



*Medical
Romance™*

JESSICA MATTHEWS

Six-Week Marriage
Miracle



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Marriage Miracle
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JESSICA MATTHEWS'S interest in medicine began at a young age, and she nourished it with medical stories and hospital-based television programmes. After a stint as a teenage candy-striper, she pursued a career as a clinical laboratory scientist. When not writing or on duty, she fills her day with countless

family and school-related activities. Jessica lives in the central United States, with her husband, daughter and son.

“I want us to reverse course. To go back to the way we were. Before everything happened.”

“As great as the idea sounds, I don’t know if we can,” she said honestly. “We aren’t the same starry-eyed people we once were, and no amount of magical fairy dust will change us back.”

He tugged her arm until she didn’t have a choice but to perch on the edge of his bed. “Maybe we aren’t the young, naive kids we once were. Maybe the hopes and dreams we once had have died. But that doesn’t mean we can’t create new ones. Together.”

Darn it, but his grip was comforting, and once again his voice was so sincere—so full of faith—that the wall she’d created in her heart to hold back her hurts and disappointments began to crumble. Quickly she struggled to shore up those widening cracks, before emotions overwhelmed her.

Dedication

To Judi Fennell for her Spanish language expertise. Any errors are my own.

To adoptive and foster parents across the world. Your generous spirit is truly an inspiration to all of us.

CHAPTER ONE

“ANOTHER ambulance is coming.”

Leah Montgomery didn't spare her nursing colleague a glance as she stripped the used hospital sheets from the bed. “Tell me something I don't already know,” she said wryly. “The moon was full when we came to work this morning.”

Although it wasn't a scientific fact, hospital staff the world over recognized and accepted that full-moon shifts were the proverbial shifts from hell. So far, this was shaping up to be one of them. Everything from car wrecks, heart attacks, lawn mower accidents, and simple sore throats had flooded the Spring Valley ER on this hot August day.

While many of her staff bemoaned the extra workload, she didn't mind the increased pace at all. Being busy kept her mind off things she didn't want to think about—things like her husband's plane crashing in the Mexican jungle a month ago today. Or the report stating that there were no survivors, which meant Gabe was dead.

Dead!

After four painfully long weeks, it still seemed surreal, as if she might wake up some morning and discover she'd simply had a horrible nightmare. To her disappointment, each day was like the one before—the facts hadn't changed overnight. Neither did they change when she worked until she was too exhausted to reflect

on the losses in her life.

If her boss would allow it, she'd cover more shifts than her PRN status allowed in order to keep her demons at bay. She was willing to do *anything* to stay busy until time took away the anguish over her last conversation with Gabe—the one where she'd asked to make their separation permanent with a divorce.

Some might call her crazy, others might say she was being silly and sentimental, but the truth was, she was mourning for Gabe on so many levels. Grieving that his vibrant life had been cut short at age thirty-eight; grieving that their marriage had reached an impasse; grieving for the loss of their dreams and missed opportunities. Was it any wonder she needed the fast pace of the hospital, the steady stream of new patients and drama as a life raft she could climb aboard?

"I hear Maternity is swamped," Jane rattled on, blithely unaware of Leah's inattention. "They're so packed with new moms, they're overflowing into the med-surg unit." She unfolded a fresh sheet and began tucking the corners under the mattress.

Leah pictured a nursery filled with bassinets of sleeping babies wearing pink or blue stocking hats, the hallway crowded with beaming fathers and proud grandparents while new mothers, some having already forgotten the pain of childbirth, looked on benevolently. She didn't begrudge the new families their happiness, but a familiar pang of disappointment shot through her chest.

At one time, she'd imagined herself in similar circumstances,

with her parents waiting for their first peek at her child while Gabe passed out the bubblegum cigars and strutted as only a new father could. She'd fallen pregnant almost immediately after they'd decided it was time to start their family, making that dream seem like a sure thing and easily within her grasp. In her mind, and Gabe's, the future couldn't have been brighter.

Life, however, had rewritten her beautifully scripted scene.

Instead of joining the ranks of other new mothers, she'd become one of a small percentage of women who became a gynecological emergency. Shortly after entering her last trimester of an unremarkable pregnancy, her placenta had separated without warning. She'd lost the baby as well as her hopes for future children when profuse and unstoppable bleeding had necessitated a hysterectomy. Afterwards, she'd been whisked away to the surgical floor where babies weren't seen or heard.

Her parents had been there for her, of course, but pity, not pride, had shown on their faces. As for Gabe ... he'd been on one of his occasional trips for the Montgomery family's medical foundation. He'd come as soon as her parents had called him, but time zones and flight schedules had prevented his return until the day she was ready to be released.

"I just love to stop and peek at the newborns," Jane gushed. "They have such cute little wrinkled faces." Suddenly, she stopped short. "Oh, Leah. Here I am, babbling on so insensitively about babies after everything you've been through. First a miscarriage, then the adoption fiasco—"

Leah cut off her friend's reminder of their failed foray into the world of adoption. After her surgery, still hazy from the grief of her loss, Gabe had convinced her to think about adoption and then so many things had fallen into place with amazing speed—Gabe's lawyer had known a young woman who'd wanted to relinquish her baby. They'd hurriedly filled out the necessary paperwork and completed the required governmental home studies and background checks. The entire time the birth mother had been adamant about her choice—she was making the right decision for both her and her unborn child. Yet when the hour arrived for Leah and Gabe to pick up the baby from the hospital, the young woman had changed her mind and Leah had once again driven home empty-handed.

Leah couldn't fault the girl for her change of heart—it had to be difficult to relinquish one's child, especially after seeing that tiny person for the first time—but understanding didn't take away her gut-wrenching disappointment.

"It's okay," she lied. "I don't fall apart just because someone talks about babies or mentions how cute they are."

Admittedly, they were, but seeing those adorable little faces was tough, which was why she never, *ever*, entered the secured area to stare at them through the plate-glass window. Why add insult to injury? she'd rationalized.

"I know, but—"

"It's okay," Leah repeated, as much for her own benefit as Jane's. "Honestly."

Jane nodded, but the worried wrinkle between her eyes suggested her good-mood bubble had burst. Determined to regain their easy footing, Leah thought it best to gently steer the conversation in another direction, for both their sakes.

“OB isn’t the only busy department in this place,” she commented as she tucked a fitted sheet around a corner of the mattress. “Our daily patient census is above average across the entire hospital and we both know our ED visit numbers are up, too. The extra business should make the bean counters happy.”

“Maybe this year we’ll get a Christmas bonus for a job well done,” Jane responded hopefully.

Word from the last supervisors’ meeting was that the possibility was remote, but Leah wasn’t going to rain on Jane’s picnic. “Maybe, but, bonus or not, more patients means more nursing staff are necessary, which means I work more often.”

Jane paused from working on her own two bed corners. “Look, hon,” she said kindly. “I know you’re probably feeling guilty because you’d never resolved your differences with Gabe, but killing yourself now that he’s gone, working sixty-plus hours a week, isn’t the way to cope.”

“I’m not killing myself,” Leah protested mildly, pointedly ignoring Jane’s opinion about her reasons for the pace she’d set for herself. “I’m merely keeping busy. Just like I have for the past year.”

“Keeping busy is one thing. Doubling your hours is another.”

“Okay, so I am working a few more hours,” Leah conceded

reluctantly, “but I was off duty yesterday and I spent the day puttering around the house. And then I treated myself to dinner and a movie.”

“Dinner *and* a movie?” Jane’s eyes brimmed with curiosity. “Did you *finally* put Jeff out of his misery and go on a *date*?”

