

PREGNANT NURSE, NEW-FOUND FAMILY
Lynne Marshall



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Lynne Marshall

Pregnant Nurse, New-Found Family

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Enter into the world of high-flying Doctors as they navigate the pressures of modern medicine and find escape, passion, comfort and love – in each other’s arms! Her baby bombshell! After one special night with beautiful nurse Bethany Caldwell, ER doctor Gavin Riordan is torn. He so wanted to pursue their relationship, but now he has been given custody of his much loved son. The little boy is his priority, and no matter how much he wants her, he must put Beth out of his mind. In Beth’s eyes, Gavin’s devotion to his son just adds to the gorgeous doctor’s charm, and she’s devastated to let him go. Then she discovers she is pregnant with his baby! Beth feels a baby is the last thing Gavin needs, but it could be just what they need to bind them together for ever – as a family!

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How hard was it to say, *I'm pregnant?*

She sighed, and distracted herself by cleaning up her equipment and charts.

A strong, warm hand wrapped around her wrist and stopped her. She looked into his inquisitive eyes and swallowed.

“What do you need to tell me?”

She blew a light breath through her lips and tried to ignore the butterflies in her stomach.

He didn't let go. “Well, it's been exactly five weeks since we...ah...met.”

“I remember it well. Now go on.”

“And earlier this week, when I passed out, they ran some lab tests on me.”

His head tilted the tiniest bit and his eyes grew more serious.

“The thing is...I'm pregnant,” she whispered.

Lynne Marshall has been a registered nurse for twenty-five years. She's been an avid reader all her life. She began her writing journey in 2000, and quickly discovered Medical™ Romance allowed her to combine both her love of medicine and drama. Lynne is happily married to a police lieutenant, and has a grown daughter and son. Besides her passion for writing romance stories, she loves travel, reading, and power walks. You can visit Lynne's website at www.lynnemarshallweb.com

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PREGNANT NURSE, NEW-FOUND FAMILY

BY

LYNNE MARSHALL



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This book is dedicated to the five years I worked as an allergy nurse, when I made special friends such as Joyce, Lorraine, Sue, Annette and Esther. With special thanks to Dr. Kenigsberg for helping me iron out my original premise, and in fond memory of Dr. Freund, a true gentleman.

CHAPTER ONE

THE last thing Gavin Riordan had ever expected was to be a full-time father again. The family courtroom drama had been legendary over the custody of his son three years before, but in the end the judge had ruled, as was most traditional, on the side of the mother.

He shook his head at the memory that Tuesday evening, and jogged down the hall in the clinic section of Los Angeles Mercy Hospital with his son in tow.

“Bupinder, have you got a minute?” He pulled the resistant nine-year-old, Patrick, along behind him.

The allergy doctor slowed down to let them catch up.

“May I run something by you?” he asked.

“Of course,” she said.

“I tell you, it’s the strangest thing.” Gavin accompanied the petite allergist along the clinic corridor. “One minute Patrick was fine. The next he had a huge asthma attack. Got any ideas?”

Dr Bupinder Mehta slanted her head in thought and studied Gavin’s son with large brown eyes. She turned back and asked, “Has he taken any antihistamines in the last week?”

“Not since the last big attack a month ago.” That asthma attack had made sense, as his mother had been leaving for England the next day and Patrick had been torn up about saying goodbye. But why had he had the asthma flare-up this time?

They’d spent the day together and gone to the movies in the afternoon. Gavin was determined to make up for not being the father he should have been all along, now that Patrick was living with him again. As usual, as soon as they’d returned home on Sunday afternoon, Patrick had run to his bedroom and slammed the door. A short time later he had come out wheezing. “This last time he just needed inhalers.”

“Then let’s do a skin test. Pollens, food, we can do the whole panel if he’s willing and you’ve got the time.” She brushed her long, black braid over her white lab coat and pushed on the double doors to a large, bright waiting room.

“I guess there’s no time like the present.” Gavin rushed ahead and held the door open with one hand and scratched his neck with the other. He sent a glance his son’s way and quickly saw the pursed lips and usual defensive resolve. He was positive his ex-wife Maureen’s sudden departure for England for four months had something to do with Patrick’s return of asthma after all these years.

Thinking of asthma as an emotional disease had been out of favor with the experts for a long time, yet Gavin still felt there was a connection. After he got some concrete medical answers, he’d deal with the emotional triggers in Patrick’s life.

On a whim, Maureen had decided to take a university extension course in art history at Oxford. She’d left Patrick with Gavin, even though it had meant putting him in a new school for the last few months before summer vacation and losing contact with all of his old friends. Maureen had always been impulsive, especially when it came to spending Gavin’s money. Patrick was definitely unhappy

with the situation. And Gavin was still adjusting to the added responsibility of being a full-time single dad while running the Mercy Hospital ER.

But he was determined to make things work. And right now that meant getting to the bottom of his son's new onset of asthma flare-ups.

"Beth, will you do one last skin test for me, please?" Dr Mehta's precise British accent echoed in the almost empty room.

The nurse snapped her head around and looked straight at them.

"I know it's late, but I'd like to do my colleague a favor, if you don't mind."

At first she looked startled, as if a spark of recognition flickered in her intense hazel eyes. She quickly recovered, and her stare washed over him like a cold wave. Holy smoke. She was the woman from the party.

"I think you've got the wrong person," she murmured in the hallway of the chief resident's condominium after the kiss that had made his toes curl.

"Feels pretty right to me." He tilted her chin and kissed her again. "My name's Gavin."

"I'm Bethany. Beth," she whispered over his mouth before smothering him with another brain-melting kiss.

Oh, yeah, she wanted him.

He hadn't used the best judgement that night. But he'd had no regrets. Not one. That was, until now.

She looked different with her hair pulled back into a tight ponytail, no make-up on, and baggy uniform scrubs, but she couldn't fool him. Though nothing like the wild woman he'd encountered a month ago, it was Beth nevertheless. She ignored him, while turning a deep shade of crimson, smiled at her boss, nodding her head as though no earth-shattering recognition had just occurred.

They were both adults. They'd made a choice to make love without knowing each other. So why did he feel so off balance? Because he'd never done anything as crazy as that before!

"I need to check Mr Plescia's arms, then I'll be right with you." She flicked her glance away before he had the chance to smile at her, and walked across the room to her other patient.

This could get awkward.

He'd hoped he would see her again, but he'd had to leave the party in a rush when his charge nurse, Carmen, had beeped and alerted him that Patrick had been admitted into an ER fifty miles away in Irvine with a full-blown asthma attack. That had been the Saturday night before his ex had left for England—his last weekend of freedom before becoming a full-time father again—and he'd acted like a crazed college student at a frat party. But, damn, he'd been angry with Maureen for pulling another stunt, and nervous about having his son come to live with him, and, well, he'd decided to cut loose. Not much to be proud of.

