



*Medical
Romance™*

DIANNE DRAKE

The Baby Who Stole the
Doctor's Heart



Dianne Drake

**The Baby Who Stole
the Doctor's Heart**

«HarperCollins»

Drake D.

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Hot-shot Doc... There's no place in brooding Dr Mark Anderson's life for love. He's working temporarily in White Elk as a favour, then he'll be gone – and nothing will make him look back. To Daddy! Until he meets beautiful single mum Angela and her adorable daughter. The last thing this rugged doctor expected was to lose his heart to these two, but the moment Angela's baby girl utters her first word – 'Daddy' – he's wrapped around her chubby little finger! The time has come for Mark to move on...but now he's looking for a permanent role – as part of their little family! Mountain Village Hospital Welcome to a small town with a big heart

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“You bought those toys for her?” Angela asked.

“Eric’s sister has that boutique in town. Handmade for Baby. Everything guaranteed to be non-allergenic and eco-friendly.”

“But so many? There must be ten?”

“Eleven,” he interrupted. “Couldn’t choose between them, so I bought them all. Figured Sarah would figure out which ones she likes, and the rest I’ll donate to the hospital.” He set her down amongst the stuffed bunnies and giraffes.

“I think my daughter is going to like all of them.”

Mark didn’t answer for a moment. Just stood there and stared at Sarah, sitting in the stack of animals, looking wide-eyed at them. “I hope she does,” he said, his voice a little gravelly. He cleared his throat, then faced Angela. “A young lady can never have too many stuffed animals, can she?”

“You’re a real softy—you know that?” So much so, she was tempted to kiss him. But she didn’t.

About the Author

Now that her children have left home, **DIANNE DRAKE** is finally finding the time to do some of the things she adores—gardening, cooking, reading, shopping for antiques. Her absolute passion in life, however, is adopting abandoned and abused animals. Right now Dianne and her husband Joel have a little menagerie of three dogs and two cats, but that's always subject to change. A former symphony orchestra member, Dianne now attends the symphony as a spectator several times a month and, when time permits, takes in an occasional football, basketball or hockey game.

Other titles in the *Mountain Village Hospital* series by Dianne Drake:

CHRISTMAS MIRACLE: A FAMILY

NEWBORN NEEDS A DAD

HIS MOTHERLESS LITTLE TWINS

Dear Reader,

It is such a privilege to be back with you again, in this last book of my Mountain Village Hospital Series. I've loved writing these books, loved being able to develop continuing characters across these stories. I've especially loved writing this last book because it touches on a subject that's near to my heart—diabetes. Of course, this *The Baby Who Stole the Doctor's Heart* is a romance in the truest sense of the word. It brings together two people who desperately need second chances at love, and unites them as a family. But it also touches on juvenile diabetes and allows Angela, who's spent the first three books cooking at the lodge as a chef, to find her true passion in tending to the nutritional needs of diabetic children. Leaving her work as a chef and becoming a hospital dietitian, she has a chance to create a situation that not only teaches children, but also empowers them in taking care of themselves. Naturally, my hero, Dr. Mark Anderson, is drawn to that strength and conviction in her. He doesn't want to be. In fact, he's not sure what he wants or where he wants to be, but one confrontation with Angela and there's no turning back.

There's no turning back from diabetes, either. But, the fight goes on, and one of the great crusaders is Brenda Novak, a fellow Harlequin author. Her son was diagnosed with the disease when he was young, and she's been fighting the battle ever since. But Brenda does it in a big way. Every May, Brenda hosts an online auction where all proceeds go to diabetes research. Harlequin, by the way, is one of her biggest supporters and sponsors. (Thanks, Harlequin!) Last year was her sixth year, and she topped an accumulated \$1 million! I know it's not quite May yet, but this year consider spending a moment looking at her website, buying an object, or making a donation. You can check out the auction at www.BrendaNovak.com. While you're there, take a peek at my donations. As you'll see, I love antique jewelry.

In the mean time, I appreciate your setting aside some time to read *The Baby Who Stole the Doctor's Heart*.

Wishing you health & happiness!

Dianne

P.S.: As always, I love hearing from you. Please feel free to contact me at Dianne@DianneDrake.com.

THE BABY WHO STOLE THE DOCTOR'S HEART

DIANNE DRAKE



www.millsandboon.co.uk

In this story I've dealt with diabetes—
an illness that has touched my life in so many ways.
I would like to dedicate this book to
Marguerite Holmes, my mother, William White,
my uncle, and Keith Kreider, one of the first heroes of
my heart—all people I've loved and lost to diabetes.
And I would also like to dedicate this book to my
friend and fellow-author Brenda Novak, whose efforts
to raise money for diabetes research will save lives.

CHAPTER ONE

DR. MARK ANDERSON took one more look at the application in his hand, laid it on the desk, facedown, and took off his glasses. “It’s not going to be easy, because I like her, but I can’t let her into my program. She doesn’t fit the criteria, doesn’t even come close to the credentials I’m seeing in the other applicants I’ve looked at.”

Drs. Neil Ranard and Eric Ramsey glanced at each other, both of them with expressions on their faces that reflected their support of the decision, mixed with disappointment. “Naturally, we’re disappointed, but it’s your choice and we support that,” Eric said.

“She’s your sister-in-law, Eric. And, Neil, she’s your wife’s best friend. I’m feeling pressured here.” Being in White Elk was pressure, staying in medicine was pressure. Everything was pressure these days, and he was already counting down the days until he was done with all of it. Medicine, old life, friends. Everything! Eighteen months to go, and he couldn’t wait. But for now he was here, trying to make the best of it because he owed Eric and Neil. They were friends. In better days, best friends. And when they’d asked him to help them start a school to train advanced medical rescue teams, he’d seen it as his chance to pay back all the favors, all the support. After that, though, he was done.

Eric shrugged. “No pressure. Angela’s a great dietician. She has a natural talent for seeing all the connections between health and nutrition. And she’s taking on the juvenile diabetes project here at the hospital. But we understand that she doesn’t have the kind of medical training you’re after. She’s eager to learn, but if she doesn’t qualify, she doesn’t qualify.”

“Well, I’m not feeling great about the decision, but I don’t want to be saddled with someone who’ll hold the program back, and that’s what she’ll do.”

“Saddled?” Neil questioned, arching his eyebrows in surprise. “I wouldn’t exactly call being involved with Angela in any way being saddled.”

Mark sighed. Angela was a looker, in a cute, pixie sort of way. He did have to admit that. Short, with cropped brown hair, amazing dark brown eyes. And so much sparkle to her. Cute, sexy. Girl-next-door in a most kissable fashion, if he had been inclined to kiss anymore. Which he wasn’t. “You know what I mean,” he grumbled, shaking her image out of his head.

“Don’t envy you the task of rejecting her,” Neil said, standing, followed by Eric.

Mark cringed at the thought. “I don’t envy myself the task either.” He hated rejection. Went out of his way not to be involved in it. But this was one he couldn’t help. He didn’t have a place for her in his program and he couldn’t make a place for her. He had eighteen months to accomplish what should, logically, take two years, and Angela would slow him down. His hands were tied, even though he was the one tying them. “And let me tell you now, this isn’t what I bargained for when I came here. I wanted to teach and train, not do the paperwork.”

Eric chuckled. “Trust me. Angela is more than paperwork.” On that note, the doctors left Mark’s office, left him wondering why he’d agreed to this, why he hadn’t followed his first impulse and simply walked away.

Truthfully, he didn’t know. Didn’t want to examine it either, for fear of what he’d find. He’d made his choices, made his decisions, and he wasn’t going to change. Sure, he had a detour for the next year and a half, but after that...

