HEARTWARMING INSPIRATIONAL ROMANCE

Celebrating 10 Years

Love Inspired®

Love's Healing Touch

Jane Myers Perrine

Steeple Hill

Jane Myers Perrine
Love's Healing Touch

Аннотация

In the middle of a busy hospital emergency room, Dr. Ana Ramirez couldn't help but notice orderly Mike Fuller's quick skills and impressive bedside manner.And, yes, his very good looks. So she proposed a simple cup of coffee to talk about his future, never expecting to find herself wishing she were a part of it…But until Fuller could talk about his past– about family secrets, sacrifices and the faith that pulled him through– his future was on hold. As was any relationship with Ana. Or was it?

Содержание

Love’s Healing Touch 5
Contents 6
Chapter One 7
Chapter Two 27
Chapter Three 44
Chapter Four 58
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента. 66

Love's Healing Touch
Jane Myers Perrine

Published by Steeple Hill Books™

This book is dedicated to my family:
My parents, "Dr. Bob" and Martha Myers,
who took me to church, to Sunday school,
to youth group, to choir, to camp…
My big brother, Mike Myers, and my sister,
Patricia Myers Norton, who were such wonderful
Christian examples as I was growing up and are
wonderful friends now. Thank you.
And, as always, to my husband, George,
for his love and support—and for forty-one years
of inspirational sermons. I only slept
through a few, honey.

Contents

Chapter One
Chapter Two
Chapter Three
Chapter Four
Chapter Five
Chapter Six
Chapter Seven
Chapter Eight
Chapter Nine
Chapter Ten
Chapter Eleven
Chapter Twelve
Chapter Thirteen
Chapter Fourteen
Chapter Fifteen
Chapter Sixteen
Epilogue

Chapter One

"Coming through," a nurse shouted as she pushed a crash cart down the hall of the emergency room.

Mike Fuller leaped away and landed in the path of a gurney being moved at breakneck speed. "Hey, you," shouted the orderly as he swerved around Mike, "grab the door to the elevator and keep it open."

Mike dashed toward the closing door and held it open until the orderly and his patient arrived. After the doors shut behind them, Mike again entered the E.R. and navigated through a hallway so crowded with patients on gurneys that there was only a narrow pathway between them. Ahead was the central desk where he'd been told to check in with the nursing staff.

No one was there.

A glance through the window on his right showed a waiting room filled with people. From outside the building, the siren of an approaching ambulance wailed, a sound which warred with the sounds inside the building—shouts of medical personnel and the bellow of the loudspeaker calling doctors and spewing forth codes. Amid the noise, medical staff hurried past, stopping in one cubicle or another.

Mike inhaled the stifling scent of disinfectant and looked around him. Even if he was only an orderly—well, clinical assistant, but everyone knew that meant orderly— he was here, in

Austin University Hospital during the late shift. The commotion made him feel alive and want to be part of it. Unfortunately, he had no idea what he should do. Whether he was an orderly or a CA, he could do only what he was told. That had been pounded into him during his training and three-day orientation.

"Orderly."

He turned to see a beautiful woman watching him. She was short, but beneath her open lab coat—which meant she was a doctor so he shouldn't be noticing how attractive she was—were curves, delightful curves. Right now, he had too much going on in his life to even look at a woman, but only a dead man wouldn't check out this one. She was exactly the kind of woman he'd always liked in the past—except for that one mistake with tall, blond Cynthia.

This doctor's dark hair was pulled back in a round little knot. She had beautiful golden-brown skin and brown eyes, which, he realized, were glaring at him. In addition, her lovely pink lips were forming words. "I need you," she said as she pointed at him, "to check the vitals of the patients in the hall. Then get gloves and a bucket and start cleaning Exam 6."

"But—" Mike started.

"I know, that's housekeeping's job but with the mess tonight, we're all going to have to pitch in on everything." Then she walked away, saying, "Thank you," over her shoulder as she entered one of the cubicles.

"I see you've met Dr. Ramírez, the head resident in the E.R.,"

said a nurse as she returned to her desk. “She can be demanding at times, but she’s a great doctor.” She glanced at Mike’s name tag. “Welcome, Fuller. I’m Pat. We can really use you tonight.”

“Is it always this busy?”

“Depends. Tonight there was a chemical spill south of town.” She picked up a marker and started writing names on the dry-erase board. “We’ve got injuries from three traffic accidents and a gunshot wound in Trauma 1. And a family in a house fire.” She shook her head. “A lot of other injuries I can’t remember. A fairly normal night here.”

Then she sat. “Might as well get you started. I’ll have Williams show you around.” Her gaze scanned the area. “Williams, come on over here.”

When the brawny orderly arrived, he smiled to expose a gold front tooth. “Glad to see you, man. We’re two orderlies short so I’m working too hard.”

“Mike Fuller.” He held out his hand.

“No time for that.” Williams slapped Mike on the back. “Come with me.”

“Dr. Ramírez wanted me to—”

“Check the vitals on the patients in the hall. Let’s get going.” The other orderly handed Mike a stethoscope. “You’ll be supervised by the head nurse, but everyone in this place will give you orders. Just do anything anyone tells you to do, and you’ll be fine.”

The rest of the shift was spent in hard work, eight solid hours

with only a few minutes break here and there.

Once he found himself whispering, “Dear Lord, please get me through this.” The prayer surprised him because, right now, he and God weren’t on the best of terms.

Once, as he pushed a gurney toward the elevator, he passed Dr. Ramírez making notes in a chart at the nurses’ station.

“Look but don’t touch,” Williams warned him. “Yes, she’s pretty but she’s a doctor. She makes sure we all know that. Her body language says, ‘Keep away.’”

Mike didn’t read it that way exactly, but staying away from Dr. Ramírez was good advice, both personally and professionally.

After the first wave of those who’d been affected by the chemical spill had been taken care of, two ambulances arrived from a gang shooting. The vitals of the first kid to come in had dropped and the EMTs couldn’t get the wounds to stop bleeding.

While everyone hovered around the gangbanger, Dr. Ramírez looked at a tiny Hispanic woman on another gurney who’d been an unlucky bystander, the EMT had said.

The doctor picked up the paramedic’s notes and read them. Finished, she said, “I want that woman in there.” She pointed at Mike then at Trauma 2.

He nodded, grabbed the gurney and pushed it into the cubicle Dr. Ramírez had indicated. On the count of three, he and a nurse’s aide named Gracie moved the woman to the trauma bed. Gracie cut and peeled off the woman’s blood-soaked clothing, then put her in a gown. The patient closed her eyes, whimpered

a little and bit her lower lip.

"Get a drip started," Dr. Ramírez told a nurse. Then, her voice soft and low, she said to the patient, "¿Le duele mucho, Señora Sánchez?"

Mike remembered enough of his college Spanish to know that she'd asked the elderly woman if she hurt. The patient nodded.

The doctor pulled the blanket and gown down to study the area on the patient's right shoulder the paramedics had treated. "¿Aquí?" She gently pressed on the area around the wound which had begun to seep blood.

"Ay, me duele mucho."

He could tell from her expression that the pressure had hurt the woman, a lot.

"Help me turn her on the left side," Dr. Ramírez said to Mike. "Slowly and carefully." Once Mrs. Sánchez was turned, Dr. Ramírez ran her hand over the patient's shoulder and back. "No exit wound," she said.

"Okay." Dr. Ramírez glanced up at Mike. "After the IV is going, take her to the OR. I'll call the surgeon."

Before Mike could transfer Mrs. Sánchez to a gurney, the doctor took Mrs. Sánchez's hand and said, "Señora, todo va a estar bien. Cálmese. El cirujano es buena gente."

Something about everything being okay, to calm down because the surgeon was a good guy, Mike translated for himself. The elderly woman took a deep breath and unclenched her fists as Mike rolled the gurney away.

Seemed Dr. Ramírez was more than a tough professional. She cared for her patients, understood what they needed. That was the kind of doctor he wanted to be, the kind he would be if he could get the money together to go back to med school.

Because he'd been in foster care, the state had paid college and medical school tuition. During four years of college and one of medical school, he'd roomed with four guys in a cheap apartment and worked part-time to make it through. But with the extra money he needed to rent the house, buy food and cover whatever expenses came up until his mother and little brother could get on their feet, he had to work full-time. No way he could go to medical school and support them, which he had to do. After his father had deserted them almost twenty years earlier, Mike was pretty much the head of the family.

He'd considered other options but couldn't afford the time off and the seven-hundred-dollar fee for paramedic training. With overtime, he'd make more as an orderly than teaching high school, plus he'd be in a hospital. All that made the decision to be an orderly easy.