After the news about Patrick's asthma attack, he'd been so distracted he'd forgotten to ask for her full name or to get her phone number. It was an easy stretch to assume she thought he'd used her. In a way he had. He regretfully shook his head. Damn, he was out of practice. The least he could have done was found out where she worked and called her.

Well, surprise! She worked in Allergy, five stories up from the ER and located in the adjoining clinic wing of Mercy's large campus.

Patrick squeezed his hand. "I don't want to do this test."

"We've got to find out what keeps setting off your asthma, Patrick."

"What if it hurts?"

"I'll ask the nurse to be extra-gentle." The comment seemed to work as Patrick now studied the nurse with his pewter-colored pleading eyes.

The diminutive allergist nodded her head as she meticulously wrote on a green sheet and signed the allergy testing forms.

“Beth, do a complete panel and throw in all of the foods we have. I know it’s late, but I’ll be sure you get overtime pay.” She motioned for Gavin and Patrick to sit behind the patient interview counter. “I’ll be in my office.”

A huge blip crossed Beth’s radar screen. This was the man from the party last month! His eyes had worked better than a hypnotist’s watch while they’d stood assessing each other in the hallway at that resident’s party that night, and she’d definitely been entranced by him. He’d felt so good pressing against her, good height, firm muscles spanning his chest and arms. They’d shared a first and second kiss as if a slow-motion magnet had been between them. And then...

After a sudden full body blush, her heart sank to her toes, along with all her blood. There he stood, arms folded, long wide stance, narrow hips, his sturdy, muscular frame covered in faded green ER scrubs and a white coat. And how could she forget his close-cropped brown hair? She’d run her hands through it countless times that night.

Do not blush again.

They’d made crazy love in a secluded room at the party, and now she couldn’t even tell if he recognized her.

Gavin had looked surprised when she’d cut him down with her killer glance in front of his son, but that’s what he deserved for not having the decency to remember who she was. It hurt to think she’d been that insignificant to him. But what else was new when it came to the men in her life?

To his credit, he did look a bit confused. Or chagrined. She should be offended, right? *He* had been the one to seduce *her*. She chose to ignore the fact that she’d been a willing and enthusiastic accomplice and had thoroughly enjoyed the whole experience.

He covered her mouth with a soft, warm kiss and teased her with tiny flicks of his tongue that managed to feather all the way down to her toes. She inhaled his steamy breath and parted her lips, tasting spearmint and spirits. And just when she let herself give in, he made an abrupt break away, a decisive look in his eyes. A firm grip circled her wrist. He tugged her down the hall to a room. A bedroom. Woozy from the combination of his mesmerizing kiss and peach daiquiris, she followed, knowing exactly what she was doing.

Intense, sexy eyes drilled into her when they reached the door. Decision time. Speak now or forever hold her peace. Beth hadn’t felt this alive in years...

Her heart jittered with the memory. A quick reality check helped her realize it was time to “forever hold her peace”. Some things were best left forgotten.

He hadn’t even asked for her phone number when he’d gotten beeped and had run out on her. How cold had that been? Two could play at this game. If he pretended not to remember her, she’d do the same.

All business, she ignored Gavin and bent to talk to Patrick. “My name’s Bethany. I’ll be your nurse for the testing today. OK?” She noticed the purple and gold basketball jersey he wore with the number twenty-four on it. “Lakers fan, huh?” The boy’s eyes brightened and he smiled shyly and nodded. “Me, too.” She took his hand. “Is this the shirt you wear when you need a little extra courage?”

“I guess.”

“Don’t worry, everything will be fine. Follow me.”

She walked briskly toward the testing area, the boy’s moist, floppy hand in hers, and forced herself to speak in a steady, soothing voice. “So what brings you to the clinic?”

“I dunno.”

“When he was a baby he had twitchy lungs.” Gavin broke in. “Then for several years he was fine. Now he’s started with full-blown asthma attacks again.” He looked thoughtfully at his son, as if they both knew when and why the new onset of asthma had started.

“I don’t want to get tested, Dad.” He squirmed, his face screwed up, and tears leaked from his squinted eyes.

“Patrick, you can do this, son.” He gently put his hand on the boy’s shoulder.

“Maybe your father should get tested, too.” She wasn’t above stealth attacks.

The boy stopped protesting, and looked curiously up at his father.

Picking up on her suggestion, Gavin cast a wry glance her way and said, “Yeah. Sure. I’ll go through it with you.” Though he lacked obvious enthusiasm.

“The testing?” Patrick questioned in a high voice.

“Yup. We’ll do it together.” This time he sounded more convincing, and Beth managed to keep a straight face. Sweet revenge.

Patrick glanced cautiously at her. She smiled and lifted her brows. “What do you say?” Though Gavin did seem sincere, she tried not to credit him with any heroics. After all, she’d left him no way out.

An impish grin erupted on the boy’s face, the first bright expression she’d seen from him since he’d shown up. His father nodded. “OK.”

Pleased with her successful manipulation, she gave Gavin a cheeky smile. “Looks like you’re on.”

He blinked.

She gestured for Gavin and Patrick to take their seats. “Have either of you ever been tested for allergies before?”

Gavin stared at her mouth with a distracted subtle smile, while watching her talk.

Patrick’s attention had been diverted to the television in the waiting room. As though on cue they both realized she’d asked them something. “What?” they said in unison.

“Pay attention, guys. I’m on overtime and we need to get this show on the road.”

“Could you repeat the question, please?” Gavin’s gaze drifted from her mouth back up to her glare.

Deep-set, molasses-colored eyes almost penetrated Beth’s composure when she made the mistake of looking into them. Her mind went blank. An awkward staring contest ensued. Her breathing quickened. She cleared her throat. “I said, have either of you been tested for allergies before?”

“Never,” he said, without releasing her from his stare.

A blush threatened. Beth willed it to stop, a futile endeavor. She ran a hand through her hair, wishing she’d fixed herself up a bit more today. Why hadn’t she worn any make-up? Right, she had been running late this morning, feeling a bit queasy after her morning coffee. Obviously she’d made it too strong and her stomach had been out of sorts all day because of it. Come to think of it, she’d been feeling under the weather since last week.

“Dr Metha has ordered a lot of tests.” She strode to the cabinet and removed two hospital gowns: one adult and one pediatric-sized—and discreetly glanced at Gavin’s chest when she handed them over. She couldn’t miss a soft patch of hair below his neck at the V of his hospital scrub top. “You’ll both need to undress from the waist up. You know the drill, opening to the back.”

He lifted his top over his head before she had a chance to close the curtain. A charming, boyish grin covered his face, though that wasn’t where her eyes concentrated as he stood before her half-naked. She recalled how quickly he’d gotten undressed the last time they’d met. “I’m ready.”