Sarah’s photo didn’t dominate her desk by any means, but Angela’s gaze was drawn to it a dozen times an hour. Maybe two dozen times. She’d never known anything or anyone that could fill her heart the way her daughter did. Coming up on Sarah’s first birthday, that was all Angela could think about—the last twenty or so tumultuous months, learning she was pregnant, discovering that her husband didn’t want a baby or a wife, seeing him flaunt his various affairs on international television. Still, it had been a good time in spite of all that, because of Sarah. “We’re doing quite well for ourselves,” she said to the photo, then refocused on the meal plan she was devising for Scotty Baxter.

He was seven, with uncontrolled diabetes, and she was worried because he didn't have the home support he needed. His mother rewarded him with snacks, never refused his demands, and most of the time Scotty demanded sweets and foods that weren't good for him. Helen Baxter loved her son the way Angela loved her daughter, but Helen's definition of love was overindulgence, maybe because she was a single mother who was trying to compensate for the lack of a father in Scotty's life. She totally sympathized with Helen, and in some ways she could see that in herself... overindulging Sarah because Sarah's father had walked out. But not overindulgence to the point of harming her, and that's where Scotty and his mother stood right now.

It wasn't a good situation, and she was worried because, so far, she hadn't gotten through. Not to Scotty, not to his mother. She was working on it, though, hoping the camp she was creating—a camp for kids like Scotty—would help. It was coming together, and she was excited by the prospect. One more hurdle, taking the finalized plans to the hospital board, and she'd be set.

Right now, though, she had to concentrate on Scotty's meal plan. "First things first," she said to Sarah's photo, forcing her attention to the computer screen and the list of low glycemic index foods popping up there.

A knock on the door startled her.

"Can I come in?" Mark asked, as he pushed the door open a crack.

Suddenly, she was on tenterhooks. She'd applied to his program. Wanted desperately to be part of the White Elk Mountain Rescue Team, like her sister was. Like all her friends were. She wanted to prove... well, her worth, for one thing. "Sure," she said, saving Scotty's file.

Mark Anderson. Larger than life, filling every inch of her door frame and handsome in a way that defied description. Definitely a man who could make her heart go pitter-patter, if she had a mind to let it. Which she didn't, even though her divorce wasn't stinging so much these days. Truthfully, she didn't have men on her mind, didn't date, didn't want to. Not now. This part of her life was about improvement, about doing the things she'd been deprived of all those years with Brad. About making sure she was in a place where *she* controlled her destiny. It was also about Sarah... Sarah, who always brought a smile to her face. Her life was a good place now, and although she wasn't very far into it yet, she surely did like her direction.

So, no rocking it with someone like Dr. Mark Anderson, even though another time, another place... Fantasies like that allowed, realities forbidden. Besides, in her limited contact with him since he'd helped her and Sarah from the train that had been trapped in an avalanche he'd seemed so standoffish, maybe even grumpy. She wasn't sure why, wasn't inclined to find out. But he held her future in his hand, so to speak, and she did want this opportunity. It was one of so many things she wanted to do and as he strode toward her desk she couldn't wait for him to start. "What did you decide?" she blurted out, too anxious to wait.

"No," he said, quite bluntly.

"No?" Blinking, it took a moment to digest his words. "Did you say no?"

"That's correct. No."

"Meaning you didn't accept me into your program?"

"Meaning I'm looking for people who have more medical training than you do. I'm sorry, but you don't fit my criteria."

He didn't look sorry. In fact, he looked rather bland on the whole subject. "My being a clinical dietician doesn't count for anything? Or the fact that I'm heading up the juvenile diabetes project at the hospital? Or that I'm probably better on skis than most of the instructors at the lodges here?"

"Those are important, even impressive in their own way, Mrs. Blanchard. I'm not diminishing what you're doing here, not trying to belittle your abilities either, but your qualifications are lacking, and I'm not accepting anyone into my program who doesn't meet a certain basic level of medical training. Which you don't. For what it's worth, I knew how much you wanted this, so I went over your application a couple of times, trying to figure out if there was a way I could deviate from the standards

I've set for the other students I'll take on. But I couldn't, because if I made an exception for you, I might have to make it for someone else, and pretty soon the whole program would be... diluted."

"Diluted?" She rose from her desk, leaned over it, palms flat on the surface. "You think I'd dilute your program?"

"OK, so maybe that's not the best choice of words. But I think it conveys my intent. I know the kind of background I want in my students, and you don't have it. I'm sorry, but that's my decision. And, to be honest, with all the new programs you're involved with already, I'm not even sure why you'd want to take on something else. Wouldn't that be spreading yourself too thin?"

She steadied her nerves with a deep breath. *That* was none of his business. He hadn't known Brad, hadn't seen the way Brad had put her down every time she'd tried stepping outside herself and doing something worthwhile. Hadn't been there the day they'd come across a skiing accident, found a man who'd crashed into a tree, who had literally been dying before their eyes. She'd tried to help, but Brad had rubbished her attempts and told her the only thing she was good for was calling the ski patrol. Young and frightened, she'd believed him, but still she'd stayed with the man and tried to keep him conscious and talking while Brad had called for help. Unfortunately the man had died on his way to hospital, and she'd always wondered if she could have done something more.

No, none of that was Mark Anderson's business. Neither was the fact that Sarah changed everything. For Sarah, she had to be better, had to know more. For Sarah, she couldn't have doubts.

So, fighting with this man wasn't the answer. She wanted to be in his class, and cool, calm reasoning was the only way she was going to get there. Gathering her wits, Angela decided to resist the battle. "And you don't think hard work and study will overcome what you say are my deficiencies? Because I'll work harder and study more than anybody else you'll have in your class."

"I'm sure you will. But you'd be the only one who wouldn't know the basics on the first day. Basics like how to take a patient's vital signs. Or how to assess pupillary reaction or start an IV. I'd have to waste precious time teaching you how to take a blood-pressure reading when everybody else is way past that." He exhaled a sharp breath. "What I want, Mrs. Blanchard, is to teach advanced field work, and you're not ready for it. I'm sorry."

OK, so he had her there. He was right. She didn't know the basics. Not yet. But not knowing didn't mean she couldn't learn. And learn quickly. "Everybody has to start somewhere, Dr. Anderson. Even *you* attended classes in medical school where you knew nothing."

"Classes designed to teach beginners. Which is not what *my* class is designed to teach. And like I said, I'm sorry. I know you're going to do some amazing things with your diabetes program, and I wish you well in that. And who knows? I'll be gone in eighteen months. Maybe the person hired to take over for me will have a different set of criteria for his or her classes." To his credit, Mark actually struggled with a sympathetic smile as he turned and walked toward the door.

But Angela wasn't ready to let him leave. In fact, she beat him to the door. Flew out from behind her desk and practically threw herself in front of Mark. She wanted this! She wasn't about to take another rejection quite as easily as she had her ex-husband's. "So, tell me what I can do to make you change your mind."

Mark's eyebrows shot up in surprise. "What didn't you understand about me saying no?"

"Trust me, I understand rejection. But I want this and there has to be something I can do to get myself into your class. Take some outside courses somewhere, read some books, take a test. I'm sure my sister will help me..."

Before he answered, he paused, and actually chuckled. Then looked her square in the eyes. "I admire your determination, and I only hope the students I do choose will have that same determination in them. But classes start in just over a month, Mrs. Blanchard. What you need to know can't be learned in that time. I'm sorry, but my decision is final. Now, if you'll excuse me..."

He laid his hand on the doorknob, tried turning it. Then stopped, like he was waiting for her next round of arguments. Which came immediately. “Is there anything to stop me from auditing your classes?” she asked.

“Auditing?”