About six months ago, Dr. Jeff Warren, one of Spring Valley’s ED physicians, had invited her to a concert, then a community theater play. Both times she’d declined, not because she didn’t enjoy his company or didn’t want to attend those particular events. No, she’d gently refused his invitation because in spite of being separated from her husband of ten years, going out with another man while she was still officially married made her feel as if she was cheating.

Which was why she’d wanted Gabe’s signature on those divorce papers. It was past time to stop expecting a miracle and start thinking about the future—*her* future—instead of the past. As it had turned out, she didn’t need his signature after all.

Leah shot her friend a spare-me look. “Are you kidding?” she asked. “I haven’t even buried Gabe and you’re asking if I’m seeing Jeff?”

“Buried or not, you’ve been separated for over a year,” Jane reminded her. “It’s time to move on.”

“I will,” Leah promised. “But I can’t until I’ve dotted all my i’s and crossed all the t’s.”

Jane rolled her eyes. “What’s left to dot and cross? From what you’ve said, his body may never come home.”

How well she knew that. The Mexican authorities had reported the discovery of the airplane's charred remains in a ravine. They lacked the resources to recover the bodies and in their bureaucratic minds the burned-out shell of the aircraft made it pointless to do so. Undaunted, and after greasing palms for several weeks, Gabe's second-in-command Sheldon Redfern had received permission to send in a private recovery team. As of yesterday, they hadn't reported any more encouraging news than what the authorities had already shared.

Their success, however, wasn't the reason she was dragging her feet ...

"The annual foundation fund-raiser is coming up in a few months," she pointed out. "It seems tacky to plan a tribute to my deceased husband while I'm dating someone else." Their relationship may have been rocky the last two years and she might be finally ready to look for male companionship and find romance again, but in honor of the good times and the love they'd once shared, she owed it to Gabe to wait.

"Did you tell that to Jeff?"

She nodded, remembering their conversation. He'd been so understanding, which not only came as a relief but also endeared him to her all the more. "He's agreed to give me time," she said, deciding not to mention that she'd set their first official date for the Saturday night after the fundraiser. If Jane knew that, she'd be bouncing off the walls with excitement and Leah didn't want to see her sly smiles and winks in the meantime.

Jane stared at her thoughtfully. “Personally, I think you’re worried too much about what other people think, but another month or two won’t make much difference. Just be sure your decision to stay out of the dating game is based on the right reasons.”

“What other reason could I have?”

Jane shrugged. “Oh, I don’t know. Maybe that you still love Gabe and are waiting for the ultimate proof that he won’t be coming back.”

“Don’t be ridiculous.” She avoided her friend’s gaze because she didn’t want Jane to recognize what she herself refused to dwell on or admit. “If I loved him, why would I have moved out?”

“You tell me. I just don’t want you to be stuck on hold for the rest of your life.”

“I’m not,” Leah insisted. “I’m merely being cautious. There’s no sense rushing into something I might come to regret.” She grabbed a fresh cotton blanket and shook it out of its folds with a decisive snap, effectively signaling an end to their conversation. “Do you know what’s coming in next?”

Jane shook her head. “All I heard was that they were bringing in three from the airport.”

“*The airport?*” She considered for a moment. “Bigwigs, no doubt.”

“What makes you say that?”

“It’s probably food related and the only folks who get food on a plane are seated in first class. And who usually can afford to

sit in first class?”

“Ah.” Jane’s eyes gleamed. “Bigwigs.”

“Exactly.”

“You’re stereotyping, you know. Regular people buy first-class tickets, too.”

Leah flashed her a wide smile. “Okay, so I’m generalizing but, mark my words, it won’t be three average Joes who roll into our ambulance bay. They’ll be fellows wearing suits and ties, carrying briefcases and BlackBerrys, and wanting a magic pill to fix whatever ails them. Oh, and can we hurry because they’re already late for a meeting.”

Jane laughed, probably because Leah’s scenario had actually taken place often enough to become a legend in the ER. “We’ll find out if you’re right in about three minutes. Marge wants us to be on the dock, ready to go.”

As the emergency department’s nurse manager, Marge Pennington was a person who believed in keeping busy every minute, so it seemed odd she would ask them to waste time waiting. Her request only seemed to substantiate Leah’s prediction of several Very Important People arriving on this transport.

“Far be it from me to argue,” she said, although it bothered her to think Marge was willing to discard her normal habits in order to impress people with money. Having married into a family with the Midas touch, Leah had always been leery of people who didn’t treat her as they would anyone else.

“According to her, the person radioing in specifically asked for you.”

Leah’s eyes widened. “Me? Why me?”

Jane shrugged. “Maybe it’s someone you know from Gabe’s trust organization.”

Leah mentally ran through her list of regularly generous contributors to the Montgomery Medical Charitable Foundation. As chairwoman of the annual fund-raising ball, which would take place in six weeks, she was acquainted with nearly all of the supporters, but none knew she worked in the Spring Valley Hospital Emergency Department.

“Impossible,” she said.

Jane shrugged. “Who knows? In any case, I’m only following Marge’s orders and if you know what’s good for you, you will, too.”

Marge wasn’t the easiest charge nurse to work for, but she was a model of efficiency and a brilliant nurse. No one, not even the hospital’s CEO, crossed her when she was in battle mode.

Leah gave the bed a final pat, pleased with their results. “Okay, then. Let’s go. I can use a few minutes of fresh air while we’re waiting.” She grinned. “Just think, we might even get to sit and rest our weary feet.”

Outside, Leah did exactly as she’d hoped to. Ignoring Jane and the two extra staff who’d joined them with wheelchairs and an extra stretcher, she sat on the concrete loading dock and dangled her legs over the edge as she breathed in the fresh air and soaked

up the heat.

If only the summer sun would chase away the coldness inside her—the same coldness that had settled into every cell, the same coldness that had taken hold ever since she'd realized Gabe's plane had gone down with her request for a divorce ringing in his ears.

She'd agonized for weeks over taking their separation to its logical conclusion before she'd contacted a lawyer, but they'd lived apart for nearly a year. After the adoption had fallen through, they'd simply shut down. It was understandable, she supposed. They'd been obsessed with the baby when she'd been pregnant, and then they'd focused exclusively on adopting a child. Their marriage had been so driven toward that end goal that their sudden failure had simply sidelined their relationship.

Consequently they'd drifted apart until the only solution had been to ask for a change of scenery. She'd wanted time and space to redefine what she wanted out of life and, more importantly, she wanted Gabe to have the same.

A year later, she'd finally faced the facts. Remaining in their legal limbo wasn't doing either of them any favors. They both needed the freedom to pursue their dreams—she wanted companionship and Gabe wanted a family. Although she hated the idea of Gabe finding a woman who could give him what she couldn't, it had seemed silly, selfish and almost spiteful to keep him from his heart's desire. With the stroke of a judge's pen, they would end their estranged state and could move on with their

lives. To start over, as it were.

In the end, her altruistic decision had been wasted. Fate had stepped in and had the last laugh at their expense before he could sign the papers dissolving their marriage. Before he'd created the family he'd always wanted.

Since then, she'd told herself on a daily basis to stop beating herself over everything from procrastinating to her bad timing. After all, divorced or widowed, she was still alone.

Alone or not, though, it pained her to imagine what final thoughts had run through Gabe's head. No doubt his last one of her had involved the unpleasant scene when she'd asked for a divorce. Some would say she was being too hard on herself. Others would say she was worrying over nothing. After all, if she wanted to completely sever their matrimonial ties, why did she care what his last thoughts of her had been?

In one corner of her heart, she'd wanted Gabe to realize their marriage needed as much attention as he gave his family's charitable foundation, but if he'd entertained any regrets during his final moments, she'd never know. Chances were, she repeated to herself for the millionth time, he hadn't thought of her at all ...

