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Romance™*

LYNNE MARSHALL

The Christmas
Baby Bump



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Lynne Marshall



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Dear Reader

The Christmas season is a special time of year. Ideally, it is a time of happiness and goodwill towards others. With that in mind, I was hesitant to give my lovely Stephanie Bennett such a difficult and haunting past to overcome. As for carefree Phil Hansen—well, it just seemed cruel to put him through such an emotional rollercoaster by simultaneously dropping two not-so-

perfect people into his life. However...I'm a writer, and it is my job to make life miserable for my characters, so with my editor's blessing I laid it on thick in **THE CHRISTMAS BABY BUMP**.

Stephanie needs a change of scenery for the holidays, and Phil is coerced into filling in as a caregiver for his preschool-aged half-brother. Unbeknownst to both Stephanie and Phil, these two story elements are the perfect ingredients for a Christmas miracle in the making.

Stephanie has an issue she must face and deal with before she can ever hope to find peace of mind and her fair share of happiness. Fortunately Phil, though at first seeming the least likely, is just the man to help her conquer her past.

I hope you enjoy this Santa Barbara Christmas story, the wrap-up book for my MidCoast medical trilogy: **THE BOSS AND NURSE ALBRIGHT**, **THE HEART DOCTOR AND THE BABY** and **THE CHRISTMAS BABY BUMP**. I've grown to love my imaginary friends at the clinic, and I'm so happy I could help them all find their happy-ever-afters.

With warm holiday wishes coming your way

Lynne

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About the Author

LYNNE MARSHALL has been a Registered Nurse in a large California hospital for twenty-five years. She has now taken the leap to writing full time, but still volunteers at her local community hospital. After writing the book of her heart in 2000, she discovered the wonderful world of Mills & Boon[®] Medical[™] Romance, where she feels the freedom to write the stories she loves. She is happily married, has two fantastic grown children, and a socially challenged rescued dog. Besides her passion for writing Medical Romance, she loves to travel and read. Thanks to the family dog, she takes long walks every day! To find out more about Lynne, please visit her website www.lynnemarshallweb.com

Special thanks to Sally Williamson for her constant support and for keeping me on the right path with this story.

Chapter One

MONDAY morning, Stephanie opened the door of the cream-colored Victorian mansion and headed toward the reception desk. Though the house had been turned into a medical clinic, they'd kept the turn-of-the-century charm. Hardwood floors, tray ceilings, crown molding, wall sconces, even a chandelier made everything feel special. She could get used to showing up for work here.

A man with longish dark blond hair in a suit chatted with not one but two nurses at the receptionist's desk. Nothing short of adoration gleamed from the women's eyes. He looked typical trendy Santa Barbaran—businessman by day in a tailored suit and carefully chosen shirt/tie combo, outdoorsman on the weekends by the tone of his tan. Not bad, if you liked the type.

“Of course I'll help you out, Dr. Hansen,” one of the young and attractive nurses gushed.

“Great.” He held a clipboard. “I'll pencil you in right here. Anyone else?”

Was he taking advantage of the staff? Unscrupulous.

“Sign me up for Saturday,” the middle-aged, magenta-haired receptionist chimed in.

Hmm.

“Got it.” As he scribbled in her name his gaze drifted upward. The warm and inviting smile that followed stopped Stephanie in

her tracks.

“May I help you?” he said.

Flustered, and not understanding why—okay, she knew exactly why, the guy was gorgeous—she cleared her throat. “I’m Stephanie Bennett. I have an appointment with Dr. Rogers.”

“Yes,” the older receptionist said, back to allbusiness. “He’s expecting you, Dr. Bennett. I’ll let him know you’re here.”

Before she could take a seat in the waiting room, the man with the bronze-toned suntan (even though it was November!) offered his hand. “I’m Phil Hansen, the pulmonologist of the group. If you’d like, I’ll take you up to Jason’s office.”

“It’s nice to meet you,” she said, out of habit.

A long-forgotten feeling twined through her center as she shook his hand. She stiffened. Tingles spiraled up her arm, taking her by surprise. No wonder the ladies were signing up on his clipboard. She stifled the need to fiddle with her hair.

“Oh, that’s fine,” she muttered. Then, finding her voice, said, “I’ll wait for him to...” Before she could finish her sentence and drop Phil’s hand, another man, a few years older but equally attractive with dark hair, appeared at the top of the stairs. Working with such handsome men, after being celibate for over three years, might prove challenging on the composure front. She’d imagined typical stodgy, bespectacled, aging doctors when she’d signed on as a locum. Not a couple of *Gentleman’s Quarterly* models.

“That would be Jason,” Dr. Hansen said, his smile narrowing

his bright blue eyes into crescents. Instead of letting go of her hand, he switched its position and walked her toward the stairs, as if they were old friends. "Here's Stephanie Bennett reporting for duty."

"Great. Come on up, Stephanie. After we talk, I'll show you around."

Phil brought her to the stairway complete with turned spindle rail, dropped her hand on the baluster, and patted it. "Thanks for stepping in," he said in all sincerity. "You'll like it here."

Considering the odd feeling fizzing through her veins, she was inclined to agree.

Stephanie saw the temporary stint in Santa Barbara as the perfect excuse for missing the holidays with her family in Palm Desert. Thanksgiving and Christmas always brought back memories too painful to bear. Not that those thoughts weren't constantly in her mind anyway, but the holidays emphasized *everything*.

The promise of going through the season surrounded by well-meaning loved ones who only managed to make her feel worse was what had driven her to take the new and temporary job. She'd only been dabbling in medicine since the incident that had ripped the life from her heart, shredded her confidence, and caused her marriage to disintegrate. A huge part of her had died that day three years ago.

The Midcoast Medical Clinic of Santa Barbara needed an OB/Gyn doctor for two months. It was the perfect opportunity and

timing to get away and maybe, if she was lucky, start to take back her life.

As she walked up the stairs, she overheard Phil. “Okay, I’ve got one more slot for Friday night.”

“I’ll take it,” the other nurse said, sounding excited.

Was he full of himself? That fizzy feeling evaporated.

Phil sat at his desk, skimming the latest *Pulmonary Physician’s Journal* unable to concentrate, wondering what in the hell he was supposed to do with a kid for ten days. But he couldn’t turn Roma or his father down.

His father had recently survived his second bout with Hodgkin’s lymphoma. His stepmother, Roma, who was closer to Phil’s age than his father’s, had called last night. She’d wanted to talk about her plans to take Carl to Maui for some rest and relaxation.

Reasonable enough, right?

No!

Just the two of them, she’d said. Had she lost her powers of reasoning by asking him to care for Robbie? The kid was a dynamo...with special needs.