By seven the next morning, he was so worn-out he moved in a fog. This was hard work, but he loved the feel of the hospital, the certainty that amid the commotion, all the patients would be helped, that he was doing good, meaningful, healing work.

The sight of Dr. Ramírez added a lot to that positive feeling. After all, he could appreciate the view, if only from a distance. At this moment and maybe for several years, with the mess that

was his life, all he could enjoy was the view.

A week after his first day in the E.R., the phone rang in the small house Mike rented. When he answered, his younger brother, Tim, said in a shaky voice, “I had an accident, but it wasn’t my fault.”

Mike held the telephone tightly. “Are you all right?”

Tim cleared his throat and spoke without the quiver. “Yeah, I’m fine. It was minor.”

Knowing Tim, a minor accident meant the car still had most of the tires and not all the glass was broken. “And you’re really okay?”

“The paramedics checked me over. No problems.”

“Where are you? How will you get home?”

“The cops’ll bring me. Talk to you then.” Tim hung up.

Mike disconnected the phone, put it on the end table, and dropped onto the sofa. He was glad Tim was okay. Mike whispered a quick, “Thank you, God, for taking care of Tim.”

Sometimes Mike wondered if God ever got anything done while watching over Tim.

Even with a minor accident, the insurance company would total the car which meant he wouldn’t get enough money to buy another anytime soon.

Mike hadn’t been in a fix like this since he was eighteen. Of course, this time he wouldn’t take a gun and hold up a convenience store, which showed he had learned something over the past six years. And this time most of the problems weren’t

his. He'd inherited them from other people.

Thank goodness the wreck hadn't happened last week when he'd moved from his apartment to this rental house. Now, for the first time in eight years, he'd be living with his family: his eighteen-year-old brother, who'd just been released from the state foster care system, and their mother, who was getting out of prison where she'd served time for fraud. He wouldn't want the living arrangements any other way, but it was still a big change.

He leaned back and put his feet up on a cardboard box marked Kitchen. He was supposed to take his cousin Francie to the doctor in an hour and the hospital had called and asked him to come in early for his shift. In a few days, he had to meet his mother's bus and get her settled in the house.

But he had no car.

No, he hadn't caused most of these problems, but he couldn't shift them to his much-loved but equally scatterbrained mother or his absentminded and immature younger brother.

He couldn't lean on Francie. She had enough to deal with, what with the baby coming, fixing up her house and finding time to be with her husband. Besides, he owed her big-time. She'd put her life on hold for him, taken the rap for him when he'd been young and almost irredeemably stupid.

No, he couldn't toss this on Francie, which left him in charge. Not a prospect that filled him with joy.

When the phone rang again, he picked it up and hoped it wasn't more bad news. "Hey."

"How's it going?" Francie asked.

"Tim wrecked my car."

"How is he?"

"He says he's fine, but I can't take you to the doctor's office. No car."

"I'll pick you up. After you bring me home, you can use my car as long as you need it."

"Francie, should you be driving? Didn't you say your doctor had some concerns?"

"The doctor hasn't told me to stop driving. Besides, if you have my car, I can't drive."

"But…"

Ignoring the interruption, Francie said, "You have to have a car. Brandon will agree with me. If it makes you feel better, you can be my chauffeur, take me anywhere I want to go," she said in her don't-argue voice. "See you in twenty minutes."

After Mike hung up the phone, he went to the window to watch for the cop car bringing Tim home.

When the police arrived, he moved to the front door and held it open for Tim. "Let me look at you," Mike said as his brother sauntered inside, bravado showing in his swagger.

"This time it wasn't my fault." When Tim stumbled a little and put his hand on the wall to steady himself, he lost a lot of his macho attitude. "It really wasn't, Mike."

Tim was tall with dark hair pulled back in a ponytail. Two years of lifting weights had put some muscle on him. Now he

had wide shoulders with an even wider chip perched there.

As he scrutinized Tim, Mike saw several facial lacerations and a couple of bruises beginning to form. “Let me check you out.”

“The paramedics cleared me. Why do you have to, Mike? You’re not a doctor.”

Mike drew in a breath at the painful reminder that no, he wasn’t a doctor and wasn’t likely to be one. “Just go along with me. Let me practice on you.”

Tim shrugged then winced at the pain the movement brought. “Well, okay. If it makes you happy.” With a grimace, he pulled the T-shirt over his head.

“How did it happen?” Mike ran his fingers down Tim’s ribs, feeling for any knots or abnormalities and watching his brother’s reaction.

“I was driving along Guadalupe and this other car didn’t even slow down, ran right into the front of your car. The police said it was the other guy’s fault. Ouch. What are you doing?”

“Almost through.” Mike’s hands brushed over a discolored diagonal line across Tim’s chest. “Glad you were wearing your seat belt.”

“For once.” Tim nodded. “Guess I must have been listening to you.”

“Also, for once.” Mike looked into Tim’s eyes. “You look okay, but you’re going to be sore. Put some ice on your face.”

“Yeah, sure.” He limped off.

Mike shook his head and hoped Tim would grow up before

he did any real damage to himself or someone else.

"Thanks for loaning me your car." Mike backed Francie's little red Focus out of the drive and turned south. He glanced at his cousin, taking warmth from her smile. Dark curls surrounded her face, a little fuller now in pregnancy.

As he stopped at a light, he noticed the worried frown on her face. "So how's little Ebenezer doing?"

"I wish you wouldn't call the baby that." She laughed, the lovely, happy sound that always made Mike feel great. "A girl named Ebenezer? It would be terrible enough for a boy." She paused before adding in a worried voice, "As I said, I'm having a few physical problems. I'm pretty sure the doctor will tell me to cut down my activities until I deliver."

"What's going on?"

"Unless you're the father or the grandparents of this baby, you don't want to know." Her voice trembled a little.

"Francie, I took a course in genetics, embryology and reproduction my first and only year of medical school."

"Well, then I'd prefer not to tell you. It's kind of personal." She softened the words with a smile. "Anyway, that's why Brandon wanted you to drive me since he couldn't get off today. We're not sure what the doctor's going to say." Tears shimmered in her eyes. "We first-time parents worry a lot."

He signaled and turned on the ramp to Loop 1 or the MoPac as everyone in Travis County called the highway. "Take care of yourself, okay?"

"I do. And I will." She sighed. "So you might as well drive the car. Brandon or his family will drive me anywhere so I won't need it. If using my car makes you feel guilty, bring me some of Manny's good soup from the diner every week or two."

"Fine with me." He stopped at a light and turned toward her. "Mom's coming home next week. I'll be able to pick her up at the bus station."

"Are you excited to see her after—how long has it been? Seven, eight years?"

"Eight." He considered the question. "Hard to say. I'm excited and worried both. The three of us haven't lived together since she left. We'll be crowded in that tiny house." He stepped on the gas as the light changed. "Tim and I have to share the second bedroom. The owner has bunk beds in there." Mike grimaced. "Fortunately, Tim's still enough of a kid to like sleeping in the top bunk."

"Oh, and you're such an old man you couldn't get up there?"

"I don't want to get up there." He turned off on the Thirty-fourth Street exit and drove a block before he said, "There's another reason I'm worried." His hands beat out a rhythm on the steering wheel. "You know how much I love her, but how's Mom going to move on from prison life? She's never worked. What if she wants to forge paintings again?"

"That's hard, Mike." She shook her head. "I don't know. Guess you'll have to lay down the law, which is not something this family is good about accepting. I'll pray for you. You might do

some praying for yourself."

He nodded. No use telling the woman who'd introduced him to church and helped him develop his faith that prayer had become only habit. It didn't work for him anymore.

Francie folded her hands over the roundness of her stomach and struggled to find a comfortable position. "How's Cynthia?"

"Don't know. Haven't seen her for a while." He signaled for a turn, carefully kept his gaze on the road and refused to meet her eyes. "Not a lot of traffic. We should get to the doctor's office in plenty of time."

"Don't change the subject." She pushed herself around in the seat to look at him. "What happened with Cynthia? I thought you two were made for each other."

"I thought so, too." He clenched his jaw, not wanting to say more, but he knew Francie wouldn't leave him alone until he explained. "When I told her I had to quit medical school to work, that we couldn't get married for two or three years, not until Mom and Tim are on their own, she said she wouldn't wait."

"Oh, I'm sorry."

"She wants to marry a doctor, not an orderly who lives with his mother and brother." Her departure had filled him with an emptiness it would take time to fill, so at least he wouldn't hurt every time he thought about her. "I don't blame her."

"You should blame her. She's a shallow ninny."

He didn't feel like it, but he had to laugh.

"Why aren't you angry? You should be furious," she said.

"I thought Christians didn't get angry."

"Well, in some situations, like when your former fiancée is being a shallow ninny, I think it's okay. For a while."