She wasn’t. Beth couldn’t help noticing the fine line of dark hair beginning at his trim waist and sprinkling upward across his substantial chest. She remembered how it had tickled her cheek. Her face went hot. She lifted her gaze and shot him a warning look for teasing her so openly in front of his son.

“Why don’t you help Patrick with his gown?” she asked, distracted. “After that, you can sign these consents. I’ll be back.” She tossed the papers on the table and left before he could notice how much he’d affected her. But she suspected it was too late—how could he *not* have noticed?

“I’ll be waiting.” His Arnold Schwarzenegger imitation wasn’t half-bad.

She strode to the refrigerator and removed three trays of testing antigens, trying her best to steady her nerves.

Poor Patrick. Dr Mehta wanted the works and that's what the two of them would get. She'd get a certain satisfaction in stab—Er, scratching the cocksure doc a good sixty times in payment for being so damn sexy. But she felt bad for the boy. It was never easy to test children, especially if they were afraid. At least Dr Mehta had come up with an abridged version for kids under twelve. Beth had been told by many of her patients that she had a soft touch, and today she'd definitely use it on Patrick. But Gavin? Well, that was another story.

She shook her head. So this was what she got for watching those chick-living-in-the-big-city sitcoms. They made casual sex seem so easy and without consequences. Well, here she was, sweating in her scrubs and wishing she'd never been so bold with the ER doc. What in the world had come over her that night? Two words. Gavin Riordan. And now, several weeks later, her total physical attraction to the man hadn't changed an iota.

She carefully placed the trays on a movable bedside table and rolled everything toward the half-closed curtain. Gavin, still naked from the waist up, swept the curtain open for her, affording another view of his muscular shoulders and arms. Everything about his incredibly superb physique affected her right down to the core, exactly the same way it had the night they'd "met".

"Here. I think you forgot this," she said, lifting the gown from the gurney and tossing it back at him.

Slightly off balance, Beth gulped and gestured with an unsteady hand toward the narrow gurneys. Making another attempt to sound professional, she concentrated on Patrick's scrawny body instead of his father's mature, masculine frame.

"I need both of you to lie face down on the testing tables."

"Now, that sounds like fun," Gavin said, obviously making light of what they were about to undergo for his son's sake.

Patrick dove for the gurney and it rolled a few inches, making him look like a surfer paddling out on the Pacific Ocean.

"Whoa, hold on, dude," Gavin stopped the gurney with a sculpted arm, and pressed on the brake.

Beth's gaze ran over the smooth tanned skin of his back. She shook her head. He was nothing more than a brief sensual treat. Eye candy. That's all.

An incredibly sexy memory of the two of them in a rather exotic position forced its way into her mind, and she almost lost her composure again.

Beth helped Patrick get into position on the gurney and gave him an encouraging look. "You'll do fine. I'll test your dad first, OK?"

The boy nodded in relief with a tense, thin-lipped smile.

She tried her best to ignore Gavin's goose-bumps at her touch, rationalizing that it was the cleansing alcohol wipe she'd applied, the potent whiff of which seemed to be taking her breath away...

Gavin felt Beth's breath blowing lightly over him. The fine hair on his neck stood erect and his skin prickled. She had a face he couldn't forget—bright hazel eyes surrounded by thick lashes and brows the color of dark honey, and a fine, straight nose. Her kissable lips were a natural tone. He'd already committed to memory how those lips felt. And her body. She'd tried her best to cover it up today, but he knew what was beneath those scrubs.

Where did they go from here? Hot sex with a stranger was one thing, but did he really want to get to know her? Maybe some things were best left forgotten.

It tickled when she drew something on his back and applied light, chilling drops of liquid. He relaxed and enjoyed the sensual feeling.

She began to scratch him beneath each of the droplets with something that felt like a needle. Hey! What was that?

“How does it feel, Dad?”

“Not bad at all,” he fibbed. “Sort of like a pinch.”

“Just a light scratch,” Beth said.

Yeah, and we’re just work colleagues.

Wanting to be a good example for his son, he managed a reassuring smile then laid his forehead down on the backs of his hands and forced himself to relax. But soon his head shot up. “I felt that one.” Oops.

“Sorry. I was just thinking about the last time I saw you. A lady, um, called you away.”

OK. So she definitely remembered him. Yeah, Carmen’s timing had certainly sucked that night, but she’d found out that Patrick had been in the ER and had done the right thing by beeping him. It had been a much wiser choice than breaking in on them, though he was certain Carmen had known exactly what had been going on.

Ignoring another sharp scratch, Gavin seized the opportunity to explain. “That was no lady, that was my ER charge nurse, Carmen.”

“I like Carmen,” Patrick chimed in. “She lets me watch videos at her house sometimes.”

“She was my designated driver, Bethany.” He raised his head and looked over his shoulder. “What is your last name?”

Her eyes quickly flitted away. “Caldwell. Bethany Caldwell. Now, lie still or these drops will run together.”

“Nice to meet you again, Bethany Caldwell. Carmen was supposed to keep me out of trouble that night.” Gavin couldn’t resist reminding her about them *meeting* the month before. Sure, he’d wished he’d known her last name and where she worked. If he’d had it all to do over again, he’d definitely handle the situation differently. It was probably too late to worry about that now, though.

“Did you get into trouble, Dad?”

“Nah, I was just kidding.” Turning his attention back to Beth, he said, “As I recall, you’re divorced, right?”

“My mom and dad are divorced.” Patrick hadn’t a clue what was going on but, as usual, just wanted to be in on the conversation.

Beth rolled the stool she sat on toward the counter to discard her cotton swabs and lancets. “Well, I guess we have something in common, then.”

Gavin remembered her silly toast about her ex-husband at the party. Something about “May the dog lose his pecker in a mysterious accident.” He scratched his nose and tried not to crack a smile. It sounded as though her marriage had ended as badly as his had.

She washed her hands and rolled toward Patrick’s gurney.

“Now it’s your turn, fella.” She gave Patrick a warm smile. Gavin liked the way she treated his son, especially as he missed his mother so much. He went back to resting his chin on a pedestal made from two fists, and thought he could get used to looking at Beth.

“That’s cold,” Patrick protested. “It tickles.” He giggled and contorted while she drew lines and letters on his back.

“OK, let’s get all the squirming over with before we start the test.” She tickled his sides until he laughed so hard he relaxed.

It took a special woman to know how to work with kids. He’d give her that. Gavin optimistically calculated the odds of getting to know Bethany Caldwell better. He genuinely wasn’t a cad. Not asking her full name or getting her number really had been beneath his usual standards. And never in his life had he carried on with a woman he hadn’t even been introduced to. But, as they said, there’s always a first. Hell, if they’d been dating and the sex had been that amazing, he’d have sent flowers the next day. But that night, with the strong sexual current flowing between them, his good sense had gotten left behind. And when Carmen had beeped him and alerted him about Patrick, well...