Robbie, the surprise child for his sixty-five-year-old dad and his fortysomething stepmom, had Down syndrome. The four-year-old, who looked more like a pudgy toddler, always got excited when his “big brother”—make that half brother—came for a visit. Phil didn’t mind horsing around with the kid on visits, because he knew he’d go home later on, but taking on his

complete care was a whole different thing. Robbie's round face and classic Down syndrome features popped into his mind. The corner of Phil's mouth hitched into a smile. The kid called him Pill. Come on. No fair.

"And it's only for ten days. Your dad needs this trip and if we don't jump on booking it right now we won't get these amazing resort rates and airfares. Please, please, please!"

Roma knew how to surgically implant the guilt. His father's craggy sun-drenched face, with eyes the color of the ocean, the same eyes Phil had inherited, came to mind. The guy deserved a break.

How could he say no?

Those eyes had lost their sparkle when Phil's mother had left fifteen years ago, the week after he'd first been diagnosed with cancer. How could someone who was supposed to love you do such a thing? Phil had cut his Australian surfing tour short to come home and see his father through the ordeal. It had been a lifechanging event for both of them, and he'd never spoken to his mother again. Last he'd heard, she was living in Arizona.

After that, Phil couldn't fathom his dad pulling out of his slump. How could either of them ever trust a woman to stick around?

Carl Hansen had been granted a second chance with Roma, followed by a huge surprise pregnancy. *"Hell, if I wait around for you to settle down and have a grandchild I'll be too old to enjoy it. May as well have my own!"* his father had joked with Phil when

he'd first told him the news.

Carl and Roma had had a tough go when Robbie had been diagnosed with Down syndrome after amniocentesis, but they'd wanted him no matter what and hadn't regretted one moment since. Then, after fifteen years of remission, Carl had been hit with cancer again and, on top of being a new parent of a handicapped baby, he'd had to go through chemo. Carl and Roma were nothing less than an inspiration as far as Phil was concerned.

Ten days wasn't a lifetime. Anyone could survive ten days with a kid, right?

"We'll be home in time for Thanksgiving," Roma had said, "and I promise the best meal of your life." Hell, she'd had him at please, please, please.

He'd already started the sign-up sheet for babysitters and backup. Good thing he'd always managed to stay friends with his coworkers and ex-girlfriends—maybe he'd call in a few extra favors.

"You've already met René's replacement, Stephanie Bennett," Jason said, breaking into Phil's thoughts. His partner stood in his office doorway, and beside him the redhead. "She comes with a great endorsement from Eisenhower Medical Center."

All Phil's worries vanished for the time being as he took her in. Her gaze darted to Jason and back to him, her cheeks flushing pink.

Though noticeably uptight, she had possibilities...Hold it—toddler on board!

“Hi, again. Jason’s giving you the official tour, I see.” He stood behind his desk. “Let me know if there is ever anything you need, Dr. Bennett.”

Her delicate mouth, which sat appealingly beneath an upturned nose, tugged into a tentative smile. “Call me Stephanie,” she said, as she tucked the more-red-than-brown, shoulder-length hair behind an ear. “Please.”

Though she was saying all the right words, he sensed her standoffishness. He’d never had trouble making friends and acquaintances, especially with women, and sometimes had to remind himself that it didn’t come as easy for other people.

“Okay, Stephanie, welcome aboard.” He remembered how cool her hand was when he’d shook it, and an old saying came to mind, *Cold hands, warm heart*. It got him thinking about what kind of person she might be behind that cool exterior.

He engaged her sharp gaze, enjoying the little libido kick it gave him. A spark flashed in her butterscotchcolored eyes. Had she felt it too? “Oh, and call me Phil. My extension is 35, same as my age. If you ever need me, I’m right across the hall and I’ll be glad to help out.”

She nodded her thanks.

“Now let me show you your office,” Jason said to Stephanie, ushering her across the waiting room.

As quickly as she’d appeared, she left without looking back. That didn’t keep Phil from staring and giving a mental two-note whistle as she followed Jason.

Phil sat and leaned back in his chair, thinking about Stephanie in her copper-and-black patterned jacket, black slacks and the matching stylish lace-lined scoopneck top. He liked the way her hair was parted on the side and fell in large, loose waves over her cheek and across her shoulders. He liked the set of her jaw, more square than oval yet with a delicate chin. He liked the ivory color of her skin without a hint of the usual freckles of a redhead, and wondered if he might find a few on her nose if he got up close, really close. Just a sprinkling maybe—enough to wipe away that sleek image, enough to make her seem vulnerable beneath her obvious social armor.

And just as he was about to dream a little deeper, his intercom buzzed. It was his nurse. “Your dad’s on the phone,” she said.

The trip.

Robbie.

How in the hell was he supposed to impress Dr. Bombshell while babysitting his half brother?

Stephanie spent most of the day getting used to the Midcoast Medical OB/Gyn doctor René Munroe’s office, as well as the new setup. She’d held a minimeeting with her nurse, discussing how she liked to run her clinic and telling her exactly what she expected. She wanted to make this transition as smooth as possible, and stuck around later than she’d planned, logged in to the computer, reading patient charts for the next day’s appointments. For this stint, she’d concentrate on the gynecological portion of her license.

There had been one stipulation for her taking this job, and Jason Rogers had agreed to it. Though she'd take care of the pregnant patients, she wouldn't be delivering their babies. Fortunately, after perusing the patient files, none of Dr. Munroe's pregnant patients would be at term during her stay. And Jason had eased her concerns by mentioning that it would have been very hard to get her privileges at their local hospital anyway. She'd been in the process of picking up the pieces of her career, knew she could handle the clinical appointment portion, but no way was she ready to deliver a baby again. The thought of holding a tiny bundle of life in her arms sent her nearly over the edge.

Her stomach rumbled and in need of changing her thoughts, she packed up for the day. As she crossed the reception area, the front clinic door swung open and in rushed Phil Hansen with a little dark-haired boy tagging along beside him. The slant of the boy's eyes with epicanthic folds, and the flattened bridge of his nose, hinted at Down syndrome.

"Hold on, Robbie, I've got to make a call," Phil said, shutting off his beeper and reaching over the receptionist's desk to grab the phone.

Robbie smiled at her as only a child with no fear of strangers could. "Hi," he said.

"Hi, there." Her insides tightened and her lungs seemed to forget how to take in air, knowing her son, Justin, would have been close to Robbie's age...if he were still alive. She looked

away. Before her eyes could well up, she diverted her thoughts by eavesdropping on Phil's conversation.

"I'll be right there," he said, then hung up and blew out a breath. "Great. What the hell am I supposed to do now?" he mumbled.

She cringed that he cussed so easily around a child.

