn't know about. She'd used a portion of it for college, but she hadn't touched the rest.

Randy Westlake, the last guy she'd dated, had known about the money, although he hadn't known exactly how much.

"You need to buy a house," he'd told her time and again. But it had bothered her that he was a real estate agent and stood to benefit if he was able to talk her into a purchase.

"Why throw your money away on rent?" he'd asked her. "There are a lot of nice houses near your grandmother's rest home that are much roomier and a lot nicer."

Yes, but none of them were as centrally located to all the places Molly frequented, like BVMC, the market and Rose Manor Convalescent Hospital.

No, the one-bedroom house she rented was perfect for her.

Randy had brought up the move and the money one time too many, and they'd finally parted ways. But not before he accused her of suffering from survivor's guilt and hoarding the "blood money" she'd received from the insurance settlement.

The accusation had been a low blow, lancing her to the quick, but only because she'd expected him to understand. She'd put the past behind her, whether he believed that or not, and she was content with her life and the place in which she'd chosen to live.

Besides, she had a new family now, the BVMC staff and her patients. And while there was a part of her that yearned for a real home and loved ones, deep inside she feared getting too close to anyone again. It was tough enough when a patient died or a coworker retired or moved on for one reason or another.

So why get any more involved than that? Life was fragile, and loved ones could be taken away in a blink of an eye. That knowledge made her good at her job.

Of course, it also made for more than a few long and lonely nights.

At 2:14, Molly's pager went off while she was checking the dosage on Dr. Cheney's order for Carla Perez, the patient in 309. She glanced at the display and saw that Chase was calling her. She'd go to him just as soon as she gave the meds to Mrs. Perez, who'd had an appendectomy yesterday and was complaining of pain.

It didn't take her very long to stop off in 309, but by the time she entered Chase's room, she found him climbing out of bed.

"Where are you going?" she asked.

"To the bathroom."

As he got to a wobbly stand, the edges of his hospital gown split apart, as they were prone to do, revealing his backside and a nicely shaped butt.

She studied the appealing vision just a tad too long before asking, "Do you need some help?"

"I'll be okay." He reached for the IV pole, using it to steady himself, then shuffled to the bathroom.

She followed a few steps behind him, her gaze still drawn to his butt.

Not bad, she thought, not bad at all.

She wasn't in the habit of ogling her male patients, so the fact that she'd done so with this one didn't sit very well with her. As he slipped into the bathroom, leaving the door ajar, she stood just a couple of feet away, prepared to act if she had to.

He took care of what he went in to do, then the water in the sink turned on. Moments later, after the faucet shut off, he uttered, "Oh, damn."

She pulled open the door, only to find him about to collapse on the floor. She wrapped her arms around his waist, trying her best to support him.

"Wouldn't you know it?" he said, teeth clenched in a grimace of pain. "I've got a pretty nurse in my arms, and look at me. I can't even make an improper move, let alone a proper one."

"Cute," she said, wresting a hand free just long enough to push the call button on the wall. The man was a lot bigger and heavier than she'd realized.

"Why do I have to be laid up when an opportunity like this arises?"

While she held him, she tried to lower the lid of the commode so she could make a place for him to sit.

"Next time you need to get up," she said, "call me, okay?"

"Good idea. Maybe then I'll be stronger and better able to enjoy your tender loving care."

About the time Molly managed to sit Chase on the commode, Evie Richards, a nurses' aide, came in. "Need some help in here?"

"Yes. As soon as he catches his breath, we need to get him back to bed."

"Two pretty nurses taking me to bed," Chase said. "And I'm just about down for the count. What a shame."

If Evie had been young and shapely, rather than middle-aged and a bit on the plump side, Molly might have considered Chase to be more of an obnoxious player than a charming flirt.

Of course, given the chance, and away from a hospital setting, he might be both.

She supposed time—and some healing—would tell.