Now the question was, how could he make up for it?

Intense itching ratcheted up in wicked swirls around the test patches on his back. “Am I allowed to scratch?”

“Absolutely not.”

“You’re sadistic, you know that?”

“What’s sadistic mean?” Patrick asked as Beth made the first scratch on his back. He didn’t protest, but his face turned red from trying to hold still.

“It means she made my back itch a lot and won’t let me scratch it.”

“It’s one of the perks of the job,” she said, looking playfully at him for the first time that evening. He remembered that look.

Beth quickly finished testing Patrick without a peep coming from him. Gavin wondered why his back felt on fire but *his* son wasn’t complaining at all.

“OK, guys. Now you have to lie here for twenty minutes.”

“Hey, where are you going?” Gavin asked.

“To clean up the work station. It’s closing time. Talk amongst yourselves.”

He lay there like a good boy trying to be teacher’s pet but his skin flushed from warm to hot, beginning from the top of his head downward. His scalp felt tingly. “Does your head itch?”

“Nope,” Patrick said, looking very comfortable. “Hey, let’s arm-wrestle.”

Gavin cleared a tickle in his throat. His lungs twitched and itched inside. His beeper went off. He sat up. “Maybe later.”

Using the wall phone, he dialed in the familiar ER numbers. “Riordan.” He coughed while he listened, then glanced at his arms. They were covered with the beginnings of hives. Patrick’s back looked pale, other than a few red dots and lots of writing.

“I’ll be right down. Contact Orthopedics and the plastic surgeon on call.” He hung up.

Beth reappeared at the door. Her eyes flashed both a double-take and alarm when she saw Gavin. “Are you all right?” She glanced at Patrick to make sure he was OK.

“A four-year-old was just brought into the ER. I’ve got to go,” he said, as the intense itching from his back spread all over his body.

“You can’t leave. It looks like you’re having a systemic reaction. And you can’t leave a minor alone during skin testing. California law.” She reached into the cupboard for a syringe and a vial.

The soles of his feet and palms of his hands joined the tornado of itching traveling across his skin. “They’re waiting for me.”

She wiped his arm with an alcohol swab and popped him with a needle.

“Ouch! Hey, what was that?”

Patrick looked on in alarm. “Do I gotta have that, too?”

She shook her head. “No, you’re fine. But your dad is having a big reaction to the testing.”

Patrick coughed.

“That was epi. Here, take this.” She handed Gavin a small foil packet she’d torn open. “It’s an antihistamine. Dissolve it under your tongue.” She turned him round and assessed his back. “Good God, a whole section of the testing has run together into one huge welt. Let me check your blood pressure.”

“I told you I have to go.” He coughed and Patrick coughed along with him. Irritation accompanied his racing pulse and his lungs wheezed. Tight, resistant huffs replaced his normal breathing.

“Sit down.” She gave his chest a firm shove and angled him into a chair. “You won’t do anyone any good if you collapse in the elevator.” She fastened the blood-pressure cuff around his arm, pumped it up, and listened with her stethoscope. He flashed her an annoyed stare. Unfazed, she bent forward in silence, almost head to head with him as she listened to his blood pressure.

He started to stand up.

“Hold your horses. Good. Your pressure hasn’t dropped. Let me listen to your lungs.” She placed the cold stethoscope bell first on his chest then on his back and commanded him to breathe in and out for each. “I hear a little wheezing, but not bad. Let me roll you down to the ER in a wheelchair. You shouldn’t be running around like this. And you can’t leave Patrick alone here.” She glanced at his back. “Man, you should be a bubble boy.”

“Yeah, I’ve always been special. Look, this is ridiculous. I can walk.”

“Maybe you can, but we don’t want to spread this reaction any further by increasing your circulation with physical activity, so you’re going in a wheelchair.” She reached into the cupboard again and tossed him a small gray canister and then an aerochamber. “Take a couple of hits off that while I get the wheelchair.”

He felt like an insolent teenager screwing up his face at a teacher’s stupid idea, but did what he had been told for Patrick’s sake. The woman was as pushy as his ER nurses, but he trusted her knowledge.

Before Beth left, she’d obviously become aware of what Gavin had been noticing for the last few weeks—Patrick’s troublesome, persistent cough. He kept coughing as though he had a nervous tickle.

“Maybe you should take your asthma medicine, too,” she said.

“I don’t have it with me.”

“Later, when we have time, I’ll teach you about keeping peak-flow records and carrying your inhaler wherever you go, but for now, use what I gave your dad. You guys both need a bronchodilator.”

She disappeared around the corner. Gavin heard her explain to Dr Mehta over the intercom what was going on, while they did what they were told.

Reappearing and rolling the wheelchair behind him, Beth caught the backs of his knees and pushed his shoulder down to force him to sit. She handed him his scrub top and lab coat and gave Patrick his basketball jersey.

“Would you like an ice pack or should I put some cortisone cream on your back before you get dressed?”

“Don’t have time now, but I’d definitely like to take a rain-check on the second part.” Though nervous about his reaction to the testing, he couldn’t resist horsing around to lighten her intense mood and help himself relax. He lowered his voice. “My choice of cream, though.”

She lightly cuffed his shoulder and rolled her eyes toward Patrick. Ignoring Gavin’s come-on, she spun the chair round and pushed it toward the door. “I’m missing dinner because of you, and I already skipped lunch today.” With the clinic normally closing at five o’clock and it now being almost six o’clock, the hall was empty.

“Nurses are tough. What about our dinner?” He gestured to his son. “You know, I think you owe *us* dinner for all this grief.”

“It was your idea,” she said.

“Are we asking her to take us out, Dad?”

He grinned. “Maybe.”

She ignored the implication and let Patrick push the elevator button on the fifth floor. Amazingly the door opened right away. She rolled him inside and stood across from both of them. Patrick punched number one.

“How am I supposed to figure out what you’re allergic to if you’re running around in the ER?” She fanned herself, looking suddenly flushed.

“You can’t.” Gavin studied his shaky hands. How was he supposed to examine a traumatized kid when he itched all over and his back burned hotter than Hades?

“Are you OK, Dad?” Patrick asked as he stood next to the wheelchair.

“I’m fine.”

“It’s just the medicine I gave him, Patrick. It will wear off. How about you? You seem to have stopped coughing.”

“I’m good.”

“The medicine helped?”

“Maybe.”

Now pale and looking droopier by the second, Bethany leaned against the adjacent wall. “And why is it no one else can take care of this emergency?”

“Because I’m the head of the ER and the kid had his hand practically torn off by the family dog.”