Well, then, yes, he'd been angry when he realized Cynthia hadn't wanted him. How could he have misjudged her feelings and character? How could she have fooled him so completely? Maybe he was the idiot for believing she loved him. It would be a long time before he opened himself to that kind of hurt again.

"When did this happen?" she asked.

"About a month ago. When I made the decision for Mom to live with me instead of going to a halfway house, I told Cynthia."

"Well, I'm put out with her. I'd like to talk to that girl, set her straight about what's important in life."

"There's nothing you can do." He shook his head. "But Brandon and little Ebenezer are blessed to have you watching over them."

"I'm the one who's blessed. I have a wonderful husband whose family loves me and this baby coming. I have you and Tim and Aunt Tessie will be home soon. What more could I want?"

Ana Dolores Ramírez—Ana Dolores Ramírez, M.D.—tossed a newspaper off the only comfortable chair in the gray, dingy break room and fell into it. After taking a drink of her cold coffee, she leaned back, almost asleep.

What an evening: a terrible accident on I-35, and a fire in a crowded restaurant, all that in addition to the normal everyday emergencies like broken bones, ODs and injuries from gang and

domestic violence. Why had she ever thought she wanted to work in an emergency room?

Well, yes, she knew. She loved the excitement, the challenge, the urgency to save people, the fight against death, bringing healing from tumult and despair.

Another reason was the memory of the doctors who had worked so hard to save her leg and the staff in the E.R. who had saved her mother's life.

"It's harder than it looks, isn't it?" Dr. Leslie Harmon, the Director of Emergency Services, entered the lounge.

Ana yawned. "Why are you here so late?"

"I was called in when the cases started to back up. I wanted to come in during a busy stretch on this shift to evaluate how the E.R. staff handles a heavy load."

"How'd we do?"

"Very well." Dr. Harmon rubbed her neck and rotated her shoulders. "I was particularly impressed with one of the CAs. The new guy—dark-haired, handsome kid—seemed really sharp. Who is he?"

Before she could reply, Ana's pager went off. Checking the message, she pulled herself up with a groan. "Not a very long break, but I've got to go." She gulped the last of her coffee and tossed the paper cup in the overflowing trash can as she headed back to the emergency room.

"What's coming in?" Ana pushed through the swinging doors, instantly alert. Paramedics pushed gurneys into the hallway while

a clerk wrote the names of the incoming patients on the large white board at the central desk and nurses began to take vitals. Instant activity and a huge increase in the noise level.

"Another traffic accident," the new orderly said.

What was his name? She took a peek at his ID tag as she picked up a chart to make notes in. "Thanks, Fuller." As Dr. Harmon had said, he seemed pretty bright. More than just a strong body to lift and position patients. Earlier tonight, he'd recognized the signs of shock and taken quick action, more like a paramedic. He'd also helped with triage, stepping in when he saw how thin the staff was stretched. His assessments hadn't been perfect, but he'd done well enough with those minor cases. After she'd quickly doubled-checked his decisions, she'd been able to concentrate on major traumas.

As the injured were quickly evaluated and moved to treatment rooms, to surgery or to wait in the hall, Ana noticed a boy about six years old standing by one of the gurneys. The woman on the gurney was pale, her eyes closed. Blood stained the bandages the EMTs had applied to her forehead and chest.

When his mother's gurney was pulled into a cubicle, the boy grabbed the side of it and ran to keep up. "Mama," he sobbed.

"Fuller," Ana called.

After he pushed a gurney against the wall, Mike hurried over to where Dr. Ramírez stood next a gurney with a little boy hanging on to it.

"This kid came in with a family from an accident. Please take

care of him."

"What? Babysit?" He didn't remember that on the job description. His duties were all medical and nursing.

"We need to keep him away from his mother until we can stabilize her. Find the paramedics. Ask them if he has family here or if there's someone coming to pick him."

"Shouldn't social services—"

"Yes, they should and they usually do take care of the children of our patients, but they're backed up and shorthanded. Can't be here for a couple of hours. I need to treat his mother now. I'd appreciate your handling this."

While Mike watched and wondered what he should do next, she bent her knees to be on the child's level. "My name's Ana. What's your name?"

The child studied her solemnly. "Stevie."

"Well, Stevie, because your mommy was in an accident, we need to patch her up a little. I promise we'll take very good care of her." Gesturing toward Mike, she added, "This young man is going to keep you company while we do that. Okay?"

Then she stood and turned back toward the trauma room.

What was he going to do? Mike gulped as he watched her walk away. Saying "no" wasn't an option. "But, Dr. Ramírez, I don't know anything about children," he protested.

"Do it," she said in the clear, firm voice Mike figured no one ignored. "Please."

He turned and started toward the boy as Dr. Ramírez entered

a cubicle.

No one, not even lowly orderlies, ignored Dr. Ramírez's voice when it got that certain tone. For that reason, yes, he was going to look after the boy even though, no, he didn't know anything about children.

The boy slumped, his spine curved in exhaustion, but still he kept a tight hold on the gurney that held his mother.

The sight of the child broke Mike's heart. Even worse, he had no idea of what to do. Mike squatted so he was on the same level as the boy's sad eyes. "Hi, Stevie. Where's your family?"

The child shook with sobs and clung more tightly to the gurney.

That had gone really well. Trying again, Mike took the child's hand from the rail and held it although the boy fought to put it back. Was this the right thing to do?

"The doctors need to take care of your mother, buddy," Mike explained calmly. "They can't get around very well with you here."

The child looked at his hand in Mike's then glanced up. "Is she going to be okay?"

"These are the best doctors in the world. They're going to do everything they can to make sure she's all right, but they need enough room to do that."

The boy nodded and stopped his efforts to pull his hand from Mike's.

Mike wiped the child's eyes and nose as he stuffed a handful

of tissues in the kid's free hand. "Well, Stevie, do you want to thank the paramedics who helped you? They're really cool guys." When the boy didn't resist, Mike led him into the hall.

"The paramedics are down there." When Mike pointed the boy nodded. "I'm going to talk to them now."

Yawning, Stevie pulled away to wiggle onto a chair. He leaned back and closed his eyes as Mike walked toward the emergency entrance. The flashing red lights of ambulances pulling up outside lit up the area in flickering streaks of red.

"Hey, guys," Mike greeted the paramedics, keeping his voice low. "Did you bring that kid in?" He gestured toward Stevie.

"Yeah, an accident on MLK. The family in a van was hit when a drunk ran a light."

"What are the kid's injuries?"

"Didn't find anything serious. Probably should have that cut on his forehead checked later, but that's it."

"Do you have a last name? Any identification? Is there family around?"

"The family members who came in with him are all in the E.R., pretty badly injured. The cops are running the name down and getting in touch with relatives," the older paramedic said.

"Thanks."

As he walked back down the corridor, he saw Stevie had fallen asleep. Mike picked him up and carried him to the E.R.

"Orderly," Dr. Yamaguchi, the on-call orthopedic surgeon, said as Mike entered the department. "Now."

Mike nodded at Stevie. “Dr. Ramírez wants me to take care of this kid. His mother’s in the E.R. and we can’t find a family member.”

Dr. Yamaguchi glanced at the kid. “Put him in the emergency bed on the end and check on him when you can, but you have to transport patients.”

“Yes, sir.”

For the next few hours, Mike checked on Stevie whenever he wasn’t pushing gurneys or following the instructions from the medical staff.

Once when Mike entered the cubicle where Stevie had been sleeping, Dr. Ramírez was trying to examine him. Stevie had pulled away from her and cowered as far away from the doctor as possible.

“Hey, buddy, it’s okay. Remember those great doctors I told you about?” Mike asked. Stevie nodded. “This is one of them.”

“Will you stay?” the kid whispered.

“As long as I can.” Mike took Stevie’s hand.

“Guess you’re here for a while,” Dr. Ramírez said.

“Guess so.” The prospect would have alarmed Mike a few hours ago but not now. For the first time since he started work, he felt as if he belonged here, as if he had an important role to play and this was part of it.

“Orderly,” came a shout from another exam room. “Transport to X-ray.”

Then again, maybe not.

Chapter Two

"Good job, Fuller." Dr. Ramírez's voice echoed through the now-empty hall in front of the curtained cubicles of the E.R.

Her voice wasn't exactly friendly, but she didn't sound as if she were ready to chew him out.

"I appreciate the way you pitched in tonight, picking up wherever you were needed." She pulled off her latex gloves, tossed them in the hazardous-waste bin and said, "Thanks for taking care of the boy until his uncle showed up."

Then she smiled at him. Not a big smile. Just a slight turning up of her lips. Still, it was a great look compared to her usual serious expression. Now her eyes sparkled a bit and a dimple appeared on her cheek. For an instant, she assumed the appearance of a human being, a real person, not a doctor.