“Sitting in, taking notes, learning what the other students are learning?” It wouldn’t get her the certificate she needed, but if the instructor who took over the school eighteen months from now was as difficult as Dr. Anderson, at least she’d be prepared. And if waiting for a year and a half was what it took, that’s what she’d do. After all, she had time. Plenty of it. “Would you stop me from doing that?”

“I won’t certify you at the end.”

“I’m aware of that.”

“And I won’t allow you to participate, as in raising your hand and asking questions or taking part in discussions. You’ll sit in the back of the room and take notes, nothing else.”

“I’m aware of that, too.”

“You won’t be allowed to come along on field exercises. Or train on any of the equipment we use.”

“That’s fine.”

“And you won’t get progress reports telling you how well, or badly, you’re doing.”

“Fine, too.” It wasn’t the way she wanted it, but if this was the only way in for her, she’d take it.

“Well, then, if you want to waste all that time for what’s going to amount to nothing, I won’t stop you from auditing the classes.”

It wasn’t an amazing victory, but it was a victory nonetheless. Or at least a tiny step on the road to her goal. “Thank you,” she said, stepping away from the door. “I appreciate you letting me do this.”

“I’m not *doing* anything, Mrs. Blanchard. Not a thing.”

Maybe not. But at least he wasn’t stopping her. That was better than nothing.

“She’s so beautiful,” Angela said, dropping down into the recliner chair next to the bed. “Almost makes me want to have another baby.”

“Anything I should know?” Gabby Ranard asked. She was cradling her newborn, Mary, in her arms, looking as happy as any new mother could look.

“I’m not dating, not going to date. Not even liking men too much right now.” She reached over and took the baby from Gabby’s arms. “Some men, anyway.”

“Sounds harsh.”

“Not harsh, practical.”

“Any particular man?”

“His name is Mark Anderson, and before you defend him because he’s your husband’s best friend, next to Eric, let me just say that whatever you’re going to say will be falling on deaf ears. He turned me down for his training program this morning, and I don’t like him, don’t want to like him, don’t intend to like him.” She said the words with a soft edge so not to disturb Mary, who’d already drifted off to sleep. “Should I go put her in the crib for you?” she asked, standing up before Gabby could even answer.

“If you’re going to tell me everything then yes. Let her sleep, because I want to hear what happened.”

Angela put her goddaughter down, tucked her in and kissed her on the forehead. Even though Sarah was only a year older than Mary, she already missed the baby experience. Loved every minute of it, didn’t want it to ever end. But too soon Sarah would outgrow her baby years, then Angela would be having her baby fixes vicariously... through her sister Dinah when she decided to have a baby, maybe even Gabby again. That’s just the way it had to be. She wasn’t getting any younger, and by the time she’d gotten herself to a place in life where she wanted her and Sarah to be, she just might be too old to have another baby. It wasn’t like thirty-three was too old, but if it took her as long to get

to the next point in her life as it had to this one, Sarah would be a teenager. Or married and having babies of her own.

“Now, tell me what happened,” Gabby urged, after Angela settled herself back into the chair.

“There’s really nothing to tell. Because I do work in the medical field now, I thought he’d accept me.” Up until six weeks ago she’d been the executive chef at one of the local ski lodges, but the hours Sarah needed didn’t work well with the hours her job had required. More than that, Eric and Neil had been trying to recruit her to the hospital to take over the juvenile diabetes program. It had been a providential move, one that had launched her into a totally new frame of mind about her life, and what she wanted to accomplish. Truly, it was time to make herself useful. Make up for all those worthless years with Brad. “And you know how good I am on skis. I’d hoped that wandering around Europe, from slope to slope, all those years, would make a difference. But it didn’t. Dr. Anderson turned me down because I don’t have what he wants.”

“What does he want?” Gabby asked.

“The sun, the moon and someone who knows how to take blood pressure. I’m a good clinical dietician, but I don’t even know one end of a blood-pressure cuff from another.”

“Sphygmomanometer,” Gabby interrupted.

“What?”

“Sphygmomanometer. Blood-pressure cuff. That’s the correct name for it.”

“See what I mean? I don’t know those things, so that disqualifies me.”

“Even after Neil and Eric recommended you?”

“Apparently so.”

“I’m sorry,” Gabby said. “I haven’t been paying much attention to what Neil has been saying about the program. With just having the baby and all.”

“Two babies,” Angela reminded her.

“Two babies, a year apart. That’s kept me preoccupied. But I really thought...”

Angela held out her hand to stop her. “It doesn’t matter. Dr. Anderson is probably right, much as I hate to admit it. If my ignorance would hold the class back, I don’t want to do that. But I’ve got a plan.”

Gabby laughed. “Why am I not surprised?”

Angela mellowed a bit. Gabrielle Evans Ranard was the best friend she’d ever had, next to Dinah. And Dinah didn’t count because she was Angela’s sister, and that relationship went without saying. But Gabby... she’d come to town, showed up in White Elk totally lost, much like Angela was feeling right now. Then she’d found everything—her life, her love, her happiness. It was out there, and not so far away, Angela hoped. She had Sarah, and that was the first part. The best part. “You’re not surprised because you’ve seen my list.”

“Your *long* list,” Gabby corrected.

“OK, so maybe I have a few too many goals. Dr. Anderson even said something to that effect, but I know what it’s like not having *any* goals, not having anything to look forward to day in and day out. So a few extra goals are good.”

“If you don’t get so caught up in achieving goals that you miss something else.”

“What would I miss?”

“What is it they say about stopping to smell the roses? Well, sometimes it’s nice to stop and smell the aftershave, too.”

“You’re not talking about...?”

Gabby shrugged. Smiled. Didn’t comment.

“Well, for your information, he doesn’t wear aftershave. I smelled soap on him, that’s all. And the only thing I want to smell is the scent of pine trees when I’m called out on a rescue operation. So, I’m going to audit his class. Sit in the back row so I don’t even have to smell soap on him, and learn what I need to know so I can apply to the next class... one *he* won’t be teaching.”

“You smelled soap on him?” Gabby teased. “How close, exactly, were you?”

Angela shook her head. “Were you listening to *anything* I said?”

“OK, so I got sidetracked. But you’re so... so animated. It’s the first time since Brad that I’ve seen you react this way to a man, and it just seemed to me that...”

Angela held out her hand to stop her. “He’s grumpy. He keeps to himself. He’s not friendly. What, in that description, makes you think I’d have anything to do with him?”

“Well, for what it’s worth, he’s had a very rough couple of years.”

“And you and I haven’t? You’ve had two babies and survived an avalanche. I had one baby, a cheating husband, and I survived that same avalanche. That’s all rough, Gabby. But we’re not grumpy.”

“But I have Neil, as well as Bryce and Mary. You have Sarah. Whatever we went through was worth it to get everything we have. And we do have a lot, Angela. We’ve both been blessed in so many ways I can’t even describe it. But Mark...” She trailed off and shrugged.

“You’re right,” Angela whispered, thinking about Sarah again. “We do have everything, don’t we?”

“Neil and Eric brought him here to White Elk because he lost everything.”

“Mark?”

Gabby nodded. “It’s really not my place to say anything, except he walked away from something that made what you and I’ve gone through look like a picnic, and at the end of *his* road there was nothing or no one waiting there for him. So he may be a little grumpy right now, but I suppose if anyone has a right to be...”

“OK, so maybe I won’t *hate* him. But that doesn’t mean I have to like him, does it?”

“Just consider him a means to your end. Audit his classes, learn everything you can from him because, from what Neil tells me, he’s an amazing trauma doctor. Then, at the end of eighteen months, ask him to give you a recommendation to the next class.” Gabby grinned. “Who knows? Maybe he’ll do it. Maybe you’ll even enjoy smelling the soap by then.”