Phil's gaze found her. A look of desperation made his smooth, handsome features look strained. He glanced at Robbie and back to her. "I need a huge favor. I just got a call from the E.R. One of my patients inhaled his crown while the dentist was replacing it, and I need to do an emergency bronchoscopy to get it out." He dug his fingers into his hair. "Can you watch Robbie for me? I'll only be gone an hour or so."

What? Her, watch a child? "I can't..."

"I don't know what else to do." His blue eyes darkened, wildly darting around the room.

He was obviously in a bind, but didn't he have a child-care provider?

She glanced at the boy, who was oblivious to Phil's predicament, happily grinning at a picture of a goldfish on the wall.

"Pish!" he said pointing, as if discovering gold.

"I'm really in a bind here," Phil pleaded. "The E.R. is overflowing and they need to get my patient taken care of and discharged. I can't very well plop Robbie down in the E.R. waiting room."

Oh, God, there it was, that lump of maternal instinct she'd pushed out of her mind for the past three years. It planted itself smack in the middle of her chest like an ice pick. She studied Phil, his blue eyes tinted with worry and desperation. She'd give the wrong impression if she refused to help out, and she'd come to Midcoast Medical to help. He'd seemed so sincere earlier when he'd offered his assistance anytime she needed it. A swirl of anxiety twisted her in its clutch as she said, "Okay."

"You'll do it?" He looked stunned, as if he'd just witnessed a miracle.

Well, he had. Never in a million years would she have volunteered to do this, but as he was in such a bind...

She nodded, and her throat closed up.

"Thank you!" He grabbed her arms and kissed her cheek, releasing her before she had a chance to react. "You're the best."

"What am I supposed to do?"

"Just watch him. I'll be back as soon as I can. Be a good boy for Stephanie, Robbie," he said before he disappeared out the door.

Why couldn't she have left earlier, like everyone else in the clinic? Dread trickled from the crown of her head all the way down to her toes. Her heart knocked against her ribs. She'd made a knee-jerk decision without thinking it through. She couldn't handle this. There went that swirl of panic again, making her knees weak and her hands tremble.

The boy looked at her with innocent eyes, licking his lips. "I'm hungwee."

She couldn't very well ignore the poor kid. "So am I, but I don't have a car seat for you, so we can't go anywhere."

She'd spoken too fast. Obviously, the boy didn't get her point. He held his tummy and rocked back and forth. "Hungweeeeee."

Oh, God, what should she do now? She scratched her head, aware that a fine line of perspiration had formed above her lip. He was hungry and she was petrified.

Think, Stephanie, think.

She snapped her fingers. The tour. Jason had taken her on a tour of the clinic that morning, and it had included the employee lounge. "Come on, let's check out the refrigerator."

Robbie reached up for her hand. Avoiding his gesture, she quickened her step and started for the hallway. "It's down here," she said, as he toddled behind, bouncing off his toes, trying to catch up.

She switched on lights as they made their way to the kitchen in the mansion-turned-clinic. "Let's see what we can dig up," she said, heading for the refrigerator, avoiding his eyes at all cost and focusing on the task. She had every intention of writing IOU notes for each and everything she found to share with Robbie.

Some impression she'd make on her first day, stealing food.

Heck, the fridge was nearly bare. Someone had trained the employees well about leaving food around to spoil and stink up the place. Fortunately there was a jar of peanut butter. She pulled out drawer after drawer, hoping to find some leftover restaurant-

packaged crackers. If the kid got impatient and cried, she'd freak out. Drawer three produced two packs of crackers and a third that was broken into fine pieces. Hopefully, Robbie wouldn't mind crumbs.

"You like peanut butter?"

"Yup," he said, already climbing up on the bench by the table. "I wike milk, too."

Stephanie lifted her brows. "Sorry, can't help you there." But, as all clinics must, they did keep small cartons of juice on hand for their diabetic patients. "Hey, how about some cranberry or orange juice?"

"Kay."

"Which kind?"

"Boaff."

"Okay. Whatever." Anything to keep the boy busy and happy. Anything to keep him from crying. She glanced at her watch. How long had Phil been gone? Ten minutes? She blew air through her lips. How would she survive an hour?

After their snack, she led him back to the waiting room, careful not to make physical contact, where a small flat-screen TV was wedged in the corner near the ceiling. She didn't have a clue what channels were available in this part of the state, but she needed to keep the boy distracted.

"What do you like to watch?"

"Cartoons!" he said, spinning in a circle of excitement.

She scrolled through the channels and found a cartoon that

was nowhere near appropriate for a child.

“That! That!” Robbie called out.

“Uh, that one isn’t funny. Let’s look for another one.” She prayed she could find something that wouldn’t shock the boy or teach him bad words. Her hand shook as she continued to flip through the channels. Ah, there it was, just what she’d hoped for, a show with brightly colored puppets with smiling faces and silly voices. Maybe the fist-size knot in her gut would let up now.

She sat on one of the waiting-room chairs, and Robbie invited himself onto her lap. Every muscle in her body stiffened. She couldn’t do this. Where was Phil?

His warm little back snuggled against her and when he laughed she could feel it rumble through his chest. She inhaled and smelled the familiar fragrance of children’s shampoo, almost bringing her to tears. Someone took good care of this little one. Was it Phil?

She couldn’t handle this. Before she jumped out of her skin, she lifted him with outstretched arms and carried him to another chair, closer to the TV.

“Here. This seat is better. You sit here.”

Fortunately, engrossed in the show, he didn’t pick up on her tension and sat contentedly staring at the TV.

It had been a long day. She was exhausted, and didn’t dare let her guard down. Robbie rubbed his eyes, yawning and soon falling asleep. She paced the waiting room, checked her watch every few seconds, and glanced at the boy as if he were a ticking

time bomb. Her throat was so tight, she could barely swallow.

Several minutes passed in this manner. Robbie rested his head on the arm of the chair, sound asleep. Stephanie hoped he'd stay that way until Phil returned.

A few minutes later, one of the puppets on the TV howled, and another joined in. It jolted her. Robbie stirred. His face screwed up. The noise had scared him.

Oh, God, what should she do now?

After a protracted silence, he let out a wail, the kind that used up his breath and left him quiet only long enough to inhale again. Then he let out an even louder wail.

"It's okay, Robbie. It was just the TV," she said from across the room, trying to console him without getting too close. She patted the air. "It was the show. That's all." She couldn't dare hold him. The thought of holding a child sent lightning bolts of fear through her. She never wanted to do it again.

Flashes of her baby crying, screaming, while she paced the floor, rooted her to the spot. Robbie cried until mucus ran from his nose, and he coughed and sputtered for air, but still she couldn't move.

It took every ounce of strength she had not to bolt out of the clinic.