Probably noticing his confused look, she allowed her usual professional expression to slide across her features again. Then she said in a voice a bit softer than her usual this-is-what-you-have-to-do tone, "Fuller, let me buy you a cup of coffee. There's something I want to discuss with you. Purely professional. Nothing personal."

He wondered what purely professional meant and why she had given him that smile. Probably didn't mean a thing to her but it was the first almost-full smile he'd ever seen from her. It was a dazzler.

If he wanted to keep things professional, he shouldn't join Dr. Ramírez for coffee. Meeting Dr. Ramírez outside the E.R. seemed odd to him, but he deserved a little bit of the good stuff—and Dr. Ramírez was really good stuff.

"Yes, ma'am, um, Doctor…Ramírez." He hadn't babbled like that since he'd asked Maribel Suárez out when he was a shrimp in the tenth grade. He cleared his throat and said, "I have to restock a room. Meet you in the cafeteria."

When she left, he checked cabinets in Exam 1, made sure equipment had been replaced in the correct cabinets, and replaced gauze, tape and other supplies that were low. As he worked, he replayed the incident with Dr. Ramírez and felt like an idiot. Since Cynthia broke up with him, he'd been questioning everything in his life, but there was nothing unusual here. The idea she might put a move on him in the middle of a hospital cafeteria was crazy…but very appealing.

He almost slapped himself for that last thought.

Finished, he stripped off his gloves, washed his hands and splashed water on his face. Then he ran damp fingers through his hair as he attempted to make out his reflection in the paper towel holder.

"Hot date, Fuller?" the tall, balding RN asked him as he came through the curtains. What was his name? Oh, yeah, Sam Mitchelson. "Couldn't help but hear the invitation from back there."

"Just a cup of coffee. Like she said, 'Nothing personal.'" Mike

tossed the towel away and moved toward the door.

"That's more than any of us, including doctors, have been asked to share. You must possess something special to rate that."

Mike grinned. "Only good looks, high intelligence and great charm."

"Don't forget she's a doctor, Fuller," he said to Mike's back. "If you want to keep your job, never disagree with a doctor."

Mike left the E.R. and headed toward the cafeteria, passing a row of wheelchairs outside X-ray and dodging a crowd getting off the elevator as he walked down the main corridor.

Macho posturing aside, Mike reminded himself again she'd asked him for coffee, only coffee, not a date. As he'd told himself a million times, he had no interest in a relationship and no time, but his response showed he found Dr. Ramírez very attractive. His reaction to her had him thinking that Cynthia hadn't completely killed his interest in women.

Just past the hallway to ICU, he turned to open the door to the cafeteria. The usual mix of medical personnel and family members of patients sat at the square tables. Straight ahead by the windows was Dr. Ramírez with another doctor.

Maybe this wasn't a good idea.

From her table, Ana watched Fuller enter the cafeteria. Tall and handsome with broad shoulders, he looked great in scrubs. That was pure observation, not attraction, she told herself. His height and those broad shoulders made it easier for him to move and transport patients.

When he saw her, he paused and looked a little uncertain. His confusion was probably because Dr. Craddock, the chief of staff, sat next to her, flirting with her. At least thirty years older than she and married, the fool was flirting.

The closer the orderly got to the table, the more obvious Craddock's attention became. Thank goodness they would soon be interrupted.

Fuller stopped when he saw Craddock still talking. He backed away, but she beckoned him forward with a wave.

As he reached the table, Fuller said, "Hello, Dr. Craddock." At her gesture, he dropped into the chair next to Craddock. She pushed a cup of coffee closer to Fuller.

"Hello." Dr. Craddock studied the orderly with one eyebrow raised. "And you are?"

"Mike Fuller. I'm a CA in the E.R." He poured cream in his coffee and stirred it.

"Oh? An orderly?" Craddock's voice and that still-raised brow left no doubt he felt the orderly shouldn't be sitting with two doctors.

"I asked Mr. Fuller to join me. I need to discuss something with him." She smiled at Craddock and gave his hand a sisterly pat. That should put him in his place.

Craddock stood. "I see that I'm the one who's not needed here."

"Dr. Craddock doesn't approve of your ignoring the hospital social order." Fuller watched the older man move away to join

a table of doctors.

"Doctors can be a rigid bunch." She picked up her coffee and took a sip. "But that's not what I wanted to talk to you about." She rubbed her thumb along the side of the cup before she looked up at him. "Fuller, I've watched how you handle situations. You're intelligent and capable."

"Thank you."

He must wonder where this conversation was going. Had she thoughtlessly put him in an awkward situation? Probably so. That's what she got for pushing herself into other people's lives. They weren't always grateful.

"You're an excellent clinical assistant."

He nodded.

"You must have a high-school diploma or a GED or you wouldn't be working here."

He nodded again and gazed over her shoulder toward something behind her.

"Do you have any college hours?"

He scrutinized her face for a moment. "I'm not comfortable with this conversation, Dr. Ramírez. Is there a reason for your questions?" he said, politely but clearly setting boundaries.

"Yes, there is, and, honestly, I want to encourage you."

He took a gulp of coffee.

"Do you have any college hours?" The question sounded rude. She really needed to work on her delivery.

He paused before nodding, again not meeting her eyes.

She was stymied. He clearly wasn't going to give her any more information than he had to, and he didn't have to give her any. "I know I have no right to ask you, but I'd really appreciate it if you'd answer a question or two." After a pause when the orderly didn't say a word, she added, "Please."

When he raised an eyebrow but didn't say no, she asked, "How many college hours?"

"I have a degree." He drank the rest of his coffee, placed the cup on the table and pushed the chair back.

"Please don't go." She put her hand on his.

The touch was not the friendly pat she'd intended. As she pulled her hand away, she glanced up to gauge his reaction. His eyes held a spark of interest before he looked down at his empty cup. The man had gorgeous brown eyes, a slight stubble on his cheeks and a square chin. A pleasant glow spread through her. Obviously, more was involved in her feelings for Fuller than mentor for student. Why hadn't she noticed that before she asked him to meet her for coffee?

"Dr. Ramírez, I prefer not to continue this discussion." His words were polite but, when he stood, he glared at her, as much of a glare as an orderly dared give a doctor. She couldn't blame him.

"I'm sorry, Fuller. I don't mean to make you feel uneasy." She forced her attitude back to the purely professional. "I don't have a gift for subtlety, and I know I don't have the right to expect you to sit down and talk to me, but I'd really be grateful if you would."

At least he didn't bolt for the door. Instead, he pulled his chair back to the table, sat and asked in a voice that showed more than a little exasperation, "Why?"

"Fuller, I'm impressed with you."

She tapped on her cup. When she looked into his eyes, he immediately lowered them. "You are intelligent and have so much ability. I'd like to encourage you to go back to school, to pursue a career in medicine or science."

"Thank you." He fiddled with the handle of the cup.

A lot of playing with their cups, Ana noted. Obviously neither of them felt comfortable with the exchange.

"Have you thought about being a doctor?" she asked bluntly in an effort to hurry the conversation along.

"Tried med school. One year. Didn't work out."

"It didn't work out?" she repeated.

Ignoring her question, he said, "Thank you for the coffee, Dr. Ramírez," placing great emphasis on doctor.

"You're welcome."

This time he did bolt for the door.

The conversation had not gone the way she'd planned it. She'd acted pushy and nosy. She'd sounded like a superior expecting the orderly to comply with whatever she demanded.

Obviously he had no desire to discuss this or anything with her. Why should he? He seemed like a very private person, just like her father.

No matter. She wasn't about to give up on Fuller. He should

be a doctor or a nurse or a medical technician, not an orderly, and she was going to help him see that.

As her mother had said, Ana always had to have a project. Fuller seemed to be her latest one.

She'd find out what he meant by, "Didn't work out," another time.

Mike strode back to the E.R. to finish his shift.

What right did the woman have to interrogate him? To expect him to sit there while she dug for personal information? Why hadn't he left earlier?

He threw a swinging door open with one hand and watched it hit the wall with a satisfying smack. But when he got to the E.R., an RN shouted, "Fuller, transfer."

He didn't have time to think about Dr. Ramírez's prying now. Maybe he should remember the other parts, the good parts: he'd had coffee with a beautiful woman and all the male staff was jealous. In addition, Dr. Ramírez had complimented him on his intelligence and how well he was doing. After the recent problems in his life, it made him feel a lot better.

Only two hours later, Mike was asleep at home when the phone rang. He pulled himself out of bed and dragged his tired body into the living room. Light filtered through curtains, which made it possible for him to find the phone on the coffee table but not before he narrowly avoided falling over a box of clothes.