About the soap, no. Definitely not. But maybe he would give her the recommendation. Or maybe, after eighteen months, when she’d proved herself to be just as good as anyone else he was training, she’d present his words to him on a silver platter and ask him to eat them. It was certainly a satisfying image, one that made her want to run straight to her sister’s shelf of medical reference books and start reading. “I brought you a nice fresh fruit salad. It’s down in the kitchen. Want some?” she asked Gabby.

“With strawberries?”

“Lots of strawberries.” Angela pushed herself up out of the chair and headed downstairs. On the way to the kitchen, though, she stopped in the den and took a look at all the medical volumes belonging to Gabby and Neil. Dozens and dozens of them, all well past anything she could read and understand. But tucked into a corner was an old paperback medical dictionary. Words... medical words with meanings. That was as good a place to start as any, and she was anxious to ask Gabby if she could borrow it. Her fingers were almost trembling as she pulled the book from the shelf. “This is where we begin it all, Sarah,” she whispered, as she tucked it under her arm and continued on to the kitchen. “One word at a time.”

With, or without, Mark Anderson’s help.

CHAPTER TWO

“STAT, from the Latin *statim*, meaning immediately,” Angela said as Mark hurried by her in the corridor.

He stopped, turned round. “Excuse me?”

“I said stat, from the Latin *statim*, meaning?”

“I know what it means,” he said. “But what I’m wondering is why *you* feel the need to tell me that you know what it means.” She arched her eyebrows at him and what he noticed was that they were perfectly sculpted, a lovely frame for the sparkling eyes beneath them. Eyes he stared at for the span of a full five seconds. When he realized that he was staring so intently, he forced a hard blink that shattered the rising sizzle of the moment. *Crazy thoughts*, he scolded himself. *Crazy and stupid*.

“No particular reason.”

The heck there wasn’t. She was serious about auditing his class, and if he were a betting man, he’d bet a week’s pay that she was memorizing a medical dictionary or something as equally bizarre. “I have a hard time believing that you do anything without a reason, Mrs. Blanchard.”

“Call me Angela. You’re going to be seeing enough of me over the next few months that I don’t think we need the formalities standing between us.”

“Then you’re really serious about this?” As if he didn’t already know. Angela Blanchard exuded determination. One look said it all. She squared her shoulders, held her head high, and plunged right into the middle of whatever she wanted, and he doubted an army could stop her. “You’re really going to spend the next year and a half of your life sitting in the back of my class, only to reap no benefit?”

She laughed. “Depends on how you define benefit, doesn’t it, *Mark*?”

A chill, caused by the way she’d said his name, shot up his arm. Her pronunciation had been crisp, deliberate... rolling off lips he didn’t want to look at but caught himself staring at like he’d stared at her eyes an instant ago. And her voice, with just a hint of huskiness... What was it about her that was drawing him? Certainly, she wasn’t his type. He liked them long, slim, blond... she was short, rounded in ways he didn’t want to think about, athletic. So, after a year or so without a woman, that’s all it could be. His retreat into self-imposed celibacy. He was out of his comfort zone, not that he’d had much of a comfort zone lately, and Angela was... tempting. Any man would admit that, and *that* part of him wasn’t in retreat quite as deeply as he’d thought. Although he’d been happier when he’d believed it was.

But he could deal with this like he dealt with everything else these days... with indifference. God knew, he’d practiced that to perfection. “Benefit, in practical terms, is the certificate I’ll be issuing that will validate eighteen months of study and hard work, that will enable its recipient to become an advanced member of the mountain rescue team and even coordinate rescues on his or her own. Which is a benefit you won’t be reaping.”

“Your choice, not mine.”

“Ah, we finally agree on something.”

“Trust me, we don’t agree on this. But that will change.”

“As in you’ll finally come around to my way of thinking?”

She shook her head. “I spent eight years of my life chasing around Europe after a man who, like you, thought I’d come around to his way of thinking. And, foolish girl that I was, I did after a while. So count on my words when I tell you that the last thing I intend on doing now, or ever again, is coming around to *your*, or anybody else’s, way of thinking. It isn’t going to happen. For me, now, it’s all about *my* way of thinking, and doing what I need to do to make a better life for my daughter.” She smiled sweetly, her nose wrinkling as the corners of her lips crinkled up. “And I’m really good at that. Better than I ever thought I could be.”

Fire and sass. He liked that. In spite of himself, he liked Angela Blanchard. She wasn't put together like any woman he'd ever known up close and personal, and while he definitely wasn't in the market for anything up close and personal, not for a long time to come, he was surprised to discover that he appreciated the contentiousness in her. It had been a long time since anything, or anyone, had challenged him the way she did, and it felt good. Made him feel... almost alive again. "So you're going to content yourself with spending a year and a half that won't produce the outcome you want? Is that *your* way of thinking, to waste your time that way?"

"I'm going to content myself with learning, which is never a waste of time. Whatever happens after that happens." She thrust a packet of papers into his hand. "In the meantime, read this. I'm working on a hospital-sponsored camp for children with diabetes. It's in the last planning stages, and I'm looking for staff support for when I present the final ideas to Neil and Eric. A word from you, *in favor*, would be appreciated. They're going to listen to my presentation tomorrow afternoon, and if things go well, I've already lined up the means to launch the trial run of the camp in a couple of weeks. Take a few kids out and see what works, and what doesn't. The plan was conditionally approved weeks ago and now everything is in place but the hospital's final consent for the trial run, so I'd appreciate you being there to speak up for what a good idea it is."

He smiled—something he hadn't done much of lately. "And you're assuming that I'll support this program?"

"Read the information. It makes sense because it's all about putting the children in charge of their physical condition and their choices. Teaching them to be smarter about their diabetes than the people around them. So, after you've read the literature, you'll support it." A devious little glint flashed in her eyes, and she added, nearly under her breath, "*If* you're as good a doctor as everybody says you are."

Again, that attitude. There was so much of it contained in such a tiny package. He was almost on the verge of finding it sexy. *Almost*. "I'll read the information if I have time. No promises."

"Fair enough." With that, she walked away. No goodbye, no other arguments, and Mark caught himself watching her practically march her way down the hall, almost disappointed when she turned the corner and disappeared from his view without turning back and challenging him one more time.

"Staring at something interesting?" Eric Ramsey asked, coming towards Mark from the opposite direction.

"Not interesting so much as unusual."

"Well, she's certainly a force to be reckoned with. I married her sister, and they're just alike in that aspect. And once you get hooked—"

"Not hooked," Mark interrupted. "And not going to get hooked."

"Just as well, because Angela's living off the list, and there's not a man on it."

"The list?"

"A list of things she wants to accomplish. When she was a chef, she ran her kitchen with the same precision, which is why we wanted her here, in charge of our dietary department at the hospital. She lives by her lists, and she doesn't get sidetracked."

A result of those years she'd followed some loser of a man through Europe? He could definitely imagine Angela living by the list, but what he couldn't imagine was the carefree Angela who'd followed the man she'd loved all over Europe for years. Admittedly, that was a side of her he found intriguing, a side he wouldn't mind having a peek at. "We all get sidetracked," he said, half to himself. "Sooner or later, we all get sidetracked."

Eric patted him on the shoulder then hurried off to tend a case of bronchitis in exam three, while Mark grabbed up the next patient chart in the stack. Stomachache. Damn, he wanted to be somewhere else other than in exam three, treating a case of nausea.

"Long day?" It was well after what would be considered normal working hours as Mark took the seat on the opposite side of the staff lounge. He chose that spot not because he didn't want to sit

closer to Angela but because he wanted room to stretch his legs. Also, from this distance, without his glasses, he couldn't see her eyes as well. Wouldn't be so distracted.