Once he was back in bed, Evie left the room. But before Molly could follow her out, Chase asked, “Did you ever find out anything about how that kid is doing?”

“He broke his wrist. His mom took him home last night.”

“Good. I’m glad he’s going to be okay.”

“I hope so,” Molly said, thinking about the single mom’s plight.

“What do you mean by that?” Chase asked.

“Well, there’s some financial difficulties—” Molly tucked a strand of hair behind her ear. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have said anything.”

He seemed to ponder her words, his brow knit together.

For a moment, she again tried to imagine the handsome man reflected in the picture on his driver’s license, rather than the guy with a battered face.

“What kind of financial difficulties?” he asked.

“He lives with his mom and a sister, so there’s just one income. And no medical insurance.”

Oops. What had gotten into her? She stopped herself from saying anything more. It was just that he seemed so sympathetic—and genuine—that the words had tumbled out before she knew it.

“Do you have a name and address for them?” he asked.

“Even if I did, I couldn’t give it to you.”

“But the hospital must have it.”

“I’m sure they do, but they won’t give out that information. And I shouldn’t have told you what I did.”

“Even if I wanted to pay the medical bill for them?”

“That’s really nice of you,” she said. “But I heard someone else has already offered to pay for it.”

“I’m going to do it,” he said, his voice sounding more certain—and a lot healthier—than it had since he’d arrived at the hospital.

She suspected that people didn’t tell him no very often, and that he didn’t like it when they did.

“Can you please let the billing department know?”

Molly supposed she could. If Chase took care of the Haines’ bill, there were bound to be new ones that she could pick up. Not that she planned to pay for any and all outstanding accounts, but the ones involving kids or others that tugged on her heartstrings were another story. “All right, I’ll tell them.”

“Get me a number,” he said. “And I’ll cut the hospital a check.”

Apparently Chase Mayfield was much more than a pretty face—and a nice butt. A whole lot more. And Molly found herself even more intrigued by him.

The charming race car driver was enough to make a woman forget she was a nurse. Almost. But Molly would never forget. It was too much a part of who she was.

“I’ll see what I can do,” she said, trying her best to rein in her wayward thoughts.

Then she turned and walked away, leaving him to watch her go.

As Chase lay stretched out on the bed, his personal Florence Nightingale disappeared into the hall. When he was sure she was gone and out of earshot, he picked up the telephone, pushed nine for an outside line and called his parents’ house in Garnerville, Texas. His eyesight, which was still limited, and his fingers, stiff and sore from the accident, weren’t cooperative, so he had to dial the number several times before he got it right.

His mother answered on the third ring. “Hello?”

“Hey, Mom. It’s Chase. What are you doing?”

“The girls and I were just sitting at the kitchen table, drinking iced tea and planning a surprise party for your father’s sixtieth birthday.”

The girls in question were obviously her daughters-in-law, the wives of his older brothers.

“It’s on a Saturday this year,” his mother added, “so I hope you’ll put it on your calendar before you get it all filled up. Your dad would be so disappointed if you missed it again, especially with it being such a biggie.”

“I’ll be there,” Chase said, even if he didn’t have a calendar handy. “Tell Callie, Susan and Jana hello for me.”

“I will.”

“Have you got a minute?” he asked.

“For my baby? I’ve always got time for you, Chase.”

He supposed she always managed to find it, but when he’d been younger, he’d often felt as though he was in the way, as if his birth had somehow thrown the family dynamics out of whack.

His parents had never come out and said it, but his brothers had. And he’d sensed it often enough.

He always carried a credit card or two with him, so he could use one to pay the hospital for the kid, as well as any charges that might be left to pay for himself, but that would put his name out there, plus the statements went directly to Gerald Barden, who’d been watching them closely. And he wasn’t ready for the questions Gerald would have.

“What do you want me to do?” she asked.

“I’m out of the area right now, so I’m going to need someone to be my right hand. And I hoped you’d do it for me.”

“Sure. Does it need to be done today?”