"Good morning," Francie said. "Will you please drive me to church this morning? Wake your brother up and bring him, too."

Mike glanced at his watch through eyes still blurry with sleep. He groaned. “I’ve only been asleep for an hour. Why don’t you let me sleep a few more?”

“Because church will be over by then. You can take a long nap when you get home. Or you can sleep through the sermon.”

“Reverend Miller won’t like that.”

“But God will be glad you’re there. Besides, you said you’d take me wherever I need to go.”

“Aren’t you supposed to be taking it easy?”

“The doctor said church is fine as long as I don’t drive.”

“What about Brandon?” Could he think of any more reasons to go back to bed? If this one didn’t work, he’d have to go, because he could never tell Francie no.

“He’s at a training session in Dallas,” she explained patiently. “Well?”

“Okay, I’ll pick you up at ten.”

“Thanks. Bring Tim.”

Driving her to church was the least he could do. When he was eighteen, he’d held up a convenience store. He groaned, hating to relive that act and its consequences. To save him, so he could be a doctor, Francie had confessed and was serving time before he could take the blame himself. They were the same height and he’d worn a ski mask and jacket so she looked like the person in the surveillance tape.

He’d made a terrible, stupid mistake, and she’d paid for it. He still struggled to figure out why he’d done it—heredity, Francie

would say—and to make it up to her somehow.

Yes, he owed her everything. He could never turn her down.

After a shower, he shook Tim awake. “We’re going to church.”

Tim threw back the sheet. “Terrific,” Tim said as he sat up on the bed, dropped to the floor and stood to stretch. “I’ve missed church.”

“Why didn’t you say something?” Mike never knew what his brother was thinking. Of course, Tim never talked about stuff that was important to him. They were a lot alike that way.

“I like sleeping in, too.”

At ten forty-five, the cousins were seated together in the sanctuary. Bowing his head, Mike hoped to be filled with the peace this time of silent meditation used to bring him, but it still eluded him. Maybe he was out of practice. Maybe he’d missed too many services. Whatever the reason, the Spirit didn’t fill him. He had a feeling it wasn’t the Spirit’s fault.

He prayed for his family and patients. He knew those requests had been heard, but when he prayed for guidance for himself he felt cold and alone.

Where was God when he needed him so much?

After church, Mike pulled the car into the drive of Francie’s house and stopped.

“Why don’t you come in?” Francie said as Tim got out of the backseat. “You can make some sandwiches and bring me one.” She took Tim’s extended hand to get out of the car. Once standing, she went around to the driver’s side, opened the door,

grabbed Mike's arm and pulled him toward the house.

Once inside, she yawned and said, "I'm going to bed. Would you fix us lunch?" She'd taken a few steps down the hall when she turned to say to Mike, "Before you do that, come with me to look at the baby's room. Brandon painted it last week, and I added a few touches."

Mike followed her down the hall and stopped to look into the bright yellow nursery. On the walls, Francie had hung pictures of whimsical animals in both brilliant and pastel hues. His mother would love this, would want to add a few fanciful ideas of her own.

For a minute, Mike was overwhelmed by the memory of how he and Cynthia had planned to have three children. Their babies could have had a room like this. Well, knowing Cynthia, she wouldn't have liked purple dragons or turquoise birds, but they would have had a nursery. When he noticed Francie studying him, he said, "It's great."

"Hey, Mike, how do you turn on a gas stove?" Tim called.

"Don't do a thing. I'll be right there." Mike pulled himself from his reverie to hustle to the kitchen. If he allowed Tim to light the stove, he might have to explain to Brandon where he'd been when Tim blew up the house.

After he took a tray back to Francie, Mike settled in Brandon's chair in the living room. In no time, he was asleep.

"Hey, Fuller." Dr. Ramírez caught him in the hall outside the E.R. the next evening. "Sorry if I intruded yesterday. I didn't

mean to invade your privacy, but…" She bit her lip. "Anyway, I'm sorry."

"Thank you." It was hard to hold a grudge against her. Mike figured she'd be angry if he told her she was so attractive any man would forgive her for anything. And that lip-biting part was distracting. Very distracting.

When Mike moved back toward Trauma 3, he saw Mitchelson watching Dr. Ramírez as she walked away.

"How'd the cup of coffee go?" the nurse asked with a grin. "Was that all? Just a cup of coffee?"

"Just a cup of coffee. She wanted to talk about my work as an orderly."

"Did she tell you that you should be a doctor or nurse?"

Mike glared at Mitchelson. "How did you know she said that?"

"Because we all think so. Can't figure out why you're not in med school, but we're glad we got you in the E.R. and hope you won't leave anytime soon." When his beeper went off, Mitchelson hurried away before Mike could say a word.

"Thank you," he shouted down the hall. Mitchelson waved back.

"Fuller," Dr. Ramírez called in her doctor voice. "Transfer, please."

Back to normal. No more compliments, only a lot of lifting and hard work.

Three days later his mother's bus arrived at 10:00 a.m. which gave Mike plenty of time to clean up after his shift and drive to

the bus station.

Before she went to prison, Mom had looked like her paintings: full of life and sparkle, happiness shining from her. She'd changed during those years. Hard to remain vibrant in prison, she'd explained on his frequent visits, as if he couldn't guess that.

He waited on the platform, surrounded by the noise and the strong fumes from diesel engines.

When she got off the bus, he hugged her, noticing she was thinner than he'd remembered.

She pulled away to study him and put her hand on his cheek. "It's so good, so absolutely marvelous to be here," she whispered. "I can't believe I'm out of prison and back with my boys."

"I'm glad, too, Mom."

She still had an innocent face, which had helped her market her forgeries but hadn't fooled the judge. Now her skin bore lines and wrinkles, but the beauty remained.

After she pointed out her one shabby suitcase, Mike handed the baggage claim to the bus driver and carried it to the car.

"I'm so tired of wearing trousers." His mother smoothed her jeans. "Boring, boring, boring, my dear, and not at all feminine." She glared at her white shirt. "Do you still have my dresses?"

"Yes, Francie stored everything while you were gone." Mike started the car and backed out of the parking place. "But it's been eight years. They're probably out of style."

"Good clothing never goes out of style."

He grinned as her sudden air of certainty and confidence. Yes,

it was great to have her home.

After he stopped at several lights, she said, “My, my, the traffic is even worse than before.” She chattered on about how things had changed in Austin while he drove.

When he pulled up in front of the small house, she said, “What’s this? We aren’t living here, are we?”

“I know it’s not very big, but it’s what I can afford.”

The shrubbery needed to be trimmed, but the house appeared neat enough on the outside. With white paint that flaked only in a few areas, black shutters, and a porch the size of a postage stamp, it had a homey aspect. But it was small, a fact even more evident when his mother opened the front door and stepped inside.

The living room held a short sofa, two folding chairs and a television on an ugly metal stand. “It came furnished,” he explained.

But she didn’t notice the furniture when she saw the paintings she’d forged, the ones Francie had saved for her, covering the walls. His mother had loved the impressionists and these glowed with the brilliance of color and light, illuminating the room. She turned to take them in, reaching out her arms to bathe in the beauty. Then she walked slowly toward one and touched her fingers to the rough surface.

“Oh, thank you,” she said. “I’d forgotten how much I love these.”

After a few minutes, she shook herself and walked through the rest of the house. First, she wandered back to the kitchen which

had maybe five feet of counter space, a few cabinets and a card table with three wobbly chairs.

"I fix most of the meals in the microwave," Mike said.

"Then I'll do the cooking," Mom said.

"I gave you the master—well, the larger—bedroom." He led her toward the door, shoved it open and followed her in to put the suitcase on the bed.

She turned to consider the double bed, one dresser and bare walls. "White," she said. "All the walls are white."

"Tim and I can paint them. You choose the color."

"Thank you. I'd like that." She left the room and looked into the bathroom and the other bedroom. "You and Mike both sleep in here?"

"We'll be fine, Mom. We're brothers. We'll get to know each other better after the years apart."

She nodded again as he followed her back to her bedroom.

"This is a nice part of town. There's an H-E-B grocery store only a block from here. It's an easy walk. And there's a park nearby."

She placed her hand on his arm and patted it. "Mike, this is fine. I appreciate you opening your house to us. We've been apart so long. I'm glad we're together." She smiled and for a moment it was her old smile. "You're a good brother and a fine son." She dropped her hand. Opening the suitcase, she placed her things in a small pile on the bed before she opened the closet.

When she saw what was inside, she pulled out one dress, sat

on the end of the bed and stared into the closet. In her lap she held a gown of brilliant green with a shimmering pattern of gold. Tears streamed down her cheeks.