Phil's patient had been set up and ready for him when he'd arrived in the nearby E.R. The dental crown had been easy to locate in the trachea at the opening of the right bronchus. He'd dislodged it using a rigid scope and forceps, and done a quick

check to make sure it hadn't damaged any lung tissue. He'd finished the procedure within ten minutes, leaving the patient to recover with the E.R. nurse.

He barreled through the clinic door, then came to an abrupt stop at the sight of Robbie screaming and Stephanie wild-eyed and pale across the room.

"What's going on?" he said.

She blinked and inhaled, as if coming to life from her statue state. "Thank God, you're back," she whispered.

"What happened?" He rushed to Robbie, picked him up and wiped his nose.

"I was 'cared,'" Robbie said, starting to cry again.

"Hey, it's okay, buddy, I'm here." Phil hugged his brother as anger overtook him. "What'd you do to him?" he asked, turning as Stephanie ran out the door. What the hell had happened? Confused, he glanced at Robbie. "Did she hurt you?"

"The cartoon monster 'cared me," he whimpered, before crying again.

Phil hugged him, relieved. "Are you hungry, buddy? You want to eat?"

The little guy nodded through his tears. "Kay," he said with a quiver.

What kind of woman would stand by and let a little kid cry like that? Had she been born without a heart? Phil didn't know what was up with the new doc, but he sure as hell planned to find out first thing tomorrow.

Chapter Two

STEPHANIE snuck in early the next day and lost herself in her patients all morning. She gave a routine physical gynecological examination and ordered labs on the first patient. With her first pregnant client, she measured fundal height and listened to fetal heart tones, discussed nutrition and recommended birthing classes. According to the chart measurements, the third patient's fibroid tumors had actually shrunk in size since her last visit. Stephanie received a high five when she gave the news.

Maybe, if she kept extra-busy, she wouldn't have to confront Phil.

Later, as she performed an initial obstetric examination, she noticed something unusual on the patient's cervix. A plush red and granular-looking area bled easily at her touch. "Have you been having any spotting?"

"No. Is something wrong?" the patient asked.

To be safe, and with concern for the pregnancy, she prepared to take a sample of cells for cytology. "There's a little area on your cervix I want to follow up on. It may be what we call an ectropion, which is an erosion of sorts and is perfectly benign." She left out the part about not wanting to take any chances. "The lab should get results for us within a week."

"What then?"

“If it’s negative, which it will most likely be, nothing, unless you have bleeding after sex or if you get frequent infections. Then we’d do something similar to cauterizing it. On the other hand, if the specimen shows abnormal cells, I’ll do a biopsy and follow up from there.”

“Will it hurt my baby?”

“An ectropion is nothing more than extra vascular tissue. You may have had it a long time, and the pregnancy has changed the shape of your cervix, making it visible.”

“But what if you have to do a biopsy?”

How must it feel to have a total stranger deliver such worrisome news? Stephanie inhaled and willed the expertise, professionalism and composure she’d need to help get her through the rest of the appointment. Maybe she shouldn’t have said a thing, but what if the test result came back abnormal and she had to drop a bomb? That wouldn’t be fair to the patient without a warning. She second-guessed herself and didn’t like the repercussions. All the excitement of being pregnant might become overshadowed with fear if she didn’t end the appointment on a positive note.

“This small area will most likely just be an irritation. It’s quite common. I’m being extra-careful because you’re pregnant, and a simple cervical sampling is safe during pregnancy. I’ll call with the results as soon as I get them. I promise.” She maintained steady eye contact and smiled, then chose a few pamphlets from the wall rack on what to expect when pregnant. “These are

filled with great information about your pregnancy. Read them carefully, and afterward, if you have any questions, please feel free to ask me.”

The woman’s furrowed brow eased just enough for Stephanie to notice. She wanted to hug her and promise everything would be all right, but that was out of her realm as a professional.

“Oh, I almost forgot to tell you your expected due date.” She gave the woman the date and saw a huge shift on her face from concern to sheer joy. Her smile felt like a hug, and Stephanie beamed back at her.

“This is a very exciting time, Mrs. Conroy. Enjoy each day,” she said, patting the patient’s hand.

The young woman accepted the pamphlets, nodded, and prepared to get down from the exam table, her face once again a mixture of expressions. “You’ll call as soon as you know anything, right?”

“I promise. You’re in great shape, and this pregnancy should go smoothly. A positive attitude is also important.”

Stephanie felt like a hypocrite reciting the words. Her spirits had plunged so low over the past three years she could barely remember what a positive attitude was. If she was going to expect this first-time mother to be upbeat, she should at least try it, too.

After the patient left, she gave herself a little pep talk as she washed her hands. *Just try to have a good time. Do something out of the ordinary. Start living again.*

A figure blocked the exam-room doorway, casting a shadow

over the mirror. “You mind telling me what happened last night?” Phil’s words were brusque without a hint of yesterday’s charm.

Adrenaline surged through her, and she went on the defensive. “I don’t do kids.” She turned slowly to hide her nerves, and grabbed a paper towel. “You didn’t give me a chance to tell you.”

“How hard is it to console a crying kid?”

Stephanie held up her hand and looked at Phil’s chin rather than into his eyes. “Harder than you could ever understand.” She tossed the paper towel into the trash bin and walked around him toward her office. “I’m sorry,” she whispered before she closed the door.

Phil scraped his jaw as he walked to his office. What in the hell was her problem? Last night, he’d found her practically huddled in the corner as if in a cage with a lion. It had taken half an hour to console Robbie. A bowl of vanilla ice cream with rainbow sprinkles had finally done the trick. Colorful sprinkles, as Robbie called them. For some dumb reason, Phil got a kick out of that.

What was up with Stephanie Bennett?

He didn’t have time to figure out the new doctor when he had more pressing things to do. Like make a schedule! He’d put so much energy into distracting Robbie last night, horsing around with him and watching TV, that he’d lost track of time, forgotten to bathe him and missed his usual bedtime medicine. A kid could survive a day without a bath, right?

His beeper went off. He checked the number. It was the

preschool. Hell, what had he forgotten now?

Stephanie arrived at work extra-early again the next morning, surprised to see someone had already made coffee in the clinic kitchen. She was about to pour herself a cup and sneak back to her office when Phil swept into the room. Her shoulders tensed as she hoped he didn't hold a grudge. Wishing she could disappear, she stayed on task.

"Good morning," he said, looking as if he'd just rolled out of bed, hair left however it had dried after his shower.

"Hi," she said. She didn't want to spend the next two months avoiding one of the clinic partners. Phil had been very nice at first, it seemed to come naturally to him, and, well, she needed him to forgive her. "Look, I'm sorry about the other night."

"Forget about it. Like you said, I didn't leave you much choice." He scrubbed his face as if trying to wake up. "Didn't realize you had a problem with kids." He glanced at her, curiosity in his eyes, but he left all his questions unspoken.