He wanted to say yes, but he hated to be demanding. “No, tomorrow is fine. Since you have a spare key to my place, I’d like you to go inside and get my checkbook out of the desk drawer in the den. And I’d like you to mail it to me.”

“Let me get a pen and paper to write down your address.”

Uh-oh. All of a sudden, something he’d thought would be easy to orchestrate when he picked up the phone suddenly seemed a bit more complicated than he’d expected. And a fuzzy brain wasn’t helping.

What address did he give her? The hospital’s? No, he knew his mother, and she’d be here before he could blink an eye.

“You know,” he said, “I just realized that I don’t have the address in front of me. I’ll give you a call with it later, okay?”

“All right, but why do you need your checkbook?”

“I found out about a family that’s struggling financially, and I’d like to give them some money.”

“That’s really sweet, Chase. I’m proud of you.”

He hadn’t been trying to impress his mother, but he couldn’t help being glad that he had. And the fact that his act had touched her was also a sign that his plan would work.

If his sponsors got wind of what he was doing, and if the newspapers did, too...well, let’s just say that he could use some good press for a change.

Not that he minded helping the family out. But to be honest, his motive hadn’t been entirely altruistic. The good PR was an added benefit.

“Where are you?” his mom asked.

“I’m...” He glanced at the hospital room, knowing he’d have to be clever. He might have given his poor mother a few headaches while growing up, but he’d never lied to her and didn’t want to start now, especially when his senses weren’t as sharp as usual. “I guess you could say I’m taking a break from the rat race and kicking back.”

“You have no idea how happy I am to hear that. I worry about you not getting enough sleep, Chase. The newspapers and magazines make it sound as though you’ve been keeping some late nights.”

“Not recently,” he said. He was going to fly under the radar for a while, just as Gerald Barden had ordered.

“That’s a relief.”

Maybe so, but settling down wasn’t going to be permanent—but he wouldn’t tell her that.

“Who’s there with you?” she asked. “A woman? A girlfriend, maybe? If you were serious about someone, you’d tell me, wouldn’t you?”

His mom would be the first to know. Everyone else in the Mayfield family was happily married, and when he and Pamela had divorced, he’d felt as if he was the only failure on the family tree.

He was just about to tell her he was alone and that there wasn’t a woman in his life that he’d consider significant when his Florence Nightingale returned to his room. And when she did, some of the pain-and drug-induced fog in his brain lifted.

If word got out that he had a girlfriend, maybe then the gossip that bordered on truth would die down, and then Barden and the others would lay off him for a while.

Of course, Chase didn’t actually need to have a girlfriend; rumors of a special lady in his life might be all that was needed.

A smile broke out, which forced the Vicodin-dulled ache in his head to return and caused him to relax his facial muscles. “Actually, that’s exactly what I’m doing, Mom. I’m with a pretty blonde named Molly, and she just walked back into the room.”

The nurse halted, and her lips parted as Chase decided to toss out information his mother could blow out of proportion. In fact, he was going to enjoy watching Nurse Molly’s reaction to his words.

“You’d really like Molly, Mom. She’s been giving me some long-needed TLC.”

Molly crossed her arms, shifted her weight to one hip and lifted her brows in an I-can’t-believe-you’re-doing-this way.

Her expressive blue eyes sparked with both amusement and disbelief, making her prettier than ever. And he couldn’t tear his gaze away from her.

Even in a pair of pale blue hospital scrubs, she promised to be shapely underneath.

For a moment the girlfriend rumor didn’t sound the least bit far-fetched.

When his mom mentioned the party again and suggested he bring Molly, Chase said, “You bet. I’ll tell her all about Dad’s birthday at the end of next month. Of course, she may get tired of me by then, boot me out of her life and tell me to find another bed to warm.”

“Now, you be nice to her,” his mom said. “And stop teasing her like that. I know you, and she must be listening, no doubt embarrassed. But if you really were sleeping with her, you wouldn’t be talking about it, especially with me. So she must be holding out. And if so, good for her. She’s got morals and brains. I like her already.”