"My clothes," she said. "All of my favorite things are here. Thank you." She stood and embraced Mike.

When Mike opened a drawer in the dresser to show her the jewelry Francie had kept and a small bottle of his mother's favorite perfume he'd bought for her, she cried harder.

"Thank you, son. You've given me a wonderful homecoming."

Oh, boy. Too much emotion for him. When the phone rang, he gave his mother an awkward pat on her back. "I'll get that." He pulled away but touched her shoulder, which seemed to satisfy her. Then he ran into the living room and grabbed the receiver.

"Yes, I can come in early today," he said as he checked his watch. "I'll be in by three."

He hung up the phone, placed his hand on one of the paintings and closed his eyes. With his mother here, the house was filled with turbulence. He could feel it—the tingle of her strong personality, the scent of her musky perfume, the rough swipes of paint in the painting under his fingers.

Yes, Hurricane Tessie had hit. As calm as she seemed today, his mother was always a force to be reckoned with.

He'd let her settle in today, but tomorrow he'd have to talk to her about getting a job to satisfy the conditions of her parole and because they just plain needed that income.

He thought how tired and how much older she'd looked when

she got off the bus, about her joy at seeing her clothes and her art. Then he shook his head as he remembered her tears. His mother never cried.

Maybe he'd wait a few days before he suggested she find work.

Chapter Three

Almost midnight a few days later, and a moment of quiet during a long shift in the E.R.

Mike headed outside and leaned back against the wall of the hospital. He took a deep breath, held it and let it out. Sometimes he was overwhelmed by the smell and the stress of the E.R. Tonight it was more than he could handle. After a few minutes and more cleansing breaths, he turned to go inside, walking back through the waiting room and the door into the E.R.

"When did you come in today?" Williams, the big orderly, asked as he pushed an empty gurney.

Stretching, Mike answered, "Three."

"Double shift, huh? You must need the money."

"Don't we all?" He covered a yawn before he went back into Exam 5 to clean the empty room.

"Why are you doing that?" Williams said. "Housekeeping's supposed to do that."

"Because they're running behind and I don't have anything else to do."

"You make us all look bad." Williams headed toward the central desk.

As he dumped the paper bed cover in the trash, Mike realized how beat he was after nine hours of the double shift. With his mother back home, Mike could work longer hours because he

didn't have to worry about Tim. Before her arrival, Mike had covered only the night shift, eleven to seven. That way he could get his brother dinner, make sure Tim got up in the morning, and push him out to look for a job. Hard to do all that between a couple of naps.

Now Mike could work more hours to cover his mother's expenses until she got work. Maybe earn enough to catch up with the bills.

"You said last week your mother was coming back to Austin. How's that going?" Mitchelson came into the room.

"Okay. She got here Wednesday and is settling in." He pulled on a new pair of gloves and began disinfecting the counters.

"Where was she?"

"The women's prison in Burnet." When he turned to throw a paper towel into the bin, he saw Dr. Ramírez standing next to the curtain. Her mouth was open a little. She had obviously heard what he'd said.

Actually, it was a good thing she'd caught the conversation. She might as well know he wasn't the man she thought he was. Maybe she'd stop nagging him and leave him alone. A mother in prison wouldn't fit into her idea of what a doctor should be or the kind of man she'd date.

A man she'd date? Where had that thought come from? The one cup of coffee last week hadn't been an invitation, wasn't meant to be a date of any kind. No, there wasn't any chance of a relationship between them other than doctor-orderly. But, even

if the smallest possibility of that existed, the information about his mother would completely scuttle it. An ex-con in the family tended to do that.

"Transfer, Fuller." Dr. Ramírez moved back to the other operating room.

Five minutes later, the injured from an automobile accident and two gunshot victims came in. All needed immediate stabilization and surgery.

He was working calmly until he saw one of the injured was a four-year-old girl, her pink T-shirt smeared with blood and her leg at an angle he didn't like. He forced himself to grin at her as he untied her little sneakers. They had kittens on them, kittens covered with blood.

"Hey, kid," he said. "My name's Mike. Your shirt says you're Naomi."

"My leg," she whispered. "Hurts. A lot."

"I bet it does, buddy. The doctor will be out in a few minutes. She'll help you."

"Fuller," Dr. Ramírez called.

Mike started to move away when Naomi grabbed his hand. "Don't go," she said.

"I'll be back as soon as I can." He wished he had something to give Naomi to keep her company. He took a clean towel, tied it in a knot and handed it to Naomi. "This is Whitey, the friendly polar bear who lives in the hospital and keeps little girls company."

Naomi took the towel and hugged it.

“Nicely done, Fuller,” Dr. Ramírez said from the doorway. “Have you thought about working in pedes?”

He faced her. “Need a transfer?”

“Yes.” Dr. Ramírez strode toward Naomi then gently pushed the hair from the child’s forehead. “Move this gurney into Exam 4 and take her mother upstairs.”

By 5:00 a.m., the hospital had quieted again. He’d transferred four victims to the operating room then to their rooms once they came out of recovery. And he’d taken one body to the morgue. His least favorite transport.

Not a hard night in the E.R., but two shifts added up to a backache and the need to relax for a few minutes. He wished he had time for a nap, but when he got to the break room, another orderly snored on the sofa.

He took a thermos from his locker and poured the last of the coffee into his cup. With a groan, he settled down in the only comfortable chair in the room and leaned his head back.

Barely a few breaths short of falling asleep, he opened his eyes to see Dr. Ramírez put a can of soda on the table and drop in the chair across from him. She seemed to be favoring her right leg and was rubbing her thigh almost surreptitiously.

“Old football injury,” she said with a slight smile before she nodded at his thermos and asked, “Saving money?”

“I can’t take the coffee someone makes in the E.R.”

“I know.” She held up her Coke. “Tastes like it’s spiked with old motor oil.”

“My mother makes terrific coffee. I’d rather have it than pay for it in the cafeteria.”

“I heard you say your mother is home from prison.”

He nodded and shifted in the chair.

“What was she in for?”

“Forgery.”

“Checks?”

“Paintings.”

“Oh, an artist.” She took a drink of Coke. As she lifted her chin, Mike watched a wisp of hair that had come loose to curl on her neck. He’d never thought of Dr. Ramírez as having curls or long hair…and he’d better not think about that.

She put the can down and licked her top lip with the tip of her tongue. The motion wasn’t meant to be seductive, just cleaning up after the last drop, but all Mike could think of for a few seconds was her lips, round and soft and pink. She’d spoken for several seconds before Mike realized she’d said something.

“I’m sorry. I’m falling asleep. What did you say?”

“My uncle was in prison.” She stood and put the can in the recycle bin.

“Oh?” He swiveled to look at her.

“It was really hard on his family.”

That was all she said. She didn’t offer sympathy or platitudes or advice or dig further into his life. She only commented on a shared experience. And she didn’t say, “I know how you feel.” Because no one really did.

“Thank you.”

“Fuller,” came a male voice from the hall. “Transfer.”

“And the fun keeps on coming,” Dr. Ramírez said. She gave Mike a smile, that little smile that was only a curving of her lips. It made the long shift seem not nearly as bad.

Ana stretched and massaged the muscles in her neck. She hated the night shift, but that was what she had to cover if she wanted to learn everything she could about emergency medicine.

Besides, her schedule wasn’t all that bad: on twenty-four hours, off twenty-four, with no more than seventy hours a week. It allowed her time with her family, time to study and a few hours to rest.

The pain in her thigh was worse than it had been for years. She must have twisted her leg. Now all she wanted to do was elevate it for a few hours. Not an easy thing to do in the E.R.

In the long run, she was sorry she’d heard the conversation between Fuller and the other orderly. Better for her not to know about the private lives of anyone she worked with.

So why was she interested in Fuller? Had she made him her project of the year? Usually her projects were easier to handle, more open and not nearly as attractive as Fuller. Wait. When had she started to think of Fuller as attractive?

Well, what woman wouldn’t? He had great longish dark hair and a terrific smile, although few people over the age of ten saw it. What she usually saw was a face clear of expression with a hint of anger in the depths of his dark eyes. The charm and the

anger made him, well, interesting, as if he had dimensions he never shared.

Add to that his broad shoulders, great build and the black stubble that covered his chin and cheeks by the end of the shift, and—¡caramba!—what's not to like?

Which meant it was time to get back to the E.R. before she had any more completely unprofessional thoughts about a man with no ambition. Maybe in other people's minds, Fuller wouldn't be seen as lacking in ambition. He worked hard, made good decisions, was great with kids. On the other hand, as an orderly he wasn't using every bit of his ability. Why wasn't he in school? Her brothers always told her she was an education snob, and maybe she was, but she hated it when people didn't push themselves to live up to their potential.