He glanced across the elevator just in time to see his new, and definitely favorite, allergy nurse fainting.

CHAPTER TWO

GAVIN punched in the code on the number pad of the emergency room door—it swung open to harsh fluorescent lights and a barrage of noise. Ah, home, sweet home.

“I need an ammonia ampoule,” he said, acting like carrying a woman over his shoulder was the most natural thing in the world. Patrick followed, pushing the empty wheelchair.

When Bethany had started to fall, he’d lunged across the elevator, catching her just above the knees, and hoisted her over his shoulder.

With her usual ER charm, Carmen nailed him over her half-rimmed glasses. “Where have you been, and who is she?” After twenty years in the ER, nothing fazed her.

“This my allergy nurse.” He made a circle, looking for a vacant exam room.

“Room three is open. Hi, Patrick, darlin’.” Her icy glare cracked into a smile just for him. “You can leave the wheelchair right there.”

Gavin headed across the ward with Patrick behind him, gently laid Bethany on the gurney in the vacant room, then adjusted the head of the bed so that her head was below her heart.

Carmen appeared at the doorway, arms folded, a curious look on her face. She handed him the smelling salts. He’d thought he’d save her the question.

“She passed out in the elevator when I mentioned the boy’s hand almost being ripped off by a dog.” Realizing his son had heard every word, he gave him a steady look and said, “I’ll make sure the boy is fine. These days surgeons can reattach just about everything.” Patrick nodded thoughtfully. Glancing back at Carmen, who was waiting for more explanation, Gavin said, “I caught her before she hit the floor.” He popped open and waved the smelling salts under Beth’s nose. A reflex made her shake her head side to side. “Keep an eye on her for me while I take a look at the boy, will you?”

“Sure. We’ve only got patients crawling out of the rafters and as usual I’m short-staffed, but I’ll take care of her.” Carmen approached the bedside and applied the blood-pressure cuff to Beth’s arm. “Is this some new dating strategy?”

Patrick laughed as if he understood what she was talking about. Carmen’s mock vitriol for Gavin disappeared when she smiled at the boy.

Choosing to ignore her smart-aleck question, Gavin said, “Patrick, you stay with Carmen and Bethany.”

“The boy’s in room six, we’ve got a GI bleed in room three, and there’s a possible kidney stone in eight.” Carmen’s expression changed from all business to concern when she had time to study him more closely. “What the heck happened to you?”

“She tried to kill me.” He nodded toward Beth before heading toward room six. Halfway there, he glanced over his shoulder. “Order an IVP for room eight, draw a stat CBC, ’lytes, PT and PTT for three.”

“Already have, but thanks for making it official,” Carmen spouted off confidently, making note of her newest patient’s BP. “Hey, Gav, what about something for pain for the possible kidney stone?” she called over her shoulder.

He slowed his pace. “Any drug allergies?”

“None.”

“Demerol 75 milligrams IM.” A deep appreciation for his skilled and competent nurse made him smile. He’d left Beth in good hands. “What would I do without you?”

“Crash and burn,” she said on a sigh as she headed for the tiny medicine alcove.

Beth lay perfectly still, woozy yet distracted by the noise and chaos. She opened her eyes and saw Patrick’s inquisitive gaze watching her as if she’d died and come back to life. He’d been raising and lowering the height of the bed by pushing the buttons on the side rails. For a while she’d dreamed she was on a Caribbean cruise, rocking and rolling at sea.

“Hey,” she said.

“Hi.” He quickly moved his hand. “Dad said you fainted.”

“How long was I out?”

“Not very long.”

She sat up, fighting an uphill battle with the gurney. “Can you push that and fix this?”

The boy eagerly complied, already a pro at the bedside controls. The blood-pressure cuff automatically pumped up again. Her BP was normal. She sat up, feeling fine now. She knew she shouldn’t have skipped lunch, but she’d still felt queasy and the thought of food had made her sick. And when dinner had been postponed, well, it must have caught up with her.

She glanced across the cavernous ER to another room. Behind the glass wall, Gavin was conversing with a doctor and a man and woman. A small boy lay behind him on the gurney. Her gaze came to rest on a teenage girl standing just outside the door. The girl chewed on her index finger and rubbed at red, swollen eyes; fear and concern furrowed her brow as she peered inside.

The timer on Beth’s wristwatch went off. She’d set it just before they’d left the allergy department. “Oh, Patrick, it’s time to check your back.” She fished around in her pocket for her calibrator to measure any redness or induration from the tests. “Take off your shirt.” She found her pen and a piece of scrap paper in her lab coat and, when Patrick backed up so she could see, began assessing the few small welts on his back. “Most everything is normal. You’ve got a mild reaction to grass and a couple of the trees. Oh, cat fur is borderline.”

“What does borderline mean?”

“It means you’re probably OK. Do you have a cat?”

“No. But I used to.” He got suddenly quiet.

“Well, other than the grass and trees, you’re OK. Can you get me a glass of water?”

He put his jersey back on and used the bedside sink to fill a small cup normally meant for pills. She smiled and took it gratefully, threw the contents back in one gulp and asked for another. “Do you have any candy on you? I’m starving.”

He shook his head but just as quickly his eyes brightened. “I know where the snack machines are.” Spoken like a kid who’d spent more than his share of hours hanging around the hospital because his dad was head of the ER.

Carmen appeared at the door with a lab tray.

“Oh, I’m fine now. I just need to get something to eat.”

“You know the drill,” Carmen said, setting her tray at the bedside and applying a tourniquet to Beth’s arm. “You show up in the ER and we’ve got to do blood tests. I had Rick, the supervising PA, order them.”

Knowing there was no getting around hospital protocol, Beth lay back and let Carmen do her job.

“Do I have to watch?” Patrick asked, his fine brows pinched together.

“If I give you a dollar, will you buy me a chocolate bar?” With her free hand Beth found a dollar and some change in the other pocket and gave him a handful. “Get yourself something, too.”

He shot out of the room as though on a world-saving mission before Carmen had a chance to expose a needle.

“So what did you do to Gavin? He looks like Lobster Man.”

“I know! And because he’s running around here, I can’t read his skin tests to find out what he’s allergic to.” She sighed. “What am I being tested for?”

Carmen was so skilled at drawing blood that Beth barely felt the needle pierce her skin. “The usual lab tests. Blood sugar. Electrolytes. When was your last period?”

Beth scratched her head and thought about it. Wait a second. Normally, she’d be having her period around this time, or maybe it was supposed to be last week?

Hesitating, she gave the information to her nurse.

Subtly lifting a brow, Carmen said, “Maybe I’ll throw in a pregnancy test.” She gathered her vials and left the room without giving Beth a hint about whether or not she knew what had gone on between her and Gavin a few weeks ago. Beth recognized her distinctive voice. But did Carmen know who Beth was?