Chase laughed, but only until the pain shot through his head again. “Hey, Mom, I’ll have to give you a call later with that address, okay?”

“Sure. But if you want it to arrive tomorrow, you need to get it to me before the post office closes. And be sure to say hello to Molly. Tell her that I hope to meet her soon.”

“I will.”

The call ended, and Chase fumbled with the phone as he tried to hang up.

“What was that all about?” Molly asked.

“My mother said to give you her best.”

“You told her you were on vacation? With a blonde named Molly?”

“Actually, ‘vacationing’ was her idea. I said I was kicking back.”

“Oh. So you’re one of those.” Her eyes sparked again, and her tone suggested she hadn’t meant it as a compliment.

His smile faded, but this time it wasn’t just to make his head and face feel better. “I’m one of what?”

“A creative liar. A guy who knows how to fabricate an alibi or an excuse without actually coming right out and perjuring himself.”

“No, I’m usually pretty up-front and honest, even with the ladies I date. But in this case, I didn’t want to worry my mother. So I’m just...creating a myth that will put her heart at ease.”

But for some reason, the thought of kicking back with Nurse Molly in his bed was making him feel better than any pain meds had.

Chapter Three

It had been a long, grueling day, and by the time Molly stopped at the market to pick up a bag of cat litter, a quart of milk and a dozen eggs, it was well after nine.

She had grocery shopping down to a science, though. As long as she could pack it all in a single bag, she could carry it on her bike.

After removing her helmet and leaving her bicycle on the front porch, she unlocked the door and entered the living room, where she'd left a lamp on earlier so she wouldn't return to a dark house.

Rusty, who'd curled up on the recliner, meowed out a welcome, then yawned.

"You're in luck," she told the orange tabby. "The Brighton Valley Market carries your favorite kitty food again."

She kicked off her shoes, made her way to the recliner and gave Rusty's head an affectionate scratch. "How was your day?"

Rusty leaned into her hand to allow for a better massage and meowed his response.

"Yeah," she said, "mine, too. Long and tiring."

But it had been interesting, as well. And having Chase Mayfield as a patient had made it even more so.

Molly walked into the kitchen, with its pale yellow walls and white café-style curtains over the sink. She set the cloth grocery bag on the ceramic tile counter and put away her purchases. Then she fixed herself a microwaveable dinner, which she stocked in the freezer for nights when she didn't feel like cooking.

Instead of sitting down at the table to eat, she carried her meal into the bedroom, where she kept her computer.

As the screen lit up, she logged on to the Internet and did a Google search on Chase Mayfield. She was only doing it because of professional curiosity, she told herself. As a way of getting to know her patient better.

But at the same time, she couldn't deny more than a tinge of feminine interest.

Sure enough, she found page after page of references—to his Web site, to newspaper articles, to lists of racing wins and awards.

She spent the next several hours reading up on her famous patient, starting with the virtual press kit on his site which claimed he was a skilled driver with a winning personality. But as she went on, she found solid evidence that he enjoyed the nightlife, Texas A-list parties and beautiful women.

Somewhere in the midst of her search, she learned that he'd married Pamela Barden, the daughter of his primary sponsor.

The two had looked good together in photos, although Pamela, with her dark hair hanging long and straight, appeared to be more plain and nondescript than her handsome husband. The more Molly read, the more it seemed that Pamela preferred a simpler life, one of charity work and philanthropy, while Chase seemed to blossom in the limelight.

Apparently the couple had divorced a year or so ago. Molly, who'd already drawn her own conclusions, wasn't surprised to hear that.

Had Chase fallen to temptation on the road? Had he cheated on Pamela? Dumped her for one of the leggy, voluptuous beauties that flocked around him these days?

There were certainly plenty of dots to connect, and Molly remembered Chase saying something about flying under the radar. What had he meant by that?