Besides that, he was a man who had clearly but politely told her to leave him alone, a man she had absolutely no interest in.

None at all.

"Hey, chica," Enrique, Ana's sixteen-year-old brother, said as she entered her family's home that evening. "What's for dinner?"

"What does it matter, Quique? You eat everything I put on the table. You'd eat lizards if I could catch enough to fill you up." She grabbed him in a hug that became a wrestling match when he tried to slip away.

"Sounds good."

"And you never put on a pound." Ana glanced at his skinny body then down at her rounder hips. "I don't think we come from

the same family."

She headed for the kitchen and glanced back at him. "Where are you going?" As if she didn't know. He was wearing baggy shorts, a Spurs T-shirt and his favorite Nike runners.

"Pickup game at Rolando's."

"Dinner is at seven. Be home." She glared at him, well aware that he'd probably grab a bite with Rolando's family before he meandered home in a few hours. "I'd like to see you sometime."

"Mira." He held out his arms and rotated slowly in front of her. "Look, here I am."

"Just go." She waved as he ducked out the door.

"Ana, is that you?"

Hearing her father's voice from the kitchen, she hurried toward it. "Hi, Papi."

Her father sat at the table doing a crossword puzzle. He and Enrique looked so much alike. Both six feet tall and slender. Her father had streaks of white in his still-full, dark hair. Before her mother's death almost a year ago, he'd been a quiet and often moody man. Since then, he'd retreated deeper, lost any spring in his step and his shoulders were more rounded. He was still a handsome man but not a happy one, as much as he tried to hide it.

"What's a five-letter word for hackneyed? Ends in an E."

"How 'bout stale or trite?"

"Those might fit." His pen hovered over the folded newspaper.

She pulled an apron from the pantry, tied it around her, and continued to watch her father. He was always doing puzzles.

Crossword and Sudoku and anagrams. He had a basket by his chair with puzzle books in it and spent most of his time at home solving those puzzles. He'd become a hermit.

"Papi, you have to get out more." She picked up a dishrag and squirted detergent on it. "Let's go to a movie next Saturday."

He didn't answer, just stared at the crossword clues.

The kitchen cabinets were dark walnut; the linoleum floor that was supposed to look like bricks was well-worn. This place felt a lot more like home than the tiny efficiency she'd recently rented a few blocks from the hospital and spent so little time in. She squeezed out the dishrag and started cleaning the white tile counters.

When she finished, she said, "I thought I'd fix enchiladas tonight." She pulled down a jar of tomato sauce. Her mother had always made her sauce from scratch, with real tomatoes, but this would just have to do. Except for her father, no one could tell the difference. After eating his wife's cooking for thirty-five years, he knew homemade sauce from canned.

Ana's philosophy about cooking was if she covered every dish with cheese and onion, they tasted great. Well, not flan, of course. Because her father was diabetic, she used low fat cheese and watched his portions although he did pretty well keeping track himself.

"Who's going to be here tonight?"

Her father stood, held on to the back of the chair before he walked across the room. He was only sixty-one but appeared

much older. A day at the store wore him out now. She'd made him go to the doctor but he said nothing was wrong with her father, not physically. How long did it take to recover from the death of a wife? Obviously, a year wasn't enough.

"Robbie and Martita are coming with Tonito and the baby. She said she'd bring a cake," he said.

"Luz, Quique and Raúl also?" Ana listed the other siblings who lived in Austin. Her brother Robbie, his wife and their small family were fun to be around, and Martita made wonderful cakes. "I want to be sure so I can make enough enchiladas for everyone and still leave some for your lunch Saturday." If Quique didn't eat them when he went through the refrigerator later.

"Well, Raúl will probably stop by. He's between gigs."

Raúl was always between gigs. Fortunately, he had a steady job at the family's furniture store Robbie managed. "Is he between girlfriends?"

"I'm never between girlfriends," Raúl said as he came in from the garage.

"Oh, yes, I know. Women always throw themselves at you. Poor dears." Ana pulled tortillas from the fridge. Store-bought tortillas, another shortcut her mother would never have considered.

"¿Cómo no? Why not? They can't resist my smile or my guitar."

What was he going to do in the future? Raúl floated through life, making it on his dark good looks, great smile and

personality, plus a dab of talent.

"Hey, Ana, no te preocupes. Don't worry."

"Why would I worry about you?" She took out a slab of white cheese and began to grate it.

"Because you always worry about me and Luz and Quique. We're all young." He pulled one of his guitars from the hall closet and came into the kitchen. "We'll grow up someday."

Ana rolled her eyes. "I hope so."

"We'll never be as responsible as you are." He ran his fingers over the strings. "After all, you were born responsible, but you don't always have to worry about us."

"Yes, she does, Raúl." Her brother Robbie followed his five-year-old son, Tonito, into the kitchen and placed a cake on the counter. "That's what Ana does. Worries about her family. She's a rescuer."

"Someone has to do it," Robbie's wife, Martita, said. "It's a full-time job. I refuse to take it on." She handed Marisol, the baby, to Robbie and sat at the kitchen table. "But sometime, chica, you are going to have to stop taking care of your family and find a life of your own."

A life of her own? An interesting concept. Taking care of her family was, well, habit—one she'd never tried to break until she realized how dependent her father was getting on her. That, and the short drive from her little efficiency to the hospital were the reasons she'd moved. Not one to make changes easily, she felt this one was enough for now.

“You want a date?” Raúl said. “I could fix you up with some guys.”

“Thank you,” Ana said politely, but she’d never take him up on that. Although she was only twenty-eight, all his friends were years younger than she in both age and maturity.

“Don’t ever go out with any of his friends,” Robbie said. “None of them are serious about anything.”

“Why don’t you come to church with us?” Martita said. “There’s a big singles’ group there.”

Ana smiled but didn’t answer. Other than weddings and funerals, she’d seldom been to church, although Martita had often invited her to the community chapel her family attended. Ana’d never consider going to church only to find a date. It didn’t seem quite right to her.

After dinner, they gathered in the family room to sing “Adelita” and “De colores” and other family favorites. Raúl and Quique sat on the bench by the fireplace and strummed their guitars. Her father leaned back in his blue recliner while Martita held her kids on the other recliner, the one Ana’s mother had always sat in. Everyone else relaxed on the sofa while Tonito played with his trucks on the floor.

As she watched, Ana was filled with love and with a terrible feeling that this was to be her life: to watch while her brothers and sister married and had babies and the babies grew up and married. And through those years, she’d worry about them, every one of them, exactly as Raúl and Robbie said she would. Forever.

She knew that about herself, too.

Sometimes, like now, she wanted more. Now that she'd reached her professional goal, she needed to look ahead. What she wanted now was a family of her own.

Odd—she hadn't thought about marriage for a long time, not since high school when Tommy Schmidt had wanted to marry her after graduation. Her drive to be a doctor had broken up their relationship. There hadn't been anything serious since. Oh, she'd dated, but she'd been so wrapped up in her family, in her push to finish medical school and her need to learn everything she could, to be the best doctor possible, to finish the residency, that she'd never found time for a relationship. Hadn't really wanted one.

Now that she was almost there, what would she do?

Was it too late for her to have a life and family of her own? If she did, she was going to have to leave the warm, comfortable circle of her family and enter the world of dating. The whole idea bothered her. She wasn't good at flirtation or chatter, and her intensity frightened men.

Then the image of Mike Fuller's unsmiling face danced in her brain. As much as she tried to force his image away, she couldn't. As far as she could tell, she didn't intimidate him.

She could not, would not even consider him. How many times did she need to remind herself he was too young for her? No, that was an excuse. How old was he? Twenty-two, twenty-three? Six or seven years wasn't that much of an age difference.

But there were other reasons. To her, he seemed unmotivated

and that bothered her, a lot. And he was so guarded, so wary and uncommunicative.

No, Fuller wasn't the man for her, but, well, other than Raul's friends he was the only unmarried man under fifty she knew.

Chapter Four

What really scared Mike was that he could always tell when Dr. Ramírez was in the hospital. He knew when he walked into the E.R.—without even seeing her—if she was there. He didn't understand how this happened. It couldn't be the scent of her perfume because she didn't wear any.

So how did he know?

He refused to believe in psychic phenomena, but every time he spotted her in the E.R. for the first time in a shift, it didn't surprise him.

If he wanted to know for sure, her schedule wasn't hard to figure out. She worked three of seven nights each week. Sometimes he thought about going to the nurses' station and trying to glance at her schedule. Inconspicuously of course because staff was always around.

Besides, the idea of actually planning this and carrying it out felt a little strange, as if there was actually something between the two of them, a relationship of some kind. He shuddered. After Cynthia and with the uncertainty of his life now, even the word scared him. No, there wasn't a relationship between him and Dr. Ramírez, and he could never consider the possibility.