Jane straightened, her gaze riveted in the distance. "Looks like they're about two blocks away." She glanced at her watch. "Right on time, too."

Leah slowly got to her feet then brushed the seat of her scrub pants. "I wish we knew what we were getting," she fretted.

"We'll find out soon enough."

A black Lexus squealed to an abrupt stop in the aisle of the parking lot. Apparently the driver didn't care about the traffic snarl he'd created.

"Security is going to eat him alive," Leah commented.

"Maybe you should tell him."

The ambulance pulled in and began backing up to the dock, its warning beeps intermingling with the other city noises. "He'll have to take his chances," Leah said. "We have things to do and people to see."

As the ambulance inched backwards, Leah heard someone call her name. A familiar figure, Sheldon Redfern had jumped out of the Lexus and was running toward her.

"Leah," he panted. "Wait!"

"Sheldon, what are you doing here?" she asked, amazed to see him.

"I have to tell you—"

The ambulance braked. "Save it for later," she ordered. "I'm busy right now."

"This can't wait."

He grabbed her arm at the same time she saw Jane twisting the handle to open the back door. "Sheldon," she protested. "I have work to do."

"Leah," he urged. "It's about Gabe and the search team we sent."

Instinctively, her heart sank. Sheldon's eagerness to contact her only meant one thing.

“They finally located his remains,” she said dully, feeling her chest tighten and a painful knot clog her throat as her eyes dimmed with sudden tears. For all the problems they’d had, she hadn’t wanted anything so drastic and so *final* to happen to him. Yes, a divorce was like a death—the death of a marriage—but part of her consolation had been that they each would carry on and eventually find the happiness they couldn’t find with each other.

Unfortunately, Sheldon’s announcement had irrevocably destroyed that thin hope. Why had he felt compelled to deliver the news now, *at this very moment*, with patients breathing down her neck, when she wasn’t mentally prepared to deal with the finality of the situation?

“No,” Sheldon corrected in her ear.

“No?” She stared at him in surprise.

“What he’s trying to say unsuccessfully is that they found *us*.” Sheldon’s voice suddenly sounded closer ... and deeper ... and more like ... Gabe’s.

And it was coming from inside the ambulance.

She focused in that direction, ignoring the paramedic to glance at the human cargo—two men and a woman. They looked tired and dirty in clothing that was tattered and torn, but broad smiles shone on their faces. An uncanny sense of familiarity struck her.

In spite of their gaunt and disreputable appearance, she *knew* all three. Yet her brain couldn’t reconcile what she was seeing

with what she'd been told.

She homed in on the man who'd spoken. He was just as dirty as the other two and equally as disheveled. His right pants leg had been cut open at some point but in spite of being tied closed with strips of gauze, she glimpsed a white bandage circling his shin. A splint encased his left forearm and another bandage was visible above the open neck of his torn shirt. But there was no denying that this man was Gabe.

"I tried calling you all morning," Sheldon babbled in the background as the identities of Gabe's colleagues—Jack Kasold and Theresa Hernandez—registered before they stepped onto the concrete. "You never answered my messages."

The pink scraps of paper tucked in her tunic pocket suddenly weighed like the proverbial ton of bricks. She'd ignored them when she'd seen who'd phoned because she'd assumed he simply wanted to hash out more details for the foundation's upcoming charity ball. Apparently, she'd been wrong.

"I was going to call you during my break," she said numbly as she looked past all the people to study her husband once again.

Tape bisected his forehead, his beard was scruffy, his hair shaggy, and lines of apparent pain bracketed his full mouth, but his midnight-black eyes were so familiar.

Could it be true? Really *true*? Her heart skipped a beat as she feared she might be hallucinating and hoped she was not.

"Gabe?" she finally asked, aware of how thin and reedy her voice sounded.

He stepped out of the ambulance, balancing himself on one crutch. His reassuring smile was one she'd seen before—the same one that belonged to the man she'd married when their future had been bright and it had seemed as if nothing could stop them from living their dreams.

“Hi, honey. I'm home.”

CHAPTER TWO

UNCERTAIN of the reception he'd receive when he finally saw Leah again, Gabriel's tension had escalated with each mile closer to his destination. Considering how Sheldon hadn't been able to reach her all morning, Gabe had expected her to be surprised and shocked by his astonishing return and she didn't disappoint him.

"Gabe?" she whispered in that soft voice he remembered so vividly. "Is it really *you*?"

He met her gaze and offered a rueful smile. "A little the worse for wear but, yes, it is."

"Oh, my." She covered her mouth with both hands. Suddenly, she turned pale and a dazed look came to her eyes.

She was going to faint. Cursing because he wasn't in a position to catch her himself, he roared, "Sheldon!"

Fortunately, his second-in-command was beside her and grabbed her arm. At the same time the paramedic did the same. For an instant she sagged, then straightened and shrugged off the two men's hold.

"I'm okay," she insisted, losing a bit of her deer-caught-in-the-headlights look.

"Are you sure?" The paramedic didn't sound convinced as he eyed her closely.

"I'm fine. Really."

Of course she was, Gabe thought wryly. Leah thrived on her ability to handle anything and everything by herself, without help from anyone. In fact, at times he'd felt rather superfluous in their marriage, but he intended to change all that.

"Truly," she insisted, tentatively reaching toward him.

Eager to touch her and prove just how wrong the reports of his death had been, as well as to reassure himself that he was truly home, Gabe grabbed her hand.

Her skin was soft and warm and soothingly familiar. Oh, how he'd missed her!

Before he could say a word, before he could do anything but entwine his fingers with hers, she flung herself against him and buried her face in his shoulder.

His crutch clattered to the concrete and his ribs protested, but having her in his arms where she belonged was worth the pain. When his plane had landed and Leah hadn't been standing with Jack's and Theresa's elated families on the tarmac, he'd been so afraid ... but this was the response he'd dreamed of and hoped for every night they'd been lost in the jungle.

The coldness of despair, the survivor's guilt, and the soul-racking regret that he'd labored under for weeks now began to diminish until he slowly felt warm from the inside out.

His wife's fresh, clean scent filled his nostrils and reminded him of how desperately he needed soap and water. If he'd been thinking properly, he might have asked Sheldon to detour to his corporate offices where he could have made use of the executive

washroom, but he'd been too eager to see Leah to consider it. Quite frankly, though, with his stiff shoulder and the slow-healing gash on his leg, he wasn't sure he could manage the feat on his own, anyway.

He gripped her with his good arm, feeling her slight frame shake beneath his hand. As her tears soaked his shirt, his throat tightened and his eyes burned with more emotion than he could begin to describe.

"Oh, honey. Don't cry," he said hoarsely, relieved by her reception and grateful the paramedics and ER staff were giving them a few minutes before they whisked him away.

"I'm not," she sniffed, swiping at the moisture on her cheeks as she stared at him. "Oh, Gabe. I can't believe it."

As he gazed at her, one thought ran through his mind. She was beautiful—more beautiful than the picture he'd slipped out of his wallet and stuck in his shirt pocket shortly after they'd crashed. The photo was now dog-eared and a little dirty, but her image had given him the incentive to keep going when he'd sworn he couldn't hobble another step.

"I can't quite believe it, either," he said ruefully. As far as he was concerned, this was a dream come true. A bona fide miracle.

More importantly, it was a miracle he wasn't going to let slip through his fingers.

"What happened?" she asked.

"It's a long story." Rather than dwell on that fateful day and the events leading up to it, he drank in everything about her,

from her acorn-colored hair and eyes that reminded him of the Grand Canyon's various shades of brown to her retroussé nose and sensual mouth. She'd lost weight, too, if his hands hadn't deceived him.