"I'm used to it. When I worked at the lodge, I had a staff of a twenty-three in the kitchen, not to mention all my other employees out front, yet I seemed to be the one working eighteen hours a day, seven days a week. Until I had Sarah. Then it changed, at least as far as I was concerned. But not as far as the lodge was concerned. They still needed those hours from me, and I had a nice, very competent sous chef who was more than eager to step up into my position when I could no longer give them what they wanted, or needed."

"Do you miss it?" he asked, trying hard to keep the conversation limited to neutral topics. He was too tired to argue with her right now. In his frame of mind, she'd probably win.

"Some. I mean, my duties here are so different from what they were at the lodge. I'm doing a lot of administration work and planning, as well as coordinating individual diet plans and doing consults, which means I'm not going to get to cook as much as I did. And I really love cooking. But my job here is... important. It makes a difference. Besides, I have a friend who'll turn over her restaurant kitchen to me any time I feel the hankering to get back to my basics. Catie Lawrence, from Catie's Overlook. Have you eaten there yet?"

"Catie knows me pretty well already," he replied, pulling a chair up in front of the one in which he was seated then propping his legs up on it. "I'm a regular for breakfast every morning, and a semi-regular for dinner. Nice place." Translated to mean nice place to be alone. He sat at an isolated table, didn't have to see people or be bothered by them. It was a situation that suited him just fine since he wasn't in White Elk to make friends, which seemed to go against the unspoken motto of just about the friendliest place he'd ever been in his life. Everybody here *wanted* to make friends. They radiated sincerity and caring, and he sure as heck didn't want all that mishmash coming near him.

"White Elk is filled with nice places. But what's good at Catie's is that while I'm cooking, she'll look after Sarah for me. In fact, she's set up a little nursery in her office for whenever I stop by, or Gabby Ranard stops by with her babies."

"You've been a single mom for a while?" He already knew the answer to that, but asking seemed like the next logical step in the conversation.

"He left me when he found out I was pregnant. But Sarah and I are doing pretty well without him. It wasn't what I'd planned, but life happens, doesn't it? When the bottom drops out of it, you replace it and start over. Being a single mom works quite nicely for both Sarah and me, and I have a lot of support here in White Elk. So, do you have any children?"

"No," he said too quickly, too gruffly. "One marriage on the rocks, no children." And no desire to talk about it either. Just to let her know, he folded his arms tightly across his chest, leaned his head against the chair back, and shut his eyes. This conversation had already gone much further than he'd intended, bordering on private things he didn't get into with anybody, not even with his best friends, and he wanted to end it before it went any further. So, nothing like some nice, rigid body language to convey the message.

"You're not very subtle, you know," Angela said.

"About what?" he asked, instantly regretting that he had. Because asking would lead to more conversation, which he didn't want. Not with anybody, but especially not with Angela. She made him think too hard, made him come too close to the edge of wishing for something he couldn't let himself have. Or even dream of.

"About what you don't want to talk about. You're the one who brought up the subject, in case you've already forgotten that."

He refused to open his eyes, refused to unfold his arms. "How did I bring up the subject?"

"You asked how long I'd been a single mom. Which led to me asking if you had children. It's a natural flow to the conversation we were having, Mark. If you don't want to talk about it, I'd suggest you don't initiate the topic."

Damn, she was a spitfire! Soon to be a thorn in his side, too, if he wasn't careful. "I was making pleasant conversation. Not trying to bring up any particular thing. Saying the first thing about you that came to mind." Well, that was a whopper of a lie. Over the course of the day too many things about Angela had come to mind. Things that had no business being there in the first place but, apparently, had implanted themselves pretty deeply anyway. "You know, trying to be polite."

"Well, your definition of pleasant conversation and mine sure don't agree, because mine doesn't end with my conversation partner turning all grouchy on me, the way you've done."

She just wasn't going to give up. "That might be the case if I were your conversation partner. But I'm not. I'm just a doctor who came in here to put his feet up and rest for a few minutes. Not to be disturbed."

"But—"

"Not to be disturbed," he interrupted.

"All I was going to say was?"

"Not to be disturbed," he repeated. Eyes still closed. Arms still folded. "Disturb. From the Latin *disturbare*, meaning to break up the quietness or serenity of. In other words, break up the quietness or serenity of... me!"

Rather than taking offense, Angela laughed as she pushed herself off her chair. "Look, Sarah is spending the night with her cousins since I'm getting off way past her bedtime, and I'll be headed down to Catie's Overlook in a while. I'm going to cook for a couple of hours, testing my recipe for Chilean sea bass *puttanesca* with seared fingerling potatoes. Catie's thinking about adding it to her menu. So, if you're not quite so disturbed by then, feel free to come and have dinner with me. My treat. Actually, you'll be eating by yourself, but you will be eating my cooking. Which will probably suit you rather nicely, since you'll be dining *undisturbed*."

"Is that a dinner invitation?" he asked, ready to turn her down.

"As in a date for two people, no. As in, if you're hungry, I'll have food, yes. That's an invitation. And normally after my Chilean sea bass *puttanesca*, no one stays grouchy."

He opened his eyes to respond, to turn her down good and proper, in such a fashion that she'd leave him alone from now on, but she was already gone. Which was just as well. Because he had no intention of more interaction with Angela Blanchard, since interaction seemed to lead to... thoughts.

"Damn," he muttered shutting his eyes, then opening them immediately, when the first image that popped into his mind was... "Damn."

"It's crazy," Angela said, handing the diaper bag to her sister, who was already holding onto Sarah for dear life as the toddler struggled to get loose. Which was being encouraged by the twins, Paige and Pippa, who flanked their mother's side, literally bouncing up and down with excitement. Six years old, and they had more energy than Angela had ever seen in any one spot. "He's barely even nice to me, and what do I do? I invite him to Catie's for dinner."

"You're cooking tonight?" Dinah asked.

"Later, after I get off work from the hospital. Trying out a recipe for her."

"So it's not like you two would be sitting down, having a meal together, would it?"

"The two of us can barely be in the same room together, so I don't think we'd survive a meal sitting at the same table. But, no, we won't be together. In fact, we won't even be in the same part of the restaurant. Which is why this will probably work, if he decides to come. He'll be in the dining room, I'll stay in the kitchen, there'll be walls and doors between us. A beautiful start to what's destined to be a rocky relationship." Laughing, she tossed a bag of Sarah's toys at the twins. "Are you sure you want to do this? I mean, I could take Sarah down to Catie's with me. You know how she loves watching her, and she does have the office set up."

"No, Aunt Angela!" the twins cried in unison.

“They’ve been waiting all day for this. They want to play dress-up with Sarah. I think they also have big plans to decorate the crib as a castle for a fairy princess. And to be honest, I need some baby time. It’s nice just... just holding her. And she’s not going to tolerate that for too much longer.”

“Are you.?” Angela indicated a swollen belly, so not to say the word *pregnant* where the twins would hear.

“Not yet,” Dinah said wistfully. “So I think it’s the time. If Eric ever has time to slow down a little. That’s one of the reasons he brought Mark here, to take up some of the slack while he and Neil spend more family time.”

One of the reasons. Gabby had hinted at something else, too, and she wondered if her sister knew. Now wasn’t the time to ask, though. Not while the twins were within earshot and Catie was expecting her any minute. “Well, when you do, you know you can count on me for anything.”

“For what?” Paige piped up. “What can my mom count on you for?”

“A nice fruit tart I intend to make tonight.”

“Me too,” the twins cried together.

“You too,” Angela said, then gave each of her nieces kisses and hugs. Her nieces. Dinah was a lucky woman, married to a man like Eric who had two such great little girls. They were a good family and she did envy them their family structure. It’s what she’d thought... deluded herself into thinking she’d have with Brad, but that hadn’t turned out to be the case. “Fruit tart for everyone. And now I’ve really got to run.”