The ripple effect of her poor judgement caused a second wave of lightheadedness, and forced Beth to lean back on the bed. Nah. No way. They’d used protection.

“Who’ll get the results?” she called out, without thinking things through.

“Rick will call you if anything’s abnormal.”

She’d been in this situation before, twice. Hell, that was the reason she’d gotten married, and her husband hadn’t been in the least bit happy about it. She hadn’t done it to trap him. It had just sort of happened. Back when she’d married Neal, she’d wanted nothing more than to have a family, but after they’d married, she’d miscarried within the first trimester. A year later, it had happened again; it wasn’t meant to be. Then he’d run off with that woman after maxing out Beth’s credit cards. Just thinking about her ex and the bosomy blonde he’d left her for sent her blood pressure into the stratosphere.

Oh, God, what if she was pregnant? She’d promised herself to only marry for love in the future, no matter what. Gavin was a total stranger.

To distract herself, Beth watched the girl standing outside the boy’s room across the ward. She’d been working at the teen clinic a couple nights a week for the last year and, with her own memories of teenage angst, she felt she’d finally cracked the code of what made them tick. Drawn by the girl’s silent scream and avoiding her own over a possible pregnancy, she decided to check things out.

“Hi,” Beth said, when she approached.

“I belong here. That’s my brother,” the girl answered, with both shoulders raised as if ready for a fight.

“You look pretty worried.” Beth edged closer.

“Well, wouldn’t you be?” she barked, and bit at the hangnail on her finger, avoiding Beth’s eyes.

“Oh, gosh, yes. But he’s in good hands now.” She was careful not to invade the teenager’s space and remained a couple of feet away while the girl leaned against the wall. “Mind if I keep you company?” Before the girl could answer, she went on, “What’s his name?”

“Andrew.” The petite girl shrugged.

“Well, Andrew will get the best of care. The surgeons will do everything they can to save his hand.”

“It’s my fault he’s here.” Frightened eyes peered above her knuckles, tears slipped over the red rims of her eyes and down her pale cheeks. Her composure completely gone, the girl’s shoulders jerked up and down with a new onslaught of sobs.

Beth reached out and wrapped the twig-thin teen under her arm. “It’s not your fault, you know.” She guided the girl toward a bench along the wall, away from her brother’s room. “*You* didn’t bite him.”

“I left him alone when I answered my cellphone.” Guilt wrenched through a squeaky, gasping voice.

Beth took a deep breath, unsure what tack to take. “Was he a vicious dog?”

“No!” the girl snapped, then backed off a bit. “That’s the thing—he’s been our family pet for ever.”

“So how were you supposed to know...? What’s your dog’s name?”

“Max.”

“How were you supposed to know Max would attack Andrew?” Beth gently prodded the girl to sit down and joined her.

She sobbed into her hands. “Now we’ve got to put Max down and my brother’s lost his hand, all because of my stupid cellphone.”

Beth placed her arm gently across the girl’s back. “Sometimes life just happens and we don’t have any control over it.” Beth sat in silence, giving the girl time to think while turning over and over her own thoughts about a possible pregnancy. “The doctors may be able to save your brother’s hand. Just have some faith. My name’s Beth—what’s yours?”

“Courtney.” She wiped her eyes and glanced at Beth.

“Courtney, it’s not your fault—have you got that?” Beth squeezed her bony shoulder. “Maybe Max was in pain or he was frightened or he’s started to get senile. Maybe a bee stung him. There could be several reasons why he’d attack your brother.”

The girl whimpered and nodded.

Gavin watched with an ache in his heart as the orderly wheeled the sedated child toward the door on his way to the operating room. Finally, the traumatized boy was calm and on his way to surgery.

Thick black lashes rested on the child’s blanched cheeks, reminding him of his own son. If the doctors did their jobs properly, Andrew would have no memory of what was to come, and his hand would be useful again. Gavin made a mental note to follow up on the boy’s progress later.

His gaze went to a scrawny teenager outside the room, wrapped in the comforting arm of his newest favorite nurse, Bethany Caldwell. She must be feeling better. Patrick was sitting beside her and they were all sharing a couple of candy bars.

Gavin liked seeing her in his department; he liked that she’d taken the initiative to support the forgotten family member. His own nurses rarely had time for such things. And she hadn’t stuck Carmen with watching his son, as he often was forced to do.

His son suddenly being left with him by his ex had clearly turned into a gift—the gift of a second chance. He smiled, thankful for odd favors.

“Hi, Dad!” Patrick waved from across the room, content to hang around until he could go home. His heart squeezed. What a trouper. The way things were going, he’d be stuck here several more hours, which wouldn’t be fair. As Carmen got off at seven, once again he’d have to ask her to watch Patrick. Theirs wasn’t a perfect situation, but they’d been working things out just fine and, more importantly, Patrick seemed to like living with him.

Gavin smiled and waved back, thankful for Carmen for the tenth time that day. If she had a clue he actually appreciated her, she’d never let him live it down.

He nodded at Bethany as he headed to room three, thinking how pretty she was, while he maintained his professional physician demeanor. After he’d passed, he smiled and recalled what they’d done together that first night. And even though the focus of his life had changed since Patrick had moved in, he couldn’t help but wonder if and how soon they could arrange to do it again. What would she think if she could read his mind?

Even an hour after the testing, a lingering itch drew his attention to his back. The meds had taken care of the worst of it, but a few areas still bothered him. He reached behind and, using his thumb, scratched the spot.

After examining the gastrointestinal bleeder and ordering a stat colonoscopy, opportunity knocked when the ER charge nurse walked by. But Bethany was nowhere in sight.

“Carmen? Can Patrick go home with you tonight? Looks like I’m needed around here.”

“I told you, any time. Patrick and I are good buddies.”

Maybe Patrick and Carmen were great friends, but it was obvious he missed his mother and was devastated by her sudden trip to England. And the big question was—could a man who’d been married to his job for the last three years be able to fill the gap?

He’d let both the boy and Maureen down during the marriage. Intent on establishing himself as a doctor, he’d left the majority of child-rearing on his wife’s shoulders, though he had managed to have quality time with the boy whenever he’d been able to. She’d wanted to give up her career and be a stay-at-home mother, and he’d done his best to provide for them while still overwhelmed with medical school debts. He’d worked like a lunatic. And after the divorce Maureen had still wanted to stay at home...on Gavin’s child support and alimony. He’d been accused of being a workaholic by more than a few people in his life, but he’d always felt it had been for a good cause.

For Patrick’s sake, Gavin had promised to do everything in his power to make things right this time around, which meant thinking of his son first and, as tempting as she was, putting Bethany Caldwell completely out of his mind. Like that was going to happen.