She had no intention of opening up to him, and hoped he'd let things lie. Maybe if she changed the topic?

She lifted the pot. "Can I pour you a cup, too?"

"Definitely. Robbie kept me up half the night with his coughing."

"Anything wrong?" She leaned against the counter.

"No virus. Just an annoying cough. He's had it since he was a baby." He accepted the proffered mug and took a quick swig. "Ahh."

“So what do you think it is, then?” Discussing medicine was always easy...and safe.

“I’ve been wondering if he might have tracheobronchomalacia, but Roma, his mom, doesn’t want him put through a bunch of tests to find out.”

“Is that your wife?”

He laughed. “No, my stepmother. Robbie’s my half brother.”

“Ahh.” She’d heard the scuttlebutt about him being quite the playboy, and she couldn’t tolerate a married guy flirting with the help.

A smile crossed his face. “Did you think he was my kid?”

She shrugged. What else was she supposed to think?

“I’m just watching Robbie while my dad and Roma are in Maui.” He stared at his coffee mug and ran his hand over his hair, deep in thought. “Yeah, so I want to do a bronchoscopy, but Roma is taking some persuading.”

“You think like a typical pulmonologist,” she said, spooning some sugar into her coffee. “Always the worst-case scenario.”

“And you don’t assume the worst for your patients?”

She shook her head. “I’m an obstetrician, remember? Good stuff.” *Except in her personal life.*

“You’ve got a point. But I’m not imagining this. He gets recurrent chest infections, he’s got a single-note wheeze, and at night he has this constant stridorous cough. I’ve just never had to sleep with him before.”

“You’re sleeping with him?” The thought of the gorgeous guy

with the sexy reputation sleeping with his little brother almost brought a smile to her lips.

“Yeah, well...” Did Phil look sheepish? “He was in a new house and a strange bed. You know the drill.”

She couldn’t hide her smile any longer. “That’s very sweet.”

He cleared his throat and stood a little straighter, a more macho pose. “More like survival. The kid cried until I promised to sleep with him.”

Heat worked up her neck. “That was probably my fault.”

He looked at her, and their eyes met for the briefest of moments. There was a real human being behind that ruggedly handsome face. Perhaps someone worth knowing.

“Let’s drop it. As far as I’m concerned, it never happened,” he said.

Maybe she shouldn’t try so hard to avoid him. Maybe he was a great guy she could enjoy. But insecurity, like well-worn shoes you just couldn’t part with, kept her from giving him a second thought.

“It’s not asthma,” he said, breaking her concentration. “If I knew for sure what it was, I could treat it. He may grow out of it, but he’s suffering right now. You think I look tired, you should see him. The thing is, he might only need something as simple as extra oxygen or, if necessary, CPAP.” He rubbed his chin.

All the talk about Robbie’s respiratory condition made her worry about him. Especially after she’d made the poor little guy cry until he was hoarse the other night. She sipped her coffee.

"Is there any less invasive procedure that can give the same diagnosis?" Keeping things technical made it easier to talk about the boy.

"Bronchography, but he's allergic to iodine, and I wouldn't want to expose him to the radiation at this age. And all I'd have to do is sedate him and slip a scope in his lungs to check things out. Five minutes, tops. I'll see how things go."

"So where is he?"

"He's in day care with his new best friend, Claire's daughter. Thankfully she took pity on me and chauffeured him today."

No sooner had he said it than Claire breezed through the door. The tall, slender, honey blonde had a mischievous glint in her eyes. "It's called carpooling."

"Ah, right." Phil said, then glanced at Stephanie. "Learning curve."

"Morning," Claire said.

Stephanie nodded. She'd met the clinic nurse practitioner the other day in a bright, welcoming office that came complete with aromatherapy and candles. She was Jason's wife, and seemed nice enough, but Stephanie hadn't let herself warm to anyone yet.

"So, Robbie didn't want to go with his group after driving to the preschool with Gina talking his ear off," Claire said. "Gina's my daughter," she said for Stephanie's benefit. "He looks so cute in his glasses. When did he get them?"

Phil grinned. "Beats me, but I found them in his things, so I talked him into wearing them."

“See, you’re a natural.”

He refilled half of his mug. “That’ll be the day. Two nights, and I’m already planning to scope him for that cough of his. How does Roma manage?”

“Like all mothers. We follow our instincts. Give it a try.” Claire winked at Stephanie, as if they belonged to the same secret sorority. If Claire only knew how wrong she was.

Stephanie took another swallow of coffee, wishing she could fade into the woodwork.

“Do you have any kids?” Claire asked.

“No.” Stephanie couldn’t say it fast enough. She stared deeply into her coffee, trying her best to compose herself. Phil watched her. “Well, I’d better prepare for my first patient. I have a lot to live up to, filling René’s shoes.” She reheated her coffee and started for the door, needing to get far away from all the talk of children. Maybe it had been a mistake coming here, but she’d committed herself for the next two months, and she’d live up to her promise.

“You’ll do fine,” Phil said with a reassuring smile. “I’ve got to take off, too. Need to make a run to the hospital this morning.”

She peeked over her shoulder. He stopped and poured the rest of his coffee into the sink, then glanced at Stephanie. Eye contact with Phil was the last thing she wanted, so she flicked her gaze toward her shoes. What must he think of her and her crazy behavior? But, more importantly, why did she care?

On her way out the door she passed the cardiologist, Jon

Becker, and nodded. He gave a stately nod then headed for the counter and the nearly empty coffee pot.

“Hey,” he said. “I made the coffee and now all I get is half a cup?”

Hunching her shoulders, Stephanie took a surreptitious sip from her mug and slunk down the hall. How many more bad first impressions was she going to make?

“Make a full pot next time,” she heard Claire say. “Quit being so task oriented,” she chided, more as if to a family member than a business colleague. “If you’re going to be a stay-at-home dad, you need to think like a nurturer.”

“Claire, all I wanted was a cup of coffee, not a feminist lecture on thinking for the group.”

Stephanie couldn’t resist it. A smile stretched across her lips, the first one in two days. Jon looked at least forty, and he was going to be a stay-at-home dad?

She’d been so isolated over the past three years, and had no idea how to have a simple conversation with coworkers. Maybe it was time to make an effort to be friendly, like every other normal human being.

A familiar negative tidal wave moved swiftly and blanketed her with doubt.

You don’t deserve to be alive. She could practically hear her ex-husband’s voice repeating the cutting words.

On her way back to the extended-stay hotel that night, Stephanie realized how famished she was. On a whim, she

stopped at a decent-looking Japanese restaurant for some takeout.