Nevertheless, when he walked in that day at 3:00 p.m. for a double shift, he knew she was there.

Ana gently probed the leg of the crash victim. She couldn't feel

anything odd. Of course, the swelling didn't allow for a complete manual examination. "X-ray," she shouted and turned to glance over her shoulder.

He was there. Fuller. Getting ready to transfer the victim to a gurney so the other orderly could push the gurney of another patient into its place.

His presence made her feel a little giddy.

Get a grip, she lectured herself.

"Dr. Ramírez," said an RN. "You have another patient."

"Thanks, Olivia." She dried her hands and held them out for the nurse to slide the clean gloves on her.

The entire night passed in the same way, patient after patient rolling in, being attended to, then moving on. Between those emergencies, she enjoyed the tantalizing glimpses of Fuller transporting patients or checking with an EMT or picking up a patient's chart. As she did with everyone, she nodded to him or thanked him or got out of his way so he could take the gurney to surgery or a room. At midnight, her aching back forced her to lean against the wall and stretch her muscles. Fuller hurried past, this time giving her a smile, much to her surprise.

He had a great smile. Too bad she didn't see it more. Or, maybe it was a good thing. If he smiled more often, she might behave more foolishly, if that were possible.

During a lull a few hours later, she decided to take a nap. She had two choices. The first: she could hurry over to the on-call rooms on the fifth floor of the east wing. Narrow little places,

each with a bed and little else. The problem was, every time she took off her shoes, settled in the bed and pulled the covers over her, her cell rang. Walking all the way over there wasn't worth the trouble.

So she decided on the second choice. She headed for the sofa in the break room and hoped she didn't have to pull rank to get it. Fortunately, she got there first. When she was almost asleep, the door swung open. She knew it was Fuller. How? She still couldn't figure it out.

She opened her eyes a slit to see if she was right. She was.

As she watched, he stepped into the room and watched her with a gentle expression, one that didn't fit the Fuller she knew, the Fuller who seldom spoke to her. It must be the dim light that allowed the deviant thought that Fuller might look at her in that way, caring and—oh, certainly not—tender.

After a few seconds, he backed out and closed the door silently. She sat up. What had just happened? Quickly she halted the absurd tangent her brain had taken off on. Tenderness in Fuller's eyes? Ridiculous.

She had to stop thinking about the orderly. It was not professional. He was not the man for her.

But something inside her didn't agree, and she was left to wonder why he'd looked at her like that.

Driving home, Mike could barely keep his eyes open. Not the safest thing to do when he was driving, but the extra money from those long double shifts allowed him to breathe more easily. For

the first time since college, he had a small savings account. For the first time in weeks, he felt there might be better times ahead that didn't consist of constant work, that held the promise he might be a doctor someday.

Not that doctors had easy lives, but they had partners to trade off with, got paid a good bit more and didn't have to do the scut work.

"Orderly," he imagined himself saying in some far-off day when he was Michael Robert Fuller, M.D. "Transport this patient to X-ray, then check on the woman bleeding in Trauma 8. And while you're there—" He almost smiled. Life was getting better when he could see a little humor in the situation, when he felt there might be a future for him in medicine.

He turned onto his street in time to see Tim ride away in his friend's car. Where were they going? He didn't have a job yet. He'd ask Tim later where he'd gone, if he remembered, but he wasn't worried. This was too early in the day to get in trouble, even for Tim.

Pulling Francie's car into the drive, he got out and stretched. He waved down the street toward the neighborhood kids waiting for the school bus as he walked across the lawn and onto the porch. It was hot already, even though it was only late May. That was central Texas.

He unlocked the front door, shoved it open and took a step inside. Silence surrounded him, the usual situation with Tim gone except normally his mother was drinking coffee and reading the

paper in the kitchen when he got home. Today the door of her bedroom was shut and a line of light glowed from beneath it. Was she sick?

He knocked and said, “Mom, are you okay?”

When she threw the door open, the dazzling light from her smile and several lamps made him blink.

“I’m magnificent, dear. Look at this.” She swirled and gestured around her.

The blast of brilliance made him stand still for a moment. Then he took three steps inside and blinked in an effort to take the scene in.

On the wall to his left, his mother had painted a view of a meadow with two women walking through it. Vibrant green grass and a dazzling sky filled the entire area. On the wall in front of him, she’d begun to paint a pond with gauzy water lilies floating on its shimmering surface.

Wearing one of his shirts and old jeans smeared with paint, his mother stood in the middle of an amazing blaze of beauty.

“I see you’re Claude Monet today,” he said stunned by the joy in his mother’s face and the glow of the painting on the walls. Mixed with all this was the realization this was a rental house for which he’d signed an agreement: all plans to paint had to be approved by the landlord. He didn’t think the landlord would appreciate the swirling glory on the walls, but it was too late to worry now. He and Tim could paint over it before they moved out.

Walking to the center of the room, he allowed the paintings to fill him with joy. “When did you decide to do this?”

“After you left yesterday afternoon, I took a walk.” While she talked, she picked up a paper towel and wiped the plate she’d used as a palette. “There’s a wonderful art store only three block from here. Did you know that?” She glanced up at him with a smile, the kind he remembered from when he was a kid.

He dropped on the bed to listen.

“They had a bin of old paint really cheap, so I bought some and a few brushes, and, well, everything I needed. It cost almost nothing.” She turned in a slow circle to study her creations. “Once I got started, I couldn’t stop. I painted the rest of the day and all night, stopped to feed Tim dinner and breakfast then came back here.” With a sigh, she put the plate down and sat next to him on the bed.

“I didn’t know how much I missed it. The painting.” Her eyes shone. “Not until I put the first stroke of color on the wall and inspiration flowed through me. It kept coming and coming, like it had been locked up inside me all these years.”

“You painted for twenty hours?”

“Almost.” She smiled. “It was wonderful. It was like coming home, coming home to you and Tim and my painting.” She stood to twirl in the middle of the room.

Mike pulled himself off the bed. “I’m glad, Mom. It’s great.”

“Thank you, dear.” She patted his cheek. “Now, let me get you some breakfast. We can eat together. Then I have to take a

nap. Although," she said, "my brain is so filled with images, I don't know if I can sleep."

"Mom, it's beautiful. What's next? Another Monet? Degas's dancers? Seurat?"

"Never Seurat. I find painting all those little dots so tedious."

She was happy. He'd let her finish her bedroom, which wouldn't take long at the speed she was going. Then he'd help her find a job.

Almost a week later, his mom still hadn't found work although she'd made several calls and filled out lots of applications. On the other hand, a Degas dancer stretched her long right leg across one corner in the kitchen. In the hall, the start of his mother's interpretation of a Pisarro view of a street made Mike feel as if he were walking through Paris. The landlord might be able to use the house as a gallery or charge higher rent with all the art filling it.

"Fuller, there's a kid in the E.R. who needs you," Dr. Armstrong said, interrupting Mike's thoughts.

In the past few weeks, Mike had gotten a reputation for being good with kids. This was good because he liked children, but bad because he really hated to see a kid hurt.

After finding the child, comforting her and getting her prepped for surgery, he transported her to the OR and promised he'd be there when she got out of surgery.

A few hours later, Mike glanced at his watch. Almost 6:00 a.m. His mother would be picking him up after the shift change.

She'd needed the car to go to the doctor yesterday afternoon, only a routine visit, she'd said. He hoped everything had gone well.

Because he'd expected her to arrive an hour later, seeing her in the E.R. hallway surprised him. Even more amazing, she supported a gray-haired man with one hand and tried to staunch the blood dripping from the towels wrapped around the man's arm with the other.

"Mom?"

"Hello, dear." She gave him a quick smile. "I met Mr. Ramírez in the parking lot and helped him in." She lowered the man into a chair. "He says his daughter works here. Do you know her?"

"Yeah." Mike pulled gloves from his pockets, slipping them on as he ran to the nurses' station. "Page Dr. Ramírez, please." Then he grabbed a couple of towels from a hall cabinet, dropped the blood-soaked towels from Mr. Ramírez's arm on the tile floor and wrapped the clean ones around it. Before he could do more, Dr. Ramírez rushed toward her father.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

Текст предоставлен ООО «ЛитРес».

Прочитайте эту книгу целиком, купив полную легальную версию на ЛитРес.

Безопасно оплатить книгу можно банковской картой Visa, MasterCard, Maestro, со счета мобильного телефона, с платежного терминала, в салоне МТС или Связной, через PayPal, WebMoney, Яндекс.Деньги, QIWI Кошелек, бонусными картами или другим удобным Вам способом.