Once things had settled down in the ER, and Beth had been officially discharged, she retreated from the pandemonium into the quiet hallway. She was tired. And hungry.

She went back to the allergy department to gather her belongings and head out to her car.

Dr Mehta would have to order a special RAST—radioallergosorbent—blood test for Gavin as she hadn’t been able to finish reading the skin tests. And with his extreme reaction, it was important for him to know exactly what he was allergic to and what to avoid.

At least she now knew her mystery man’s name and where he worked. Gavin had stirred feelings she’d never felt before, and if she was honest, she wanted to find out what else might happen with a man like him. Was that playing with fire? Yes. Was it dangerous? For her, yes. Would she actually allow herself to find out? Absolutely not. Until she knew the results of the pregnancy test, she’d do everything in her power to avoid him.

Beth started her car. The men in her life, starting with her dad and ending with her ex-husband, had track records for being unreliable and undependable.

According to her best friend Jillian, who worked in the urgent care department, Gavin had more women throwing themselves at him than he could handle.

Of all the people to have had secret sex with.

Beth adjusted the rear-view mirror and shifted into reverse. Jillian always shared the scuttlebutt from ER and Dr Gavin Riordan could have any woman he wanted. So why would he be satisfied with just one? And in the world according to Beth, from now on she would settle for nothing less than being the only one.

She pulled the car out into the traffic and started her drive home, thinking about her failed marriage. Again. She’d always dreamed of having a big family. Her ex had never wanted kids, but hadn’t mentioned it until after they’d had to get married. While her heart had broken more with each miscarriage, he’d seemed relieved. And she’d foolishly assumed her ex would be faithful. Wrong! She hadn’t been able to trust him.

The fact that he’d been unable to satisfy her in bed over their two-year marriage might have had something to do with it. But Beth had never been good at faking anything, and she hadn’t hidden that one important fact from him. Evidently his ego had only waited so long before he’d gone searching for a more responsive partner.

So long and good riddance.

If she was frigid, what could she call what had happened with Gavin that night? He’d taken her on a rocket trip to bliss in record time.

And now her period was late.

Was that her reward for finally cutting loose?

Damn.

If she did wind up being pregnant and she didn't miscarry, she'd keep the baby and figure out what to do about Gavin later.

The moment Beth opened the doors to the allergy department on Wednesday morning the phone rang. She swooped up the receiver, assuming it was the supervisor from the ER to tell her her fate.

"Allergy, this is Beth."

"You owe me dinner."

She heard Gavin's deep voice, loud and clear. Her heart rushed a beat or two.

"Are you there?" he asked when she paused.

"May I ask who's calling?" Lame!

After a brief hesitation he said, "It's Stud Muffin."

Her cheeks flamed faster than a brush fire. Obviously his son being present had kept him from saying what had been on his mind yesterday.

She stifled a giggle.

"I'll pick you up in front of the hospital on Friday night at seven...Sweet Cakes," he said.

How could she not smile? The guy was being silly and going overboard, trying to get her to laugh.

She played with a pen she'd picked up from the counter. Two could play this game. "I'm afraid 'Sweet Cakes' isn't available on Friday night. She works at the teen clinic in Venice." The pen shook in her hand.

"How late?"

She clicked the pen several times and heard an impatient sigh on the other end. She'd taken it too far. It also occurred to her that the poor man might have been up all night working—if the overflowing ER when she'd left last night had been any indication. Did he deserve her giving him a hard time? "I work until ten. You might be awfully hungry by then. I suggest we take a rain-check."

"Then let's have a drink and get to know each other. You can buy me dinner another night. I know where that clinic is—I'll pick you up from there on Friday."

She faltered. Had he just finagled two dates out of her? What about her plan to avoid him?

He sighed again. "Just say yes, Bethany. I need to get some sleep."

"Yes, Bethany, I need to get some sleep," she parroted softly, her mind swirling with what-ifs.

"Have a good day...Sweet Cakes." She heard a smile in his voice.

Would it be a good day after the lab called?

"Wait!" she said.

"Yes?"

"How's that boy, Andrew?"

Gavin cleared his throat. "The surgery went well. We'll have to wait and see if the hand will be functional. By the way, what you did with his sister was commendable. And my son. Thanks for that. I'll see you Friday."

She'd agreed to get-to-know-each-other drinks with a man she'd already had sex with. Well, what would "Stud Muffin" think about her predicament? He might change his dating tune if a certain lab test came back you-know-what. And more importantly, if she *was* pregnant, would she have the guts to tell him?

No sooner had she hung up than the phone rang again. On automatic reflex she gave the department name, followed by her own.

"This is Rick from the ER. I'm not sure if this is good news or not...but it's definitely news."

For the second time in two days Beth felt faint. "I'm pregnant?"

"Most definitely."

She couldn't remember afterwards if she'd said thank you and goodbye or had just hung up, but suddenly she was standing in the allergy clinic with her arms tightly folded across her stomach

to keep from falling apart. Her eyes stung. Nervous tingles made her skin prickle. Tears brimmed. She bit her lip to keep from crying out.

Maybe this third time the pregnancy would stick. Could she afford to be hopeful, again? Or should she be horrified? *I'm not married and I got knocked up on a one-night stand with a stranger.*

She'd always wanted children, but only under the right circumstances, in a loving relationship and preferably married. Talk about bad timing. Hell, she'd worked at the teen clinic long enough to know life threw everyone curve balls, but in this case she'd been the accomplice who'd helped the pitcher wind up and let fly.

And now, oh, God, she was pregnant.

On Thursday afternoon Gavin pushed through the swing doors into the allergy waiting room. At the nursing podium, Beth was in the middle of giving shots to one of her regular weekly patients. She'd just finished drawing up antigen from a vial when she spotted him.

Thanks to morning sickness, which seemed to be lasting all day, she didn't need any help with the sudden urge to vomit. Seeing him made her lose control and she dropped the vial. Damn. What could she do but try her best to act naturally? She felt out of control, as though someone had taken a hand mixer to her stomach.

She was pregnant and he was the father and somehow, some way, she'd have to tell him. But not now!

He nodded at her. "I need to set up an appointment for Patrick for asthma training."

"Sure." She managed to find her voice, nodding to the patient waiting for a shot and trying her hardest not to let the trembling of her hands show.

Navy blue slacks, pale blue shirt, colorful yellow tie, obviously just out of the shower with his hair still damp...he dripped confidence. And his woodsy scent had her thinking about being skin to skin with him and places she'd never been before. And though the smell soothed her queasy stomach, the memories whipped it right back up again.

Her patient cleared her throat. Right. The shot.

"I've been summoned," he said, pointing down the hall and continuing on toward Dr Mehta's office.

A few minutes later, just when Beth had calmed herself down, Gavin's voice startled her when he snuck up from behind.