The paramedic stepped close to interrupt. "I don't mean to cut short your reunion, Dr. Montgomery, but let's get you inside before you fall."

Whether she suddenly realized how heavily he was leaning against her or the paramedic's statement had reminded her of his injuries, his prim and proper wife—and she still *was* his wife, even if they'd lived apart for the last twelve months—unwrapped herself from him and took his good arm. Although he missed her embrace, he was glad she hadn't completely turned him loose. Granted, she'd fallen back into nurse mode, but he wanted to believe she needed the contact as much as he did to reassure herself that he was, indeed, alive and well.

Maybe not "well", he corrected as he lowered himself into a hastily provided wheelchair, but his aches and pains now seemed inconsequential. For the past month he'd fought his fears of failure—fears that the feelings she'd once had for him were gone—but he took heart that she hadn't rejected him. In the nightmares that had often startled him awake, he'd dreamt she'd take one look at him and walk away. Thankfully, none of those painfully vivid dreams had come true.

They still had issues to resolve but he was cautiously optimistic about success. If he played his cards right—and he intended to

because he'd had a month to plan a strategy—there wouldn't be any more talk of a divorce. Fate had given him a second chance to correct his mistakes and undo the past. He would not fail.

Leah wanted to ask a hundred questions, but Gabe's slumped shoulders as she walked beside his wheelchair told her how exhausted he was. In all the years she'd known him, she'd never seen him so drained, even during his residency when forty-eight-hour shifts had been the norm. There would be plenty of time to hear his story after his medical needs were addressed—starting with how he'd survived a supposedly fatal accident.

It wasn't until he'd gingerly moved from his wheelchair to the bed with her help and that of a paramedic that she realized the awkwardness of the situation. As a nurse she belonged in the room, but as his estranged wife she certainly didn't. Unfortunately, by the time she'd come to that conclusion, the other nurses had already disappeared into their respective patients' rooms, leaving her no choice but to continue. Asking for a reassignment now would only draw unwanted and unnecessary attention. As soon as word leaked of Gabe's return, speculation would run rampant anyway.

In spite of resigning herself to her temporary fate, her awkwardness grew exponentially as Jeff Warren took that moment to walk into the room. The normally implacable blond physician stopped abruptly in his tracks, as if he hadn't realized the identity of his patient until now. Immediately, he glanced back at Leah and she shrugged helplessly, realizing that this

moment was as uncomfortable for him as it was for her. The only difference was Jeff seemed to recover more quickly from his surprise than she had.

“Gabe,” he said, reaching out to shake his hand. “Welcome back.”

“Thanks. It’s great to be home.”

“I’ll do my best to get you there,” Jeff promised. “Let’s have a look at what you’ve done to yourself, shall we?”

Leah had planned to act as usual, giving Gabe the same objective care she’d give any other patient. However, that was easier said than done. The minute he shrugged off his tattered shirt, she saw the physical evidence of what he’d endured. His bones stood out in stark relief to the scabbed-over scrapes and large, brilliantly colored patches of purple, yellow and green that dotted his skin, while other areas were rubbed raw.

“Oh, Gabe,” she breathed.

“It looks worse than it is,” he assured her.

Objectively speaking, he was probably right, but through the eyes of someone who’d once carefully and lovingly mapped every inch of his six-foot body, she wasn’t as certain. It became far too easy to imagine how he’d earned each scrape and each bruise and then marvel at how he’d endured the trauma and still returned home. His obvious weight loss made her wonder what he’d eaten, if anything, which was another facet of his ordeal she hadn’t considered until now.

Part of her wanted to hug him again, to erase those physical

hurts with a soft and gentle touch. The other part of her wanted to rail at him, ask if his injuries had been worth those extra duties he'd assumed and the additional trips he'd taken on behalf of his family's charitable organization.

More importantly, though, she wanted to lock herself in the restroom so she could cry because, however illogical it seemed, she somehow felt responsible—not for the crash itself, or even for this particularly fateful international jaunt, but for sending him into the ever-eager arms of the Montgomery Medical Foundation. Had she not rejected his comfort after their adoption had fallen through, he wouldn't have found his purpose in his work. With the schedule he'd set for himself, both before their separation and after, it was almost amazing that disaster hadn't struck before now.

Regardless of where she laid blame or how she took responsibility, what mattered most for now was the state of Gabe's health, not rehashing the mistakes or hurts of the past.

“Leah?”

Hearing her name, she pulled her thoughts together and met Jeff's questioning gaze. He was obviously reading more into her inattentiveness than she wanted.

“Maybe you should take a break,” he suggested softly.

She was tempted to take his advice, but she'd never deserted a patient before and she wouldn't start now. She shook her head and squared her shoulders. “I'm fine. Really.”

Jeff simply shrugged, then listened to Gabe's chest sounds as

he spoke. "You still have some nasty injuries. What did you do? Hit every tree in the jungle?"

"It seemed like it," Gabe mentioned ruefully. "I picked up about half of my bruises and bumps during the crash. Splitting my leg open came later."

"What happened?"

"In regard to my leg or the crash itself?"

"Both."

Curious about the details surrounding his experience, Leah listened closely.

"Minutes before we crashed, there was a thump, then an engine sputtered, and Ramon yelled something about birds. The next thing I knew, we were going down." He paused. "When it was all over, I had a dislocated shoulder and a bad wrist. Jack relocated the bone and immobilized my arm with the supplies out of our first-aid kit. Then we went to find help."

Leah tried not to imagine the pain he must have endured while Jack had worked on his shoulder without any anesthetic. As an internist, Jack's basic orthopedic skills were no doubt rusty, but he would have had to proceed because the potential complications like a lack of blood supply and damaged nerves were too serious to ignore. As she surreptitiously studied Gabe's fingers, the pink skin color and lack of swelling were reassuring signs of his success.

"Needless to say, it took us a while to find another human being," he added wryly, "although, technically, a few locals found

us when they stumbled across our path. We stayed in their village overnight but before they took us to the next town, the search team had tracked us there. And here we are.”

“You’re lucky they found you at all,” Leah interjected. “We were told you were dead.” Thank goodness Sheldon had persisted with cutting through the red tape to send in their own team. If they’d accepted the official verdict and let matters lie ... the idea of Gabe and his colleagues still wandering through the jungle sent a chill down her spine.

“I’m not surprised the authorities assumed the worst,” Gabe said, his voice pained. “We’d stopped inches away from a ravine and thought we were on safe ground. Not long afterwards, the ground gave way and the plane slid over the edge. On its way down, the fuel tanks blew.”

Mentally picturing the scene, Leah shuddered as her grip tightened on the blood-pressure cuff she was still holding.

“You three are celebrities now,” Jeff remarked. “Not many people walk away from an experience like that.”

Gabe’s face became stoic, his expression shuttered. “Two of my group didn’t.”

“Who?” she asked, hating it that not everyone associated with Montgomery Medical would have a happy ending.

“Will. Will Henderson, and Ramon.”

Will was an information technology guru Gabe had hired about eighteen months ago to facilitate the internet connections between remote medical clinics and hospitals to specialists at

centers like Spring Valley. Leah had met him a few times but had never had any dealings with him.

Ramon Diaz, however, was a man she knew quite well. As the first pilot Gabe had ever hired and the organization's most senior pilot, Ramon had usually taken charge of Gabe's flights. He'd also begun dating Theresa, one of the foundation's nurses, right before Leah and Gabe had split up, and had recently proposed to her. No doubt they'd both been thrilled to go on this trip together. How sad it had ended so horribly.