The more she read, the more questions she had—and the more intriguing he became.

Her interest didn't please her, though. Instead, it left her uneasy. She wasn't sure what unsettled her the most, his dangerous career or his flashy, high-profile life.

Either way, she had to get over that silly little...what? That little crush she'd developed?

No, it definitely wasn't that.

She just found him interesting, that's all. And God only knew why she did.

Chase Mayfield would be the worst person in the world for her to get involved with. And she'd best keep that in mind when she went back to work tomorrow.

The next morning, Molly kept busy with all of the patients she'd been assigned, so she wasn't able to check on Chase as often as she had the day before.

Well, that wasn't entirely true. She'd gone to see about him as often as necessary, but certainly not each time he'd crossed her mind.

And that was so not a good sign.

Neither was giving him her home address to use for his mother to mail him his checkbook, which he'd talked her into doing yesterday afternoon.

What had provoked her to agree to that? She was usually more guarded with her patients—and with most people, for that matter. But her sympathetic nature had run away with her.

Or had it been more than that?

Chase Mayfield, she had to admit, was a charming rogue who could be very persuasive.

During her lunch break she'd ridden her bike home, taking the side streets as usual. And sure enough, she'd found a package for Chase in her mailbox. She'd given it to him when she got back to the hospital.

"Thanks," he'd said, taking it from her and opening it. "You're the best, Nurse Molly."

Was she?

His praise had made her smile, yet it left her a little uneasy, too.

She'd watched as he'd filled out the amount, then scratched out his signature. She'd wondered what a handwriting expert would have to say about the man who made such big, bold strokes.

While she waited for him to finish, she'd felt like an autograph-seeking groupie. So once she had the check in hand, she'd lifted it and fanned it in the air. "I'll get this to the billing department."

"Thanks, but before you go, I have a question for you. Where've you been hiding out? I've missed you."

Had he? Or had he been playing with her? She feared that with Chase it would be hard to know which.

"I was letting you sleep so you can recover faster," she told him. "I'm sure you're eager to be discharged so you can get out of here."

"Yeah, but there are a few perks." His face was still battered, his eyes puffy and bruised, but he had a nice smile. A flirtatious smile.

Had he meant her?

Oh, for Pete's sake, she scolded herself yet again for giving him and his playful comments so much thought.

Chase was a charmer, that's all. And she was a fool for considering him to be anything else.

Molly went back to work, although her thoughts continued to drift back to Chase whenever there was a lull on the floor.

As the afternoon wore into evening and the sun dipped low on the Texas horizon, she sat at the nurses' desk, keeping busy—and away from Chase's bedside. Things were pretty quiet and peaceful on the floor now, which was good.

At the sound of shoes clicking on the tile floor, she looked up to see Betsy approaching the desk. The dedicated physician didn't smile as much these days as she had when Molly first met her, but she appeared to be even more solemn than usual.

"Is something wrong?" Molly asked.

"No, not really. I just got back from a visit with Tommy Haines and his mother, Diana. I told them I was checking on his cast, but I'd also wanted to let Diana know that the medical bill had been

paid. The other night, she seemed to be really stressing about it, and since they can't afford a phone, the only way to do that was to stop by and tell her in person."

"That was nice of you."

"I suppose, but it nearly broke my heart to see the way they were living."

"It was that bad?"

"Well, the kids were clean and happy, but their clothing was tattered from wear and too small for them. And when Tommy's sister opened up the pantry in search of a snack, the shelves were pretty bare."

It wasn't unusual for the hospital staff to come into contact with poor families. They always had a list of social service agencies to which they could refer them. They couldn't get personally involved with every case, but apparently, this particular situation had touched Betsy in a way some of the others hadn't.

"I wish I had more to give them than the news that they didn't owe money for Tommy's bill," Betsy said. "I gave Diana a hundred dollars, which she didn't want to take. I had to insist that she spend it on the kids. But I have a feeling it isn't going to stretch very far."