He tossed some paperwork onto the podium. "I'm signing up for immunotherapy. Bupinder talked me into it."

Avoiding his eyes, she pretended to be engrossed with the doctor's orders. "Is that so?"

He leaned his forearm on the stand. "Guess I'll be one of your patients."

How could she face him every week of her pregnancy—that was, if she didn't miscarry this time? "I never read your test—how does she know what you're allergic to?"

"RAST test." A blood test where, if there was an allergy, the specific antibodies attached to a radioactive chemical. "You're right, I should be a bubble boy, but that's just me. I don't do anything halfway."

Recalling their crazy first encounter, she fought a blush. No. He definitely didn't do anything halfway.

She glanced up and saw a knowing smile, then quickly concentrated on her folded hands on the podium. She couldn't fall any deeper for his charm, not until he knew the facts and she knew where they stood.

"Be sure to pick up an EpiPen from the pharmacy and carry it with you at all times. We can't treat you for food allergies, just the pollens, so you've got to be prepared for another systemic reaction if it ever occurs."

She worked up the courage to make eye contact again. The tantalizing taupe stare forced a burst of nerves in her chest, and she caught her breath. She couldn't go on like this, and changed the subject. "When is a good time for the asthma training for Patrick?"

He looked into her eyes and smiled. "Any evening. You can come over to my place."

"Sorry, I don't do house calls."

"Not even for me?"

She sent him a pleading, exasperated glance—there were patients within earshot. He got the message. "What if I bring him in one afternoon next week?"

"Sure. Just bring him to the clinic. I'll make time for him." Putty in his hands.

"Sounds good. So is that all you need to talk to me about?"

Beth shot him a startled look. Why had he asked that? Did he know? Her mouth went dry. "After a systemic reaction like you had, we insist that you wait two weeks before starting the immunotherapy program. And don't forget to pick up your EpiPen."

"Sure thing." He slanted her a smile. "I'll see you tomorrow night."

He pushed himself off from the podium and strode toward the lobby, pushed through the swinging doors like a cowboy in a saloon, and left. She shamelessly checked out his behind. What got into her whenever he was around?

Dread trickled down her spine and quickly replaced the attraction to him. She'd have to tell Gavin sooner or later, and as they had a date tomorrow night, "sooner" *seemed* to be the best option.

But sooner stunk.

CHAPTER THREE

ON FRIDAY night at ten, Gavin drove his car to the front of the Venice Beach Teen clinic and parked. An old school chum of Patrick's had invited him to spend the weekend in Irvine, so Gavin was free. He needed a diversion from his inhumanly busy schedule and, having the night to himself, he looked forward to spending it with Bethany.

When he'd spotted her at the party last month, vibrant and appealing, he'd felt oddly energized by her spirit. This sweet young thing didn't deserve his usual post-divorce routine of hard work, easy loving, then saying goodbye. Now, with Patrick living with him, those days were officially over. He'd changed for his son's sake, and he didn't need a woman complicating things between the two of them. So why was he parked outside of a clinic in a bad part of town, looking forward to taking her for a drink?

Maybe because something more than sex had passed between Bethany and himself. It had started with a shock of a kiss that had reached inside and grabbed him. The electricity had been so fierce that he'd considered checking to make sure they hadn't been standing in water. Later, short-circuit sparks had turned into an all-out fire when they'd had sex. The way she'd surrendered to his touch, made him realize how special they had been together. It wasn't everyday you found someone as responsive as that. Tonight he hoped to get to know her to find out if his hunch was right—that she was a woman a man could fall for.

He gave an ironic laugh. Wasn't it just like life to dump the first woman in ages he'd really been intrigued by into his lap after he'd promised to be the father Patrick had never had but always deserved? And if he and Bethany did click tonight, how was he supposed to handle dating *and* Patrick?

He sat in the darkness of his car and watched a group of five young adults leave the clinic in a straggly line. Their clothes ran the gamut from black, gauzy gothic to pullover preppy sweater to the new retro 1980s rock-star hairstyle, wrinkled T-shirts and skin-tight jeans. What was little Miss Florence Nightingale up to? And why did he find her so damn intriguing?

He hopped out of the car and crossed the street to meet her in the lobby. Her slim figure appeared in the foyer just as he reached the front door of the clinic. The bright fluorescent glow threw a halo around her soft honey-colored hair. He let out an amused chuckle at the image. She'd acted anything but angelic the night they'd met.

Instead of smiling when he approached, her eyes widened and she took a deep breath before she locked up the office. She didn't exactly look happy to see him.

Beth was the first to speak. "Feel like taking a walk? It's probably beautiful at the beach tonight."
"What happened to 'Hi, honey, I'm home. How was your day?'"

She gave him the requisite brief laugh for his sorry attempt at humor, but she still looked anxious. And it was beginning to rub off on him.

On impulse, he tugged her close and pecked her on the cheek. "Hi, honey, I'm home." He inhaled her scent, peaches and vanilla, good enough to eat, then led her out the front door. "Would you rather take a walk than have a drink?"

"Well..." Looking flustered from the kiss, she brushed hair away from her face. "We could stop at the corner store and buy a couple of sodas and do both."

They crossed the street. He opened the door and held it for her as she slid into the passenger seat. "I don't want to accuse you of being cheap, but you're easy on the pocketbook, Bethany. Not that I'm complaining." He circled the car and got inside.

"It's been a stressful week. I'm just thinking I could use a walk, if you don't mind." So far she'd managed to evade making eye contact with him.

"Whatever the lady wants. The sea breeze might do me some good, too." He started the engine, liking the idea of a sultry beach walk with Bethany. Maybe it would help her shake those tense vibes she was giving off.

He pulled out from the curb into the boulevard bustle. Headlights from oncoming traffic illuminated the interior of the car and he glimpsed her expressive almond-shaped eyes watching him. She definitely looked anxious and quickly looked away. As she hadn't said another thing, he'd start things off with small talk. "So, what do you do at the clinic?"

She cleared her throat. "Two nights a week, I'm an STD counselor for teenagers."

He sputtered a laugh. Just his luck, she was a sexually transmitted disease counselor, and she'd probably preach about it non-stop. "A safe sex crusader, are you?"

"I do my best."

"Does anyone listen?"

"Sometimes."

"Is that enough?" Hmm. She'd probably just come from the clinic that Friday night last month, too. They'd used protection, and she'd been the one to produce it.

"Enough? It has to be. They sure don't pay me much." She smiled. "This counseling job comes with small rewards, not huge successes." She tossed him a brief, resigned glance and returned to looking out of the passenger window.

Had he done something wrong? He liked the way things had started out between them at the party. Though he hadn't exactly been a gentleman where Bethany was concerned, tonight he'd planned to begin making up for it, if she'd give him a chance.

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