"Oh, Gabe," she breathed, knowing how the loss of two people who had been more friends than employees must weigh heavily on him. She dropped the cuff and clutched his hand in sympathy. "Did they ... suffer?"

"Will didn't. He died in the crash. Ramon ... died later."

Gabe's tight-lipped expression suggested there was a lot more to his story, but she didn't press for details. "I'm sorry, both for you and the company. Theresa must be devastated."

"She's having a tough time," Gabe agreed.

Making a mental note to visit with Theresa as soon as she was able, Leah watched as Jeff unwrapped the bandage around Gabe's leg. The gash was red and swollen, but didn't look nearly as bad as Leah had anticipated.

"I've seen worse," the doctor remarked, apparently agreeing with her opinion. "How long ago did this happen?"

"About ten days. I slid down a hill and bumped into a few rocks along the way. One of them sliced my skin."

“Then it definitely isn’t healing as fast as I’d like.”

“We cleaned it as best we could but, as you can see, our topical ointment couldn’t quite do the job.” Gabe winced as his colleague probed the area and his grip on her hand tightened. “Sutures might have helped, but those weren’t available, either.”

Leah wasn’t fooled by his innocent tone or his condensed version of events. He could probably talk for hours about their struggle for the things she took for granted—food, water, protection from the elements and safety from predators. And he’d definitely had a difficult time because his clothing appeared as if he’d walked through a shredder.

As for his injuries, he’d made them sound as if they were nothing more than minor inconveniences when they were visible proof of his harrowing ordeal. Cracked ribs and a dislocated shoulder were painful under ideal conditions and to “slide down a hill and bump into a few rocks” before they’d healed would have been agony. If the truth were known, it wouldn’t surprise her to learn that his so-called “hill” could probably compete with Pikes Peak and his “few rocks” had probably been boulders.

She wanted to throttle him for acting as if his stint in the jungle had been as easy and effortless as a Sunday stroll through the city park. Making a big deal out of bumps and bruises, gashes and cracked bones went against his macho grain, even if he was speaking to a physician who recognized what it took to create this degree of damage. There were two females in the room, too, and it wouldn’t do to appear weak in front of them. In essence, it

was a guy thing—part of that caveman, show-the-woman-who’s-strongest mentality.

It was also a Gabe thing. He’d always tried his best to insulate her from the harsh realities of life instead of treating her as a partner in the challenges they faced—and they’d had a number of personal difficulties and tragedies to contend with. Obviously, he still pictured her as being too weak to face the truth. While some women might appreciate being treated like a Fabergé egg, she wasn’t one of them. After ten years of marriage, Gabe should have learned that, but he hadn’t.

As soon as she recognized the familiar resentment building inside her, she wondered why her former frustrations were rearing their heads again. She should be elated Gabe was home safe and more or less sound and not dredging up old complaints. Her only excuse was that she could finally give herself permission to be angry about his decision to take this flight in the first place.

Yet, however one might psychoanalyze her reaction, Gabe’s return didn’t wipe their slate of problems clean. They still had to be addressed in some manner and the easiest and most expedient method was to get his signature on those divorce documents, wherever they currently were.

Realizing her fingers were still entwined with his, she pulled her hand free.

Jeff’s gaze was speculative as he glanced at her. He’d clearly noticed how her touch had lingered longer than was actually necessary, but he didn’t comment. Instead, he finished his exam

and tucked his stethoscope back into his pocket with deliberate movements.

“All things considered,” he said, “you’re not in too bad a shape.” He paused ever so slightly as his gaze slid sideways to Leah and then back to Gabe. “You’re a lucky fellow in more ways than one.”

“You don’t have to remind me,” Gabe answered fervently.

A meaningful note in his tone made Leah question if the two men were discussing Gabe’s health or if this was some sort of private male discussion, but before she could wade into the conversation, Jeff fell back into his professional mode.

“You’ve probably diagnosed yourself, but I want X-rays to check your ribs and your arm as well as basic bloodwork and cultures. To be honest, I’m not happy with the way your leg is healing, so prepare yourself for a few rounds of IV antibiotics.” He glanced at Leah. “I want those started immediately.”

Considering the state of Gabe’s leg, Jeff’s treatment plan was not only sound, it was necessary to stop the infection from turning septic. Without a word, she began pulling the appropriate IV supplies from the cabinet.

Gabe sighed audibly, as if he also knew the IV was necessary but wasn’t particularly happy about it. “I’d expected as much.”

“I’m glad we agree. After I see the films and lab results, we’ll talk again.”

“Any chance I can shower in the doctors’ lounge before you run me through the testing mill?” Gabe’s expression was hopeful.

He might be the full-time CEO of the Montgomery Medical Foundation but he was also a member of the surgical staff at Spring Valley Memorial and, as such, he filled in a few nights a month and the occasional weekend when the regular surgeons took time off.

“Of course,” Jeff agreed, “but if we delay your tests, we also delay your treatment. So let’s do the cultures, blood samples and X-rays first, then by the time you finish your shower, we’ll have answers and can decide what comes next.”

Knowing how Gabe hated to compromise, Leah expected him to argue, but to her surprise, he didn’t. “Okay. If it means I’ll get out of here sooner, we’ll do it your way.”

Jeff grinned. “I’m glad to hear it. While you’re stuck in Radiology, I’ll see about arranging for first-class bathroom accommodations.” He turned to Leah. “He’s all yours for now.”

It was a throw-away statement, a figure of speech, but she wondered if his qualifier referred to tending Gabe’s injuries or if it had more personal overtones. Because it was far easier to fall back on the comforting routine of following a doctor’s orders, she did so, determined to leave the soul-searching for later when her mind had stopped reeling.

Thank goodness experience allowed her to perform her tasks without thinking as she still considered Gabe’s return as nothing short of miraculous. Thankfully, and perhaps Jeff had alerted Marge to the situation, Jane came in to help.

“Stay,” Gabe said when Leah tried to escape, and so she did,

but by the time he'd finished the lab draws and X-rays, his face was white and pinched with pain. Clearly, he was in desperate need of rest.

"I think the shower should wait," she began.

His jaw squared. "No way."

"Not even until you've napped a few hours?"

"Not even then."

Seeing how unsteady he was on his feet, she offered, "How about a sponge bath instead?"

His eyes lit with an unholy gleam before it faded. "As intriguing as that sounds, I want a shower that lasts until I empty the hot water tanks. I *need* a shower because I'm tired of smelling myself."

"You smell fresher than some patients who've walked through our doors," she replied.

"Too bad. I know what I want and I want water. Gallons and gallons of it."

"But you can hardly—"

His gaze was determined. "Trust me. I can and *will* do whatever I have to."

She wanted him to be reasonable and take her advice, but if he'd found the fortitude to survive the jungle, he'd find the energy reserves to shower. However, as both his nurse and his wife, she'd watch to ensure he didn't over-extend himself.

"You always were stubborn," she remarked.

He nodded. "I'll take that as a compliment."

“Well, hang tight while I see what I can arrange.”

After a short consultation in the hallway where she couldn’t speak privately to Jeff because Jane was part of their group, Leah wheeled Gabe to the nearby med-surg wing and into a patient room. She expected him to protest at the obvious implication, but he was too intent on his prize and didn’t.

While he brushed his teeth with the spare toiletry kit she’d commandeered from their supply cabinet, she located towels and soap so he could finally indulge in his much-wanted and much-needed shower in the wheelchair-accessible bathroom.

After removing his splint—the X-ray had shown the bones in his arm and shoulder weren’t broken—she covered his IV site with plastic so it wouldn’t get wet.

“I’ll be out here if you need me,” she told him. “Be careful with your leg and when you’re finished, I’ll dress it.”