She paused long enough to give Sarah a kiss. “I’ll be back tomorrow, sweetie,” she said. “Aunt Dinah is going to take good care of you and I think your cousins have a lot of plans for the evening.” She’d spent nights away from her daughter before, but it was never easy. Not even when it was her own sister taking care of Sarah. One more kiss sufficed, though, before the trickle of tears started, then Angela scooted out the door and hurried to her car.

She was already well into her recipe prep, almost two hours now, and as far as she knew Mark hadn’t come into the restaurant. Two more hours of work at the hospital after she’d dropped Sarah off and she hadn’t seen him there. Now she’d caught herself craning to have a quick look through the pass-through more than she should have, then being oddly disappointed when she didn’t see him. But what did she expect? He didn’t like her, and while she wouldn’t go quite so far as to say she didn’t like him, she did recognize that their relationship was strained. Actually, it wasn’t even a relationship. More like a walking, breathing case of antagonism that crept up on them whenever the two of them happened to be in the same place at the same time.

He fascinated her, though. She didn’t know why, couldn’t explain it, and maybe didn’t want to. But, yes, he did fascinate her. Which was why, deep down, she’d hoped he would come tonight. No date intended, of course.

“Who would you be looking for?” Catie asked.

“No one.”

“Which is why you’ve been glancing longingly through the pass-through every five minutes for the past hour and a half.”

“I invited someone to taste my sea bass, but I haven’t been glancing longingly,” she snapped.

Catie laughed. “Must be a man, the way you’re all riled up.”

“A colleague from the hospital.”

“Tall, dark and handsome? Likes two eggs over easy, dry wheat toast, a bowl of fruit and black coffee for breakfast every morning?”

“Every morning?” Angela asked.

“Every morning. No variations on a breakfast theme. Not ever.”

“Sounds boring.”

“Sounds like you’re trying to dodge my question,” Catie countered, chuckling. “But that’s OK. Everybody’s entitled to some privacy.”

“There’s nothing to be private about. He said he has dinner here quite often, and I offered him my Chilean sea bass *puttanesca* if he happened to stop by tonight. Which he hasn’t.”

“Actually, he has. He’s sitting in the alcove. You can’t see it from the pass-through. And he did ask for your sea bass, as a matter of fact.”

Angela’s pulse sped up a blip. Then she took a deep breath to calm herself down. “I’ll have it ready for him in seven minutes.”

“You could make that a dinner for two, and join him. I mean, it’s almost closing time, there aren’t many people left in the dining room, and there’s really no reason for you being in the kitchen the rest of the evening, since we’ll be starting our closing prep in the next half hour. So, cook your meal for him, then join him.”

“I can’t,” she whispered, feeling the heat rising in her cheeks. And it wasn’t a heat coming from the kitchen.

“Why not?”

“We don’t get along. Not even a little bit. I think that if I were even in the same room with him while he was eating I’d ruin his digestion.”

“Yet he specifically wants your sea bass?” Catie shook her head. “If he thought you’d ruin his digestion, he’d have gone somewhere else for dinner. But he didn’t. And I think you’re being too hard on yourself.”

“I don’t have time for... for anything. Especially not for... well, you know. I’ve got Sarah, and my life is pretty hectic. Even if I didn’t ruin his digestion, I still couldn’t... have dinner with him. Bad timing. Other priorities.”

“Suit yourself. But in my experience, there’s always time, if you want it badly enough. And if you do want it badly enough, surprising things can happen, but only if you give them a chance. Personally, I think Chilean sea bass *puttanesca* for two is a good chance to take.”

Angela glanced over to the back door, to the great hulk of a man loitering there. Walt Graham, her new medical advisor in her camp program. He was a newly diagnosed diabetic himself, and under the close eye of Catie and her healthy cooking. Also the surprise of Catie’s life. Two widowed people, old friends from way back now with one reason to keep them together. No one had seen it coming, but everybody was happy for them. “Maybe for someone else, but I can’t take that chance,” Angela said, turning to the stove. Seven minutes to fix the meal, then she was going home. Out the back door, not through the dining room.

“I’ll admit, it was the best Chilean sea bass *puttanesca* I’ve ever had,” Mark said. The snow was coming down hard for early March. For White Elk that was good as it extended the ski season. And maybe, just maybe, he’d finally find some time to hit the slopes. He’d been intending to for the three months he’d been here, but so far it hadn’t happened.

Angela rose from under the hood of her car, and glared at him. “Glad you liked it,” she snapped.

“I suppose my logical question here is, are you having car trouble? Or do you simply enjoy tinkering with your carburetor in a heavy snow in a dark parking lot?”

“I’m not tinkering with my carburetor.”

He pulled his penlight from his pocket and shined it down, underneath the car hood. “That’s the carburetor, and it looks to me like you’re tinkering with it.”

“My car won’t start,” she admitted.

“And you’re a mechanic? That’s why you’re attempting to fix it?” From the look on her face, he figured he was about to get hit with a snowball, but to put himself in the position of the knight in shining armor coming to the rescue of the damsel in distress simply didn’t suit him. Oh, he’d help her. It was the only proper thing to do. But he wanted to make sure it was on the terms of the relationship they’d already established for themselves. Contentious. That was the only safe thing to do when he couldn’t keep a safe distance from her.

“No, I’m not a mechanic. And I don’t know a carburetor from... from anything else under the hood.”

“Then I’d suggest you get out from under the hood, get into the car and give it a crank so I can hear what’s going on.”

“You’re going to help me?”

She actually sounded surprised, which made him feel bad. And guilty. She was a nice woman with a tough life. Maybe he didn’t want to get involved in all that, but he certainly didn’t want his problems heaped on top of hers. “Look, Angela, I know we’re got some differences?”

“Big differences,” she interrupted.

In spite of himself, he couldn’t help smiling. *This* was the Angela that intrigued him. “Big differences. But I never meant you to get the impression that I was downright mean.”

“And rude,” she supplied.

He chuckled. “OK, mean and rude. But I’m at a bad place in my life right now, which has nothing to do with you. And I really just want to be left alone. Which is hard to do when—”

“When I keep coming at you?”

“Actually, you do keep coming at me, but that’s not it. It’s... everything.” He gestured to the restaurant, to the Three Sisters mountain peaks shadowed in the distance, to the main street of the village. To the parking light, where in the pinkish haze the snowflakes danced like fairy ballerinas. “It’s everything. I don’t want to be here. Don’t want this kind of life. Not medicine, not anything that I’ve had. But I’ve got it for the next year and a half, like it or not, and so far you seem to be the one who’s always closest when I feel it all closing in around me.”

“So, because of proximity, I get the brunt of your bad mood?”

Mark cringed. She was right about that and it made him feel ashamed. Yet something in the very essence of Angela Blanchard made him want to correct his life, and correct it immediately. Whatever it was about her that stirred that frantic beast in him burrowed to the very heart of what he needed. When she wasn’t around, he was able to concentrate on the tasks at hand; when she was, that compulsion to change, to try on a different existence nearly consumed him. “Something like that, and I’m sorry. I read your proposal earlier, and I respect what you’re trying to do. It looks like an amazing program and I have every intention of speaking up on your behalf tomorrow, and supporting it in the months I’ll be here.”

“I hope you’ll speak on my behalf with a smile on your face, because with the scowl you’re usually wearing, Eric and Neil won’t be convinced that you really think it’s a good idea.”

Yes, she did come straight at him and he was beginning to like that directness. “I don’t always scowl, do I?”

“About ninety-nine percent of the time.”

“Then tomorrow I promise ninety-eight.”

“You resist moving by leaps and bounds, don’t you? You prefer baby steps.”

“And you always move by leaps and bounds.”