After placing her order, she sat primly on the edge of one of the sushi bar stools. She sipped green tea, and glanced around. Down the aisle, there was Robbie, grains of rice stuck to his beaming face like 3-D freckles. Across from the boy, with his back to her, sat Phil. A jolt of nerves cut through her as she hoped Robbie wouldn't recognize her. He might start crying again. How soon could she get her order and sneak out? Just as she thought it, as if sending a mental tap to his shoulder, Phil turned and saw her, flashed a look of surprise, then waved her over.

She couldn't very well pretend she hadn't seen him. She waved tentatively back then shook her head as Phil's ever-broadening gesture to join them was accompanied by a desperate look.

Be strong. He's the one babysitting. It's not your responsibility.

He stood, made an even more pronounced gesture with pleading eyes.

The guy begged, but she couldn't budge. She shook her head and mouthed, "Sorry." He might think she was the most unfriendly woman he'd ever met, but no way was she ready to sit down with them, as if they were some little happy family. No. She couldn't. It would be unbearable.

She avoided Phil's disappointed gaze by finishing her tea.

Fortunately, the sushi chef handed her the order. After she paid for the food, she grabbed the package, tossed Phil one last regretful look, and left.

Strike two.

Stephanie walked her last patient of the morning to the door. The lady hugged her as if they were old friends. One of the things she loved about her job was telling people they were pregnant.

“Have you got all the information you need?”

The young woman’s head bobbed.

“Any more questions?”

“I’m sure I’ve got a million of them, but I can’t think of anything right now except...I’m pregnant!” She clapped her hands.

Stephanie laughed. “Well, be sure to write all those questions down and we’ll go through them next time.”

“I will, Doctor. Thanks again.” The woman gave her a second hug.

Stephanie waved goodbye, and with a smile on her face watched as her patient floated on air when she left the clinic.

“I was about to accuse you of being heartless, but I’ve changed my mind now,” Phil chided.

Stephanie blushed. She knew exactly what he referred to.

“How are things going with Robbie?” her nurse asked Phil in passing.

“Just dandy,” he said, with a wry smile. “I finally figured out it’s a lot less messy to take him into the shower with me instead of bathing him in the tub by himself.”

The nurse giggled. “I can only imagine.”

Stephanie fought the image his description implanted in her

mind, obviously the same one Amy had. He seemed to be a nice guy. Everyone liked him. Adored him. The fact that he was billboard gorgeous, even with ever-darkening circles under his eyes, should be a plus, but it intimidated her. And after the way she'd treated him and Robbie, she didn't have a clue why he kept coming around.

"You doing anything for lunch today?" he asked.

Could she handle an entire lunch with this guy? "Why would you want to take me to lunch?"

"Why not? You're new in town, probably don't know your way around..."

His cell phone went off, saving her from answering him.

"Cripes!" he said. "Hold on a sec." He held up one finger and answered his phone.

After a brief conversation, he hung up with a dejected look. "Evidently Robbie got pushed by another kid and skinned his knees." He scratched his head, a look of bewilderment in his eyes. "He's crying and asking for me, so..."

"It's a big job being a stand-in dad, isn't it?"

"You're telling me. Hey, I have an idea, why don't we have lunch tomorrow?"

Swept up by the whole package that was Phil, including the part of fumbling stand-in dad, she answered without thinking. "Sure."

The next day, at noon, Stephanie found Phil standing at her door wearing another expression of chagrin. "I completely forgot

we have a staff meeting today.”

“Yeah, I just got the memo,” she said.

“You should come. We’ve got some big decisions to make.”

“I don’t have any authority here.”

“Oh, trust me, on this topic your input is equally as important as any of ours.”

“What are you talking about?”

“We have to decide how we’re going to decorate the yacht for the annual Christmas parade.”

“It’s not even Thanksgiving yet!”

“Big ideas take big planning. Besides, have you been by the Paseo? They’ve already put up a Christmas tree. Huge thing, too. I took Robbie to see it last night.”

His deadpan expression and quirky news made her blurt a laugh. When was the last time she’d done that? “Well, seeing I’ve never been on a yacht, not to mention the fact that I suck at decorating, I can’t see how I’ll bring a lot to the table.”

“Come anyway. You might enjoy it.”

I might enjoy it. Wasn’t that the pep talk she’d given herself the other day? Be open to new things? Start acting alive again?

“It’s a free lunch,” he enticed with lowered sunbleached brows.

“I’ll think about it.”

“If you change your mind, we’ll be in the lounge in ten minutes.”

“Okay.”

His smile started at those shocking blue eyes, traveled down

to his enticing mouth and wound up looking suspiciously like victory. The guy was one smooth operator.

After he left, Stephanie surprised herself further when she brushed her hair, plumped and puffed it into submission, then put on a new coat of lip gloss before heading to the back of the building for the meeting. She stopped at the double doors, fighting back the nervous wave waiting to pounce. The place was abuzz with activity. Claire called out various types of sandwiches she had stored in a huge shopping bag, and when someone claimed one, she tossed the securely wrapped package at them. One of the nurses passed out canned sodas or bottled water. Another gave a choice of fruit or cookie.

"I'll take both," she heard Phil say just before he noticed her at the door. "Hey, I saved you a seat." He patted the chair next to him. "What kind of sandwich do you want?"

"Turkey?"

"We need a turkey over here," he called to Claire.

Stephanie ducked as the lunch missile almost hit her head before she could sit. A smile worked its way from one side of her mouth to the other. These people might be crazy, but they were fun.

"Sorry!" Claire called out.

"No problem." She had to admit that she kind of liked this friendly chaos. It was distracting, and that was always a good thing. When her gaze settled on Phil, he was already watching her, a smile very similar to the one she'd seen in her office

lingering on his lips.

“I’m glad you decided to come.”

If he was a player, she got the distinct impression he was circling her. How in the world should she feel about that? Lunch was one thing, but what if he asked her out? Hearing how he struggled with Robbie had shown her another side of him. This guy had a heart beneath all that puffed-up male plumage, she’d bet her first paycheck on it. She wasn’t sure she could make the same claim for herself.

“Okay, everybody, let’s get going on this.” Jason stood at the head of the long table, his mere presence commanding attention. Dark hair, pewter eyes, suntanned face, she could see why Claire watched him so adoringly. “Last year we came in third in the Santa Barbara Chamber of Commerce Christmas Ocean Parade, and this year I think we have a fighting chance of taking first if we put our heads together and come up with a theme.”

“You mean like Christmas at Christmastime?” Jon looked perplexed by the obvious.

“He means like Santa and his helpers, or Christmas shopping mania, or the North Pole,” Claire shot back.

“How about trains?” Jon said. “Boys love trains at Christmas.”

“What about trains and dolls?” Jon’s nurse added, with a wayward glance.