While he hobbled into the shower, she turned down his bed and double-checked the medications that Jane had delivered. When she had everything in place except for her patient, she returned to the bathroom and stood in the doorway.

“How are you doing in there?” She raised her voice over the rushing water, noting he’d had at least a seven-minute shower.

“Fine.” A groan came from behind the curtain.

That didn’t sound good. Instantly worried, she straightened, ready to invade his privacy. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah. God, this feels so good.”

The awe in his voice reminded her of other times when he’d

said the same, under more intimate circumstances. She quickly stuffed those thoughts inside her mental box labeled “to be opened at a later date”. “I’m sure it does, but Jeff wants those antibiotics started ASAP.”

“Just a few more minutes.”

“The shower will still be here, waiting for you, tomorrow,” she coaxed.

“I know, but five more minutes. Please.”

It seemed cruel to deny him this simple pleasure when those extra minutes probably wouldn’t affect his treatment outcome. “Okay, but I’m timing you.”

“You’re the boss.”

If that were only true.

“I’d get done faster if you scrubbed my back for me,” he added.

He sounded so hopeful and so like the old Gabe—the Gabe before their lives had drifted apart—that she flashed back to those happier times when they *had* shared a shower. The memory of the subsequent lovemaking burst into her head, but it was more than simple recall. She replayed how it had *felt*—from the sensation of his rough skin against hers, the tickle of his breath and his lips on sensitive areas, his clean, sandalwood scent teasing her nose.

His suggestion was so very tempting ... especially when she reflected on their stolen moments during the early days of their relationship. In his position as a surgical resident and hers as

a newly minted ED nurse, as long as a deadbolt guarded their privacy, they'd been happy.

Unfortunately, they didn't have a locked door and Gabe had become a celebrity, which meant privacy was impossible. Although those details didn't present an insurmountable problem, making love at this point implied that their personal life was fine and dandy.

And it wasn't.

"Not a good idea," she pointed out.

"Why not?"

"You mean, other than that you're barely able to stand?"

"Yeah."

"This place will be like Grand Central Station before long," she reminded him. "Everyone wants to drop by and give you a personal welcome."

"They can wait. Besides, people will understand if we have a quiet, intimate reunion. They're probably expecting it, which means no one will interrupt us unless there's a fire."

The sad fact was he was probably right. Most people knew they were separated, but no one, other than Jane, knew the D-word had been floated between them. Everyone loved a happy ending, which meant everyone would speculate—if not hope—that Gabe's return would be the turning point in their relationship. Perhaps under other circumstances, it would have been, but their differences were more deep-seated than a conversation or a few promises could fix.

“They can expect all they want, but it isn’t going to happen.”

His sigh was audible. “I suppose not, but I really would like you to wash my back. I can’t reach.”

Instantly, she felt ashamed for not realizing how his bruised ribs and stiff shoulder made his request completely valid. Irritated at herself for jumping to the wrong conclusion, she shoved the curtain aside to see her dripping husband struggling to touch those hard-to-reach places.

“Turn around,” she ordered, determined to handle her task with clinical detachment. Yet, as she ignored the spray of water on her scrub suit to run a soapy washcloth down his spine and over the lean muscles of his back before moving around to his front, her concern over what he’d endured grew. This wasn’t the body of the man she’d last seen a month ago. Oh, the birthmark in the small of his back was the same, as was the general shape of his torso, but while he’d once reminded her of a lean mountain lion with rock-hard muscles and sinew, now he resembled a starving wolf.

“If you keep that up,” he said dryly, “our private reunion will be extremely one-sided.”

Realizing she’d come dangerously close to an area of his body where she hadn’t intended to go, she froze.

“Although,” he added softly, “there’s always later.”

The promise in his voice sent an unexpected tingle through her body but, then, a mere glance, a simple touch, or a softly spoken word from Gabe had always carried enough power to

melt her into a puddle. What truly surprised her was how she could respond so easily in spite of the issues that had driven them apart. Was she so starved for attention and affection that when he showered her with both, she would greedily accept it?

Disliking what her response suggested, she dropped the washcloth over the handrail. "Rinse off. I'll be waiting." Suddenly realizing what she'd said, she clarified. "Outside. I'll be waiting *outside*."

As he laughed, she flung the curtain closed and counted to twenty so Gabe could finish and she could recover her composure.

"Time's up," she called.

He didn't respond.

"Gabe?" she repeated. "Your time is up."

Still no answer.

"Gabe?" Although she hadn't heard a thump or other worrisome noise, his silence raised her concern. She flung back the curtain once again to find him leaning against the tiled wall, his eyes closed, his dark hair dripping.

"I knew it," she scolded as she cranked the taps until the water stopped. "You've stayed in here too long. You're about to fall on your face."

"Maybe, but being clean would be worth it."

CHAPTER THREE

GABE hated feeling weak. For a man whose body had never failed him before, it was a humbling experience to be at less than peak condition. However, if his injuries convinced Leah to give him another chance, he wouldn't complain too loudly.

Although, in spite of his aches and pains, he'd been relieved to discover one part of his body still worked quite well. If he hadn't stopped her from toweling him off like a child, he would have needed a second shower—an ice-cold one.

"I don't suppose I can wear a scrub suit instead of that," he said, eyeing the hospital gown she held out.

"We'd never be able to take care of your leg if you were wearing trousers."

"I could wear a pair of athletic shorts."

"You could," she agreed, "but a pair isn't available at the moment. You're stuck with this for now."

"You could cut off the legs and turn the pants into shorts," he coaxed.

"If you were going to stay a few days, I would, but I suspect you're not, so I won't. Now, stop arguing." She tied the string at the back of his neck then guided him to the nearby bed.

He sank gratefully onto the mattress before he rubbed his face. "Did you bring a razor?"

"Not this trip. Count your blessings for the toothbrush I found.

Would you like to sit or lie down?"

"Sit."

She immediately adjusted the bed to accommodate his wishes then pulled the sheet over his good leg, leaving his injured extremity uncovered while she fluffed his pillows. "We'll tackle the beard later. You've done enough for the moment."

He hated to admit she was right, but although his spirit was willing, his flesh was weak. He'd been functioning on adrenalin for too long. Now that he'd enjoyed a hot shower, although a much shorter one than he would have liked, he'd crash soon. With any luck, after a rejuvenating nap, his IV would have run its course and he could convince Leah to drive him home, where he'd deal with the proverbial elephant in the room.

"Maybe," he conceded, fighting to keep his eyes open. "But the beard has to go. It itches."

"We'll get to it," she promised, "but first things first." She reattached his IV tubing to the port just above his wrist before he recognized his surroundings.

Suspicion flared. Patients weren't shown to a regular room if they were leaving the hospital in a few hours. "What am I doing here?"

"Jeff ordered IV fluids and antibiotics. Remember?"

"I know that," he snapped. "Why am I *here*, instead of back in Emergency?"

Jeff strolled in at that moment, carrying films and a fistful of paper. "You're here, Gabe, because I'm admitting you for

observation.”

“I don’t need observing. I’m fi—”

Jeff held up his hands. “Yes, you’re fine,” he said in a placating tone, “but you could be better and that’s what we’re going to do—make you better. I showed your X-rays to Smithson in Orthopedics and he agrees with me. You suffered a severe sprain to your wrist when you dislocated your shoulder. According to him, your shoulder is okay but he recommends a wrist brace for a few weeks.” He peered over his reading glass with a warning glare, “However, he still wants you to take things easy, so don’t lift anything heavier than a pen for a while.”

Gabe took the films to see for himself. “Fair enough.”

“As for your ribs,” Jeff continued, “they’ll get better on their own, provided you slow down and rest. But you already know that.”