“Life is short,” she said, pulling her scarf tighter around her neck as a gust of wind hit her. “I know there’s that poem that talks about not going gently into the good night, and that’s how I want to live my life, because there’s so much I want to do, and I won’t get it done going gently. I lost eight years I can’t get back, and I’m not wasting another minute.”

“Which is why you want to be a mountain rescue paramedic,” he said, feeling a fragile thread of guilt for not including her in the program. But he wasn’t going to. If he had to do this, he was going to give it his best, and that included putting the right people in place. As tough as Angela was, she still didn’t fit the criteria and, on that, he couldn’t budge. “So I assume this is where you’re going to make your pitch again? Right?”

“Wrong. You’re not getting rid of me, and I intend on being in your class, not in the back row, though. But I accept your decision. Don’t like it, but I’ll make it work for me.”

Which was one of the reasons he couldn't afford any kind of relationship with her. She was so dynamic, so positive. He truly feared it could rub off on him. Truly feared it could make him change his mind about so many things he'd been etching in stone these past couple of years. "Well, right now we need to figure out if we can make your car work for you."

Angela climbed in, turned the key, elicited only a clicking noise. No grinding, no sputtering, no nothing.

"How long's it been since you've had a new battery?" he called out.

"A month. That was my last repair." She tried it again. Still, nothing happened.

So he checked the battery cables and terminals, jiggled, adjusted and had her try one more time, to no avail. "Well, the good news is it's not the carburetor," he said, pulling out from under the hood. "The bad news is it's either the starter or the starter solenoid. Meaning you need a mechanic."

"I've needed a mechanic almost every other week lately. Or it's the time to buy a new car. I've got to find something more dependable because of Sarah." She pulled her cell phone from her pocket. Started to dial.

"Calling a cab?"

She shook her head. "Calling Eric."

"Let him spend the evening with his family. I'll take you home," Mark offered impulsively.

"Are you sure?"

Again, she acted surprised that he had a little niceness in him. He really did have to work on that... some. "You fixed me a good dinner. It's the least I can do."

"Then I accept." She tucked her phone in her pocket, grabbed her purse, her briefcase, and her laptop computer from the back of her car. Mark took the laptop and briefcase, and led her to a large black pickup truck that was so high off the ground she wondered if she could get herself inside it without making a complete fool of herself. "Men and their big trucks," she said, hoisting herself up.

"Practical when you're living in the mountains," he said while he waited for her to settle herself.

He was barely inside when she asked, "But you're not going to live in the mountains, are you? Once you've fulfilled your eighteen months, don't you plan on getting out of here?"

"And if I don't need a truck where I'm going, I'll get something else."

"You don't know where you're going?" That didn't surprise her, as Mark seemed more like a man who was running away from something rather than running to it.

"Not a clue. Don't really care. One road's as good as another, and if it leads me someplace else, I'm perfectly fine with that."

Fastening her seat belt, Angela relaxed back into the leather seat, loving the new aroma of it. It reminded her of Mark. Big, manly, bold. "No one's ever sat in this seat before, have they?" It was a strange question to ask, but she couldn't see Mark involved enough with anyone to allow them in this seat, and she wanted to know. Such a solitary man.

"You're the first, except for the salesman who sat there when I took it out for a test drive."

No women. He didn't date. Again, it didn't surprise her, yet, in a way, it did. Men like Mark Anderson didn't live without women. In other circumstances, she could picture him with a woman hanging on each arm. Under these circumstances, though, all she could picture was him alone. And scowling. "I want seventy-five percent tomorrow rather than ninety-eight."

"What?"

"Your scowl. I want you scowling only seventy-five percent of the time. Being all sullen the way you are is bad for your digestion, and while I certainly wouldn't lecture you on all the things that can go wrong with you physiologically when your gut stays in a constant knot, let me just say that nothing good comes of it. So, if you force yourself to quit frowning for a quarter of your day, and even try and smile a little during that time, you're going to relax your gut and feel much better overall."

"And that's your professional opinion?"

“Yes. But that’s also the opinion of someone who spent too much time frowning, whose gut was knotted up just like yours.”

“What happened to change that?”

“I became happy. Had Sarah, realized the value of my friends. Discovered what I really wanted in my life wasn’t as complicated as I was making it out to be. And, most important, I figured out what I didn’t want and put an end to it.” All of it the truth. When she’d quit letting Brad be the shadow over her that had always held her back, everything had changed. Mark had the same kind of shadow over him, she could see it looming very close, barely allowing him any room to breathe. It was a pity because underneath the scowl she was catching glimpses of something good, and something so conflicted he didn’t even know the good was there anymore.

Heading out of the parking lot and turning left onto the main street through town, Angela glanced up to the silhouette of the Three Sisters?three mountain peaks that towered over the entire valley. According to Indian lore, their magic safeguarded White Elk and all the people within their shadow. But theirs was a good shadow. Mark’s was not, and it was so heavy she could almost feel it trying to cloud her outlook. It was not a good place to be. In fact, it gave her cold chills. *Come on, Three Sisters*, she said silently to herself. Maybe, just maybe, they had a little of their magic in reserve for Mark, because he really did need it.

CHAPTER THREE

THE short drive was quiet, and once Angela had given Mark directions to her house, she settled back to stare out the window in lieu of tumbling into any sort of dialogue with him. Especially since he was making no effort to talk about anything. The silence between them was a little unnerving, so was sitting so close to him. She didn't know why, didn't know why the hair on her arms seemed especially tingly, or the little chill bumps parading their way up her spine seemed especially charged. But they did, which was why she chose to fix her attention on the road, and on the brisk snow trying its best to lay down a new blanket.

"What the...!" About three minutes into the drive, Mark jammed on the truck's brakes then threw the truck into reverse before it had even come to a complete stop.

The seat belt snapped tight on Angela. "What's wrong?" she gasped, hurled rudely from a nice, relaxed mellow into an immediate panic. She tried tugging the seat belt loose and found it locked down tight across her chest.

"Not sure," he said, looking over his shoulder as he guided the truck backwards. "Thought I saw..."

No more words were spoken. Mark slammed on the truck brakes, and before she could say another thing he'd unfastened his seat belt, hopped out and was already sprinting toward the sidewalk.

"Mark," she called, trying to maneuver herself out of her own seat belt. She wasn't as swift as he'd been about it, and by the time her feet hit the slippery street, he was already half a block a head of her, on his way down the footpath into the city park. "What are you doing?" she cried when she'd almost caught up to him and saw him drop to his knees.

"Saw somebody," he yelled back.

He'd struggled out of his coat by the time she'd reached his side. That's when she saw... "It's Mr. Whetherby. He's the town librarian, and he has dinner at the lodge every Friday night. Lobster Newburg and..." She checked her words when she realized that Richard Whetherby was lying on the ground, not moving, and she was babbling. Immediately, Angela dropped to her knees alongside Mark. "What's wrong with him?" Imitating Mark's actions, she pulled off her own coat and laid it over the still form in the snow.

"Darned if I know. I just saw him lying here..."

"You saw him from the street?" Mark's fingers were busy assessing the pulse in Richard's neck. She recognized that action.

"It's what I do." No other explanation.

"Tell me what I can do." Already, she was pulling her cell phone from her pocket. "Call for an ambulance?"

"Good first step. Tell them he's hypothermic, pulse thready and slow. Tell them we're going to need something to warm him in the ER, and to get one of the orthopedists in? I think we have a serious fracture."

She made the call, told them exactly what Mark had said and, after she had clicked off, while Mark was making an evaluation of Richard's arms and legs, Angela let her fingers stray to the same pulse point Mark had taken a reading from only moments earlier, hoping to learn, at firsthand, what it felt like. And, there it was, slow and thready, like Mark had said. To compare, she felt the pulse in her own neck and was able to determine what a healthy one was compared to the one barely beating at her fingertips. The difference was astonishing. Frightening. For the first time in her life she truly comprehended that she was feeling the very essence of life, and while her essence was strong, Richard's was slipping away.