“How about Christmas around the world?” Stephanie’s nurse, Amy, spoke up. “We could cover the yacht with small Christmas trees decorated the way other countries do, and the mast could

be a huge Christmas tree all made from lights.”

The conversation buzzed and hummed in response to the first ideas. It seemed everyone had a suggestion. Everyone but Stephanie. She particularly liked what Amy had suggested.

What did she remember most from Christmas besides the beautifully decorated trees? Santa, that’s what. “Could we have a Santa by the big tree?” She said her thought out loud by mistake.

“Yeah, we need a Santa up there,” Phil backed her up.

“And I nominate you to be Santa,” Claire said, pointing to Phil with an impish smile. “You’d be adorable.”

“Me! You’ve got to be kidding! I scare kids.”

“Oh, right, and Robbie doesn’t adore you. Yeah, I think you should be Santa and Gina and Robbie can sit on your lap.” Claire wouldn’t back down.

“No way,” he said, with an *are-you-crazy* glare in his eyes. Out of the corner of his mouth he said, “Thanks a lot,” to Stephanie.

“Great idea,” one of the nurses blurted across the table, before a few others chimed in. “Yeah.”

“But I am the *un*-Santa.” He glanced at Stephanie again, this time with a back-me-up-here plea in his eyes.

Not about to get involved in the debate, she lifted her brows, shrugged and took a bite of her sandwich.

“Look,” Jason said. “We need to get more people involved on the yacht, and you haven’t been much help the last couple of years.” There was a sparkle in Jason’s eyes, as if he enjoyed putting Phil on the spot. “Should everyone be elves?” he asked,

his mouth half-full of sandwich.

“What if one person stood by each decorated country’s tree dressed in the traditional outfit?” Amy seemed to be on a roll. “You know, lederhosen, kilt, cowboy hat...oh, and what’s that Russian fur thing called? Ushanka? And what about a dashiki or caftan, oh, wait, and a kimono, or a sari or...”

“That’s a fantastic idea,” Claire said.

Revved up, Amy grinned, and Stephanie nodded with approval at her. Phil squeezed her forearm. Okay, everything was a great idea except for Santa.

General agreement hummed through the room, and several people soon chimed in. *Wow. I like that. Good idea.*

The receptionist, Gaby, wearing glasses that covered half of her face, took notes like a court reporter.

“Did you get that?” Jason asked her.

Gaby nodded, never looking up, not breaking her bound-for-writer’s-cramp speed.

“Ah, then we shouldn’t need a Santa anymore,” Phil said, sounding relieved.

“Of course we will,” Claire said. “One Santa unites them all, and Phil will be it.”

Stephanie’s eyes widened and from the side, she noticed his narrow betrayed-looking gaze directed at Claire.

“I say we take a vote on who should be Santa, the captain of the boat or me,” he said, just before his beeper went off. “Damn. It’s day care. I’ve got to take this.” He strode out of the room, the

doors swinging in his wake.

Jason snagged the opportunity. “Okay, everyone agree Phil’s Santa?”

Everyone laughed and nodded. Poor guy didn’t stand a chance. Stephanie had to admit she sort of felt sorry for him.

Phil stepped back into the room, half of his mouth hitched but not in a smile. “I’ve got to make a quick run over to day care. Robbie’s refusing to cooperate with nap time.”

Jason nodded. “Let us know if you need to reschedule some appointments.”

“It shouldn’t take long. I’ve just got to make the kid understand he has to follow the rules—” Phil snapped his fingers as if the greatest idea in the universe had just occurred to him “—or he won’t get afternoon snack!”

Stephanie laughed. The guy was barely coping with this new responsibility, but he wasn’t griping. He seemed to catch on quickly, and, she had to admit, it made her like him even more. She glanced around the table at all the adoring female gazes on him. Okay, so she’d finally joined the club.

“So who’s Santa this year?” Phil asked, one hand on the door.

Jason grinned. “You!”

He flashed a glance at Stephanie, pointed, and mouthed, “You owe me.”

Chapter Three

PHIL finished entering the list of orders in the computer for his last patient of the afternoon. His mind had been wandering between the appointments, and Stephanie Bennett was the reason. She was as guarded as a locked box. Then out of nowhere today this fun-loving Santa-of-the-world fan had emerged, and it had backfired and landed him on a date with a red suit.

Something held her back from enjoying life, and he'd probably never find out in two months what it was, but romantic that he was, he still wanted to get to know her better. The time restraint was a perfect excuse to keep things casual and uninvolved. Just his style.

But there was Robbie—a full-time job. No way could he squeeze in a romantic fling until his father and Roma came home.

He pushed Enter on the computer program and shut it down.

Good thing he'd lined up Gaby for child care on Saturday morning.

Jason had asked him to stop by his office on his way out today, so he trotted up the back stairs to the second floor. Aw, damn, he'd caught Jason and Claire kissing. He stepped back from the doorway. They seemed to do that a lot and hadn't even heard him. Yeah, they were newlyweds but, still, they were married, with children! He marveled at the phenomenon. Come to think of it, his dad and Roma did a lot of smooching, too.

Maybe players like him didn't corner the market on romance.

He decided to talk to Jason later, then padded down the stairs and veered toward Stephanie's office, a place he'd been drawn to like a magnet lately. Just as he passed Jon's door he heard his name.

"Hey, Phil, come take a look at the latest pictures."

Oh, man, he knew exactly what those pictures would be. Evan, his newborn son, seemed to be the center of Jon's universe these days. Being just outside Jon's office, Phil couldn't very well avoid the invitation.

What was with his partners? They'd all settled down, leaving him the lone bachelor. The thing that really perplexed him was that they all seemed so damn blissful. Well, he wasn't into matrimonial bliss. No way. No how. He liked his freedom. Liked being alone. He glanced at Stephanie's office. At least now he knew someone else who liked being single.

Except for Robbie staying with him, he hadn't lived with anyone since his med-school roommates. And he really didn't miss their stinky socks and dirty underwear tossed around the cramped apartment. Come to think of it, Robbie's socks ran a close second, and the kid knew nothing about putting things away. He smiled at the image of his little half brother strutting around in his underwear with pictures of superheroes pasted all over. Even his nighttime diapers had cartoon characters decorating them. What in the world had his life turned into?

An odd sensation tugged somewhere so buried inside he

couldn't locate it, but the feeling still managed to get his attention. *Heads up, dude. Take note. Maybe there's something to be said for a good relationship and a family.*

No. Way. Maybe it worked for other people, but he wasn't capable of sustaining a long-term love affair. Wasn't interested. He knew just as many people whose marriages didn't work out. Hell, his own mother had walked out on them.