Jeff’s advice fell in line with Gabe’s plans, as he’d hoped it would.

“My main concern,” Jeff continued, “is infection and I want to hit those bugs hard.” He glanced at the IV pole. “I see your antibiotics are running.”

“Thanks to my ever-efficient nurses,” Gabe quipped.

“I’m glad you agree because you’re going to be at their tender mercy for a few days.”

His jaw squared as he shook his head. “No can do. I’m going home.”

Jeff shook his head. “Not a good idea, buddy.”

“Good idea or not, I’m sleeping in my own bed tonight. I can either do it with your permission or I’ll check myself out AMA.” Gabe hated to play the against-medical-advice card against a colleague, but he was *home*, dammit, and he wasn’t going to postpone his heart-to-heart with Leah another day. He had too much to say and he couldn’t say any of it here where walls were paper-thin and interruptions were commonplace.

“I can’t give you my blessing to leave in a few hours.” Jeff emphasized his statement with a brisk shake of his head. “I honestly can’t.”

“Are you keeping Theresa and Jack?” Gabe demanded.

“No, but, unlike a certain person, they only need good food and rest to recover from their experience,” Jeff said wryly, “not high-powered antibiotics.”

“If the IV is stopping you, I can handle it. Or Leah can do the honors. Just give her the supplies and we’ll take it from there.” Gabe heard her muffled gasp, but ignored it to fix his gaze on his doctor.

Jeff pursed his mouth as his eyes darted between Leah and Gabe. “She could,” he finally agreed, “but you know the dangers of septicemia as well as I do. You belong here where we can monitor you.” He held up his hands to forestall his objections. “At least until the lab gives me preliminary culture results.”

“Sorry. I’ll stay a few hours to finish this IV, but I’m going home tonight.”

After muttering something about physicians being terrible

patients, Jeff turned to Leah. “Talk some sense into him, will you?”

She shrugged. “Sorry, but you’re on your own. If he won’t listen to you, he certainly won’t listen to me.”

Her matter-of-fact tone surprised Gabe. Did she really believe that he didn’t value her opinion? And yet, in hindsight, he could understand how she might feel that way. After they’d lost their son and their dreams of having a child of their own, he’d wanted to do *something* to make things right again. When the opportunity to adopt a baby had literally fallen into his lap, he’d gone full-steam ahead over her halfhearted objections when he should have allowed Leah—and himself—more time to deal with their first loss. In the end, they’d had *two* losses to cope with and clearly hadn’t done well with either.

Regardless, he’d had weeks to reflect on their relationship and if he wanted to prove to her that he was giving his marriage and her opinions top priority, then this was his opportunity.

“I’m listening now,” he pointed out, avoiding references to the past in order to avoid a potential argument. “What do *you* suggest I do?”

“Follow your doctor’s instructions,” she said bluntly. “Jeff isn’t being unreasonable.”

No, Jeff wasn’t, but Gabe hated being tethered to a hospital bed when Leah was free to go about her business. If his mental radar was working correctly, her “business” probably involved his own physician.

“You also,” she continued, “aren’t in a position to fend for yourself. Taking a shower completely wore you out. How will you function on your own?”

“I’ll manage,” he said, unwilling to spring his plan on her just yet.

Now she looked exasperated. “Fine. Do whatever you want, regardless of what your doctor or anyone else suggests. Frankly, with your attitude, I’m surprised you bothered coming to the hospital at all for medical attention.”

Her comment struck home as he realized she was right. He *had* gotten to the point where he assessed a situation and made a decision without asking for advice or input, and if any was given contrary to his opinion, he didn’t follow it.

The question was, had he always been that way? He truly didn’t think so. At one time he hadn’t been able to wait to share everything in his day with her and he hadn’t made any plans without consulting her first, but now that he thought about it, that aspect of their life had changed after they’d lost both babies. Granted, the second child hadn’t died, but when the birth mother had taken her daughter home instead of putting her in their care, it had felt the same.

Conversation had dwindled when she’d been grieving and although he’d tried to get his feelings out in the open, he’d soon given up. Leah’s sorrow had been so overwhelming he hadn’t wanted to burden her with his own pain, so he’d bottled his emotions and carried on.

Instead of coping together, they'd coped separately. He'd focused on his job and expanding the foundation's services while she'd flung herself first into a remodeling project and then into her job at the hospital. Eventually, their diverging interests had allowed them to drift apart until their marriage had reached breaking point.

He should have done things differently but he hadn't. Fate, however, had given him another chance and he was determined to make the most of it. The first step, however, was to prove that he *was* listening and valuing her opinion, even if her opinion conflicted with his own wishes.

"If you want me to stay, then I'll stay, but only on an outpatient basis until tomorrow morning," he qualified.

"I can live with that," Jeff immediately agreed, as if he realized this compromise wouldn't remain on the table for long.

Gabe continued, "And only if Leah is my nurse. My private nurse."

Leah's jaw dropped, plainly surprised he'd included her as part of his conditional surrender. A moment later, her expression cleared. "I cover the ED, not this ward," she pointed out, somewhat smugly.

He steadily met his colleague's gaze. "Jeff?"

The other physician pressed his lips together, then nodded. "If she's what it will take to keep you in that bed, I'll work it out," he promised.

Leah's jaw immediately closed with a decided snap, her eyes

flashing fire. It was a small victory and one that she clearly didn't support, so Gabe forced himself not to smile. As compromises went, he'd gained more than he'd expected, although it was less than he'd wanted. What really felt good, though, was finally seeing Leah with her normal spark instead of appearing as if all the life had been sucked out of her.

"Fine," she said a trifle waspishly, "but I'm adding a condition, too. You'll stay until he releases you."

"Okay, but he *will* release me tomorrow morning." He glanced at his colleague. "Won't you, Jeff?"

Jeff appeared more interested in the tug-of-war between Leah and Gabe than in Gabe's capitulation. "If nothing horrible shows up on your cultures and you don't spike any fevers, then you have my word you'll be out of here in twenty-four hours."

Gabe leaned his head against the pillows, too exhausted to complain about how their final agreement had as many exemptions as a bill before Congress. He'd face those scenarios when and if he had to. "I want to know everything the minute you do."

"I wouldn't expect otherwise." Jeff addressed Leah. "In the meantime, good luck with your patient."

Gabe tried not to be jealous of how easily she smiled at his colleague—his divorced, *single* colleague—the same divorced colleague who'd probably been more than happy to comfort Leah during the past year, especially during the month after he'd been presumed dead. However, jealousy was a good thing, he decided,

because it gave him added incentive to win her back again.

“Not to worry,” she said airily. “If he misbehaves, I have a sedative with his name on it.”

“I’d rather eat a steak, medium-well, with baked potato,” Gabe said as he eyed the tray of food Leah had organized from the unit’s kitchenette.

A steaming bowl of chicken broth with assorted crackers, strawberry and lime gelatin squares, and chocolate pudding were the result of her raid.

“Maybe you’ll get those for dinner tonight,” Leah said lightly, knowing he wouldn’t. As much as she’d like to reverse his weight loss as quickly as possible, his digestive system needed to acclimate first. “This is just a snack until then.”

“There’s nothing here for a man to sink his teeth into.”

She ignored his grumbling as she studied his skin tone with clinical detachment. Now that he’d scraped off his beard with the disposable razor she’d provided, he was paler than she’d like. His face, although still handsome with his straight nose and strong chin, was thinner and his cheekbones more pronounced than the last time she’d seen him.

“For good reason,” she answered. “You hardly have the strength to chew.”

“I can find the energy if it’s worth my while,” he said. “A cheeseburger, fries and a milkshake would—”

“Come up as fast as they went down. Would you rather hug the toilet for a few hours? Now, just try this,” she wheedled.