From what Betsy had said in the past, and Molly had gathered, Betsy had some money from a trust fund her aunt had left her, and as a successful doctor, she'd managed to save quite a bit over the years. But those funds were no longer available to her.

Most people didn't know it, but Betsy was one of the investors in BVMC. And while she certainly wasn't one of the principals, she'd put the bulk of her money into the hospital investment.

Thank goodness she had. Otherwise her ex-husband would have cleaned her out completely before he'd disappeared six months ago, leaving her with a slew of bills to pay and an empty bank account.

Of course, that was another tidbit that most people didn't know.

"On top of the financial troubles," Betsy added, "Diana is taking care of her elderly grandfather, who's clearly showing signs of dementia. He used to babysit for her so she could work part-time at the fabric store, but he's at a stage where he needs almost as much care as the children do."

"That's too bad," Molly said. "Has she considered putting him in a convalescent hospital?"

"Yes, but the man raised her, and she feels an obligation to keep him at home as long as she can."

Molly could relate to that. She'd had to deal with her own grandfather's health issues—not dementia, but a stroke. "Diana is in a tough spot."

"I know." Betsy blew out a weary sigh. "I gave her the contact number for a social worker who is a friend of mine, but I still felt...ineffective."

Molly wasn't sure how much help she could be, but she'd like to do something, especially since Chase had picked up the cost of the medical bill. "Would you mind giving me their address? Maybe I can take them something myself."

"It's a long ride on a bicycle," Betsy said, "even for you. You'd have to take your car."

Betsy was one of the few people at the hospital who knew that Molly preferred not to drive when she didn't have to. Not that it was a big secret; she just didn't think it was anyone's business but her own.

"Do Diana and the kids live in Brighton Valley?" she asked Betsy.

"Yes, but it's on the opposite side of town. They live in a trailer park on Sage Brush Trail."

Molly was torn between the sympathy that urged her to visit Diana Haines and the discomfort she felt whenever she slid behind the wheel. But there was only one way to get to the other side of town, and that was by car.

She could call a cab, but she made a lousy passenger—white knuckles and the whole nine yards. She felt powerless in the backseat, not to mention vulnerable, so she rarely kept her mouth shut, no matter who she rode with.

In retrospect—and with a nursing degree now under her belt—she realized that she probably should have had some counseling right after the accident.

Her grandparents had lost their only child in that accident, and seeing their eyes well with tears each time they thought of her father had made her own grief nearly unbearable. They'd been so caught up in their pain, they hadn't realized how tough it had been for her, although that's probably because she masked it so well.

But why make any of them suffer any more than they had to?

"Do you have a space number for the Haines?" Molly asked.

"Yes, it's two-twenty-three. It's close to the entrance, so you shouldn't have any trouble finding it."

No, her biggest problem would be in mustering her courage for the trek.

As long as she knew exactly where she was going, she did okay driving into Wexler or even to Evansville, which was ten miles to the east. But whenever she had to drive anywhere unfamiliar, she got a little uneasy.

But, hey. It wasn't that bad. She would just put on her seat belt, adjust her mirrors, stay under the speed limit and keep lots of space between her car and the other vehicles on the road.

So what if she had to deal with a few impatient drivers who honked at her?

"I'll probably stop by sometime tomorrow," she said, thinking it would be best if she had more daylight hours ahead of her and she didn't have to risk being on the street at night.

"Thanks, Molly." Betsy smiled, but before she could add anything else, her pager went off. "Uh-oh. That's my answering service. I've got to call in."

Molly nodded, just as her pager went off, too. She glanced at her own display screen. Room 310. Chase needed her.

Chase lay in bed, his television on the blink. He supposed he could have used the call button, which would have paged any nurse at the desk, but it wasn't just any nurse he wanted to see; it was Molly.

Why did he get the feeling she was avoiding him today?

Had he gone too far when he'd asked her to let him use her mailing address?

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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