Nope. He liked the here and now, and when things got too deep or involved, he was out of there. Maybe he was more like his mom than he wanted to admit. His list of ex-girlfriends kept growing; many of them had since married and he was glad for them. It just wasn't his thing.

Phil greeted Jon and fulfilled his obligation as a good coworker to ooh and aah over Jon and René's new son. Then he patted him on the back, told him he was a lucky dog, and excused himself with a perfectly valid reason. "I've got to pick up Robbie."

On his way out of the clinic, he glanced at Stephanie's closed office door. What were the odds of him running into her at dinner again tonight?

Nope. If he wanted to spend some more time with her, he couldn't depend on something as flimsy as fate. He'd need a plan.

Gaby had signed up to watch Robbie on Saturday morning. Maybe he'd make plans with Stephanie then. As for dinner tonight, he had a date with his kid brother for a grilled cheese sandwich and tomato soup.

Just seven more days.

Stephanie was aware that René mentored nurse practitioner students from the local university once a week, but hadn't realized she'd be taking on this aspect of René's job along with everything else. Thursday morning she was shadowed by a bright and pregnant-as-she-was-tall young woman filled with questions. Maria Avila had thick black hair and wore it piled on top of her head, and if she was trying to look taller, the extra hair didn't help. Her shining dark eyes oozed intelligence and curiosity and her pleasant personality suited Stephanie just fine. After a full morning together, they prepared for the last appointment.

"If my next patient consents, I'll guide you through bimanual pelvic examination."

Stephanie fought back a laugh at the student's excitement when she pumped the air with her fist.

"Have you done one before?"

"I've done them in class with a human-looking model," Maria said.

Stephanie raised her brows. "That's not nearly the same thing. I'll do my best to get this opportunity for you. Now, here's the woman's story." Stephanie recited the medical history from the computer for Maria. "What would you do for her today?"

Maria sat pensively for a few minutes then ran down a list of questions she'd ask and labs she'd recommend. Her instincts were right-on, and Stephanie thought she'd make a good care provider one day.

The examination went well, Stephanie stepped in to collect the Pap smear, and Maria was ecstatic she got hands-on experience. Fortunately the patient was fine with the extra medical care as long as Stephanie followed up with her own examination.

One of the ovaries was larger than normal, and tender to the touch. It could be something as simple as a cyst, but she wanted to make sure. She also wanted Maria to feel the small, subtle mass that she'd overlooked when she'd first performed the exam.

From the woman's history she knew there wasn't any ovarian cancer in her immediate family. She met some of the other risk factors, though. She had never been pregnant, was over fifty-five, and postmenopausal.

"Have you had any pain or pressure in your abdomen lately?"

The woman shook her head.

"Bloating or indigestion?"

"Doesn't every woman get that?" the patient said, with a wry smile.

"You've got a point there." Stephanie grinned back.

When she finished the exam, as she removed the gloves and washed her hands, she mentioned her plan of action. "I'm ordering a pelvic ultrasound to rule out a small cyst." She didn't want to alarm the woman about the potential for cancer due to her age, but finding any pathology early was the name of the game when it came to that disease. "I'll request the study ASAP."

The grateful woman thanked both of them and on her way out she hugged the student RNP, Maria. "Good luck with your

pregnancy, and keep up your training. We need more people in the field.”

Her comment drove Stephanie to ask, “Are you in medicine?”
“I’m a nurse.”

Stephanie figured, being a nurse, the patient was already in a panic about what her slightly enlarged ovary might be.

“Don’t drive yourself crazy worrying about the worst-case scenario, Ms. Winkler, okay? The nodule didn’t feel hard or immovable. It’s most likely a cyst.”

The extra reassurance helped smooth the woman’s wrinkled brow, but nervous tension was still evident in her eyes when she left.

Stephanie briefed Maria on possible reasons why she’d missed the subtle change in the ovary and offered suggestions on hand placement while performing future examinations for best results.

They walked back to her office as Stephanie explained further for Maria.

“The worst thing we can do is leave a patient waiting for results, but sometimes our job is like a guessing game. We have to go through each step to rule out the problem. Fortunately, modern medicine usually gives us great results in a timely manner.”

“Waxing philosophical, Doc?” Phil’s distinct voice sent a quick chill down her spine.

How long had it been since that had happened with a man? Not since the first morning when she’d seen him, to be exact.

“Can I do something for you, Phil?”

With a slow smile, he glanced first at Stephanie then at Maria, whose cheeks blushed almost immediately. What was with his power over women?

“Yeah. You can meet me at Stearn’s Wharf Saturday morning around nine.”

Was this his idea of asking her out? In front of the student nurse practitioner?

“Uh. You sort of caught me off guard.”

“Hmm. Like how you bamboozled me into being Santa?”

Okay, now she got it. It was payback time. She grimaced. “If it matters at all, I abstained from voting.”

“Warms my heart, Doc.” He patted his chest over his white doctor’s coat.

But meeting at the beach for what was predicted to be yet another gorgeous Santa Barbara day sounded more like reward than payback.

Maria cleared her throat. “I should be going and let you two work this out.”

“Oh, right.” Stephanie felt a blush begin. What kind of impression would she make with her student, making plans for a date right in front of her?

“Thanks so much, Dr. Bennett. You’ve been fantastic and I’ve learned a lot today,” Maria said.

“You’re welcome, and I guess I’ll see you next week?”

“Actually, that’s Thanksgiving. But I’ll be here the week after,

that is if I don't go into premature labor first!" The otherwise elfin woman beamed a smile, looked at Dr. Hansen again, subtly turned so only Stephanie could see her face, and mouthed, "Wow!" with crossed eyes to emphasize his affect on her, then left.

Stephanie didn't even try to hide her grin. *Yeah, he's hunky.*

Stephanie couldn't have asked for a more beautiful day on Saturday morning. There wasn't a cloud in the cornflower-blue sky, and the sun spread its warmth on the top of her head and shoulders, making the brisk temperature refreshing. The ocean, like glittering blue glass along the horizon, tossed and rolled against the pier pilings, as raucous seagulls circled overhead. At home, the clean desert air was dry and gritty, but here on the wharf the ocean breeze with its briny scent energized her.

She hadn't exactly said yes or no to Phil's proposition on Thursday. She'd said she'd think about it, and he'd said he was planning to surf that morning anyway, so come if she felt like it. Well, she'd felt like it, and by virtue of the glorious view, she was already glad about her decision.

A group of surfers was a few hundred yards to the left of the pier, and though the odds were stacked against her, she tried to pick out Phil. With everyone wearing wet suits, it proved to be an impossible task.

"Here's some coffee."

Jumping, Stephanie pivoted to find Phil decked out in a wet suit, holding his surfboard under one arm and a take-out cup of

coffee in another. He handed it to her as she worked at closing her mouth.

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