It didn't take trained medical experience to know that.

"I think it's his hip," Mark said, standing. "Can't tell for sure, but that would be my guess for a primary injury. Everything else going on is probably a result of that. Look, I'm going to run to the truck for my bag. I'll be back right back." He didn't wait for her reply. He simply turned and ran down the footpath with a stride and strength she couldn't have possibly matched. Which left her there alone. Richard Whetherby's only lifeline for the next minute.

"Richard," she said. "It's Angela. Angela Blanchard. I'm here with Mark Anderson, one of the doctors from the hospital. We're going to take good care of you, get you all bundled up and take you to the hospital in just a couple of minutes."

No response, of course. No movement either. Because of that, Angela wanted to feel Richard's life force again, just to reassure herself. So she laid her fingers back on his pulse point, but couldn't find the faint rhythm she'd felt before. Anxiously, she tried again. Moved her fingers from side to side, up and down a little, yet still couldn't find his pulse. Suddenly, it hit her like that proverbial lightning bolt! "Mark," she screamed, rising up on her knees to position Richard's head back a little. She'd taken a CPR class years ago but hadn't ever practiced it except on a dummy. But now... "Mark!" she screamed again as she forced Richard's stiff jaw open and bent to give him a breath. Actually, she gave him several... couldn't remember how many, but she knew it had to be several. Then she reared up, threw off the coat covering the man's chest, pulled his own coat open, placed one of her hands on top of the other, went to the critical spot in his chest she remembered from her instruction, and started to pump. "One, two, three..." she said aloud, fearing she wasn't pressing hard enough, or that she was pressing too hard. She remembered something about bad positioning and broken ribs and punctured lungs.

"Angela!" Mark said, dropping down beside her.

"I couldn't find a pulse," she gasped, scooting aside while he took over the chest compressions. "So I..." Rather than finishing the sentence, she positioned herself at Richard's head, counting each and every one of Mark's chest compressions. "Is it thirty to two?" she asked.

He nodded. Didn't look at her. And as she counted down the thirty, she got ready for the next two breaths, repositioned Richard's head, drew in her own deep breath, then laid her mouth to his. She and Mark alternately repeated their resuscitation efforts for the next few minutes... minutes that felt like an eternity, neither one of them uttering a word as they concentrated on what had to be done. Then, finally, in the distance, came the wail of a siren. A flash of relief passed between them in the fleeting glance they allowed themselves.

"Where are you?" a voice from the road yelled.

"Twenty yards down the footpath," Angela yelled.

"Angela," Mark said. "Can you hold the flashlight, and keep his head tipped back once I get it into position. We need to get him breathing, and I'm going to insert an endotracheal tube into his throat."

The first paramedic resumed the chest compressions, the second broke out the equipment? the tubes, the oxygen, the heart monitor. At Mark's prompt, he handed the ET tube to Angela, who turned it over in her hands, not sure what it was.

"When I ask for it, hand it to me. Until then, just keep the light steady, and make sure that his head doesn't slip. Normally I don't have to get belly down in the snow to do this, and it's going to be a little tricky."

"I can do this," she whispered, more for her own ears to hear than for Mark's. But he heard anyway.

"I know you can." He gave two good squeezes to the resuscitation bag, which had replaced the mouth-to-mouth efforts. "Oh, and when I get the tube in, hand me a stethoscope."

It was all procedural, very matter-of-fact, which amazed her. Step one, step two, step three... a methodical plan they all knew, but she didn't.

"And once I get the tube in, be ready to hold it while I check to make sure it's in the right place."

Now, that scared her a little, but she nodded, hoping her nervousness didn't make her look like one of those dolls with the bobbling heads.

"Ready?" he asked, squeezing the resuscitation bag one last time. Then signaled for the paramedic to stop the chest compressions momentarily.

It happened in the blink of an eye, but she took in everything. Mark positioned Richard's head, she positioned the flashlight. Mark lowered himself flat in the snow, she took hold of Richard's head and held on for dear life. Then Mark took some kind of instrument from his pocket... she couldn't remember its name, but she'd ask him later... opened Richard's mouth even more, then asked for the tube. Instinctively, she moved closer as she handed it to him and, without fanfare or effort, Mark simply slid that tube into Richard's mouth. Not the esophagus, she told herself. This tube was for breathing, so it went into the trachea.

For the first time she wondered about the anatomy of it, wondered what separated the two as they were in the same area. Wondered how Mark differentiated.

"Stethoscope," Mark said. "And hold the tube for me now. Don't let it move."

Angela was immediately in the snow, not on her belly, but close to it, as Mark rose to his knees to listen. The IV paramedic who manned the equipment, and who was also preparing to start an IV, attached the resuscitation bag to the tube, gave it a couple of good squeezes, and Mark nodded.

"Tape it in place," he told Angela, as the paramedic dropped a roll of white tape down to her.

"Tape it?" she asked.

Chest compressions were starting again. Mark was busy doing something with a syringe. The IV paramedic was attaching a bag of fluids to the tubes coming from Richard's arm. So many things were going on and Angela felt more lost than ever in all the procedures. Even the simple ones, like taping the tube.

"Lasso the tape around the tube then anchor it on both sides of Richard's face," Mark explained with all the patience of a good teacher.

So easily said, yet such a daunting thing to do. *For her*. Still, she taped the tube in place as Mark attached the syringe to a tiny tube sticking out of it.

"Blowing up the cuff," he explained. "The small tube leads to an inflatable cuff on the actual breathing tube—endotracheal tube is what it's called?and when air is inserted into the small tube, it gives the endotracheal tube a tight fit to the tracheal walls so it doesn't slip or let air get in around it." He completed the task, then reattached the resuscitation bag to the tube and fell back into the rhythm of thirty compressions, two breaths.

All of this in mere seconds. Angela was amazed. And exhausted by the time they'd stabilized Richard enough to lift him onto the stretcher.

"Don't you have to shock him or something?" she asked. She'd seen it on TV. Rush in, get the paddles, shock the heart. But they weren't doing that here.

"We've got good oxygenation established to his brain, and it was done quickly. The purpose of CPR is not so much to revive the patient but to keep them oxygenated long enough to get them proper help. The hospital is two blocks from here... better to try the cardioversion there, in a more controlled environment."

Cardioversion... something else to look up.

As Mark explained all this to Angela, the paramedics whisked Richard to the ambulance. And by the time Mark paused for a breath, and Angela had picked up their discarded coats, the ambulance was pulling away. "That was so fast," she whispered. Ten, maybe fifteen minutes, tops, from the time Mark had first spotted him. It was amazing!

"Thanks to you," he said, taking her coat from her, brushing the snow off it then helping her into it.

"I didn't do anything. I just... Look, do you need to follow them to the hospital?"

"I should. As I started this, I'd like to see it through."

“Then you go on. I want to stay here, see if I can find Fred. And clean up the trash we’ve created.” Bags, boxes, tubes... an amazing amount of supplies and trash left behind for such a fast procedure.

“Fred?”

“Richard’s dog. A Yorkshire terrier. He walks him out here at night. Everybody in White Elk knows Fred... he spends his days at the library, under the checkout desk. He has special privileges as a service dog.”

“Service dog, like for the disabled.”

Angela smiled. “The library board was kind when Richard asked for permission to keep Fred with him. The kids who come to the library love the dog, and participation in the various children’s programs has gone up since Fred started collaborating in storytime.”

“Then you’d better find Fred, or there’s going to be a lot of disappointed children. But how are you going to get home?”

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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