“If your system can handle this without any problems, I’ll personally deliver a greasy cheeseburger from your favorite fast-food restaurant later on.”

His sigh was loud enough to be heard in the hallway, but he picked up a package of crackers. After struggling unsuccessfully to tear the Cellophane, he finally gave up and tossed the packet of crumbs onto the tray in disgust.

“Would you like me to open it?” she asked, reaching for the mangled package.

Hating to admit his weakness, he grimaced. “I changed my mind. A fellow can do that, can’t he?”

“Of course you can,” she soothed, aware of the hit the tiny packet had leveled against his dignity. It was also clear that her time in the kitchen would be wasted if she didn’t take matters into her own hands, so she picked up the spoon and began feeding him soup.

“I can do this myself,” he protested between swallows.

She doubted it. He was clearly exhausted from the poking and prodding, the round of X-rays and his stint in the shower, but for some reason he refused to sleep. Maybe a full stomach would work for him as well as it did for babies.

“I know,” she agreed, “but I’m trying to earn my pay. I am your nurse, remember?”

It still rankled how Jeff had marched into the nursing vice president’s office and when he’d come out again, it was official. Leah was assigned to one patient and one patient only—Gabriel

Montgomery.

“This is all so pointless,” she had railed at the emergency physician. “Gabe doesn’t need nursing care. He only needs someone to fetch and carry and help him in and out of bed, and anyone can do that. He doesn’t need me and I can’t believe you agreed to this. We have a date coming up!”

“I did it *because* of our date,” Jeff had told her kindly. “You’ve been riding an emotional roller coaster for the past few weeks. Now that he’s back, you need to rethink exactly what you want —”

“I *know* what I want,” she’d interrupted.

“You *think* you know what you want,” he’d corrected, “but having Gabe return from the dead changes everything.”

“It doesn’t,” she’d insisted, trying to convince herself as much as him.

Jeff had smiled benevolently at her. “It may not, but you owe it to yourself, and to me, to be absolutely certain of what you’re looking for in a relationship. But I’ll be honest,” he’d said as he’d squeezed her shoulder. “As much as I respect Gabe, I won’t be rooting for him.”

And so she’d accepted the inevitable, even though she believed her skills were being wasted and that she knew her own mind when it came to her broken marriage.

Yet, after it had taken all of her concentration to reel her thoughts in far enough to figure out the microwave controls to heat his broth, she had to admit that perhaps she *shouldn’t* be

working in the ED right now. While she felt guilty over leaving her department short-handed, she shuddered to think of how ineffective she'd be in handling a trauma victim when a life hung in the balance. To her utter disgust, feeding Gabe seemed to be the only task her jumbled mind could handle.

"Are you ready to try the gelatin?" she asked, spooning a red cube into his mouth before he could refuse.

He swallowed. "Do you work with Jeff often?"

"Usually. Like I said, I normally work in Emergency."

His brow furrowed. "Don't PRN nurses work everywhere in the hospital?"

She spooned another bite into his mouth. "Some do, some don't. I haven't since I completed my advanced trauma nursing coursework six months ago."

His brow furrowed. "I didn't know that."

"You didn't notice the nursing textbooks on the coffee table before I moved out?"

"I did, but I thought you were boning up because you'd accepted this relief position."

"I was. Then I decided to take the next step." She hesitated, realizing that while he could have asked, she also should have volunteered the information. Now she wondered if the reason she hadn't said anything had been because she'd wanted *him* to notice and express an interest in what she was doing. And when he hadn't, she'd counted it as a strike against him.

"I should have told you," she said.

He shrugged. "We both had problems with communication, didn't we?"

At least he wasn't putting the burden all on her and if he could be magnanimous, so could she. "To be fair," she began slowly, "some of your staff had quit and you were trying to take up the slack. You had larger problems than wondering why textbooks had appeared on the table. More gelatin?"

He shook his head, his gaze intent. "Are you working full time?"

"Officially, no. Unofficially, yes, but I'm not reaping the benefits," she said ruefully. "However, the director of nursing told me yesterday that the next available position will be mine." She shoved another gelatin cube in his mouth.

He chewed, swallowed, then surprised her with his next question. "How was your cousin's wedding?"

She froze. "You knew about Angela's wedding?"

"She sent me an invitation. I would have gone, but I didn't want to make the day awkward for you. Things will be different, though, for your next family function."

Different? "Excuse me?"

"I want us to save our marriage, Leah. To fix what went wrong with our relationship."

At one time those were words she'd dreamt he would say, but too much time had passed. He was asking for the impossible.

"I know you went through a traumatic experience," she said slowly, "and as a result you want to right the perceived wrongs in

your life as part of whatever foxhole conversion you experienced, but what happened to us—to me—can't be fixed."

"It can," he insisted.

"Not if our relationship is tied to my medical history."

"It isn't."

She raised an eyebrow because, to her, it was. "Oh?"

"It never was."

She eyed him carefully. "Maybe I should have Jeff order a CT scan because I think you suffered a concussion. In case you've forgotten, our relationship began its downhill slope when I lost Andrew and any chance for more children."

"It may have, but we can turn our life around. Children or not, we can make our marriage into whatever we want it to be."

His fierce determination was almost contagious, but his rhetoric didn't change one important fact. This man, who should have gone into pediatrics because he loved little people, was destined to remain childless because she refused to risk another adoptive mother changing her mind in the final hour. And he'd made it quite plain over the years that his biggest wish was to fill his house with children—children she couldn't give him, whether they were his or someone else's.

Neither did his sincerity change the fact that his work at the foundation was probably far more rewarding than simply coming home to her each night. And, yes, she could join him on his trips as she had when they were first married and she'd rearranged her hospital schedule, but deep down she was a homebody while he

was a traveler. Eventually, the difference would become an issue again.

“For what it’s worth, I *am* glad you’re back,” she said simply, “but now isn’t the time to discuss what went wrong in our life.” She rose to push his bedside table away. “Your only concern should be to give yourself time to heal.”

He frowned, clearly not liking her response. “I can’t believe you’re giving up on us so easily.”

“To you, I’m giving up, but to me, I’m finally putting the past behind me. Which is what you should be doing, too.”

He paused. “How long have you been seeing Jeff?”

She froze, startled by his question. “Jeff? I’m not ... We haven’t ... We’re just friends,” she finished lamely, wondering how Gabe had drawn that particular conclusion when she’d been so careful to hide her burgeoning interest in the other man.

“But you’d like it to be more.”

“You’re guessing,” she countered, hating it that he could read her so well.

He shrugged. “I saw the way he looked at you. I only want to know what I’m up against.”

She didn’t know why she felt compelled to explain, but she did. “We went for a beer a few times with the rest of the ED crowd on a Friday night, but nothing more than that. You and I may have lived apart, but I still took my wedding vows seriously, which was why I was waiting to pursue a relationship with Jeff until after ...”

“After I signed the divorce papers?” he finished.

“Yes.”

“But once you heard my plane had crashed, you didn’t need them. Why didn’t you two take things to the next level right away?”

He sounded more curious than argumentative, so she answered as honestly as she could.

“If you must know, I wanted to wait until after the foundation’s annual fund-raiser. I’d already decided it would be my last one—and it seemed appropriate for our chapter to end there. Now that you’re back, there isn’t any point in waiting, is there?”

He paused. “Is that what you want? For me to sign your papers?”

Was that what she wanted? Perhaps if their differences weren’t irreconcilable, perhaps if they hadn’t grown apart, perhaps if Gabe treated their marriage as a partnership rather than a boss-employee relationship, she could risk giving him another chance, but she couldn’t.

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