



Tina Beckett

The Billionaire's Christmas
WISH



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MEDICAL

Tina Beckett

The Billionaire's Christmas Wish

«HarperCollins»

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Only a Christmas miracle.....will make his wish come true.In this Hope Children's Hospital story, since losing his wife Theo Hawkwood hasn't enjoyed Christmas—and now his daughter Ivy is ill he has even less reason to celebrate. Unless visiting diagnostician Madison Archer can perform a miracle... While Madison works to find a cure Theo fights his growing attraction to her... Is Madison the miracle he's been waiting for?

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In this Hope Children's Hospital story, since losing his wife Theo Hawkwood hasn't enjoyed Christmas, and now his daughter Ivy is ill, he has even less reason to celebrate. Unless visiting diagnostician, Madison Archer, can perform a miracle... While Madison works to find a cure, Theo is fighting a growing attraction to her... Is Madison the miracle he's been waiting for?

Hope Children's Hospital miniseries

Book 1 – *Their Newborn Baby Gift* by Alison Roberts Book 2 – *One Night, One Unexpected Miracle* by Caroline Anderson Book 3 – *The Army Doc's Christmas Angel* by Annie O'Neil Book 4 – *The Billionaire's Christmas Wish* by Tina Beckett

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Three-times Golden Heart® finalist **TINA BECKETT** learned to pack her suitcases almost before she learned to read. Born to a military family, she has lived in the United States, Puerto Rico, Portugal and Brazil. In addition to travelling, Tina loves to cuddle with her pug, Alex, spend time with her family, and hit the trails on her horse. Learn more about Tina from her website, or 'friend' her on Facebook.

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The Billionaire's Christmas Wish

Tina Beckett

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THE BILLIONAIRE'S CHRISTMAS WISH

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To my family.

You bring me joy each and every day.

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[CHAPTER ONE](#)

“THEO—IVY IS asking for you.”

Theo Hawkwood’s heart dropped into the acidic pool in his stomach as the nurse’s voice came through his cellphone.

“Is she okay?”

Of course she wasn’t. His daughter hadn’t been “okay” for months. Which was why she’d been moved to a room a short distance from his office.

“There’s no change. I think she just wants to see you.”

A familiar nagging ache went through his chest, filling the space his heart had just vacated. His wife's sudden death four and a half years ago had left him with a hole in his life and an infant daughter to raise. And now Ivy was sick. Very sick. And no one could tell him why. If he lost her too...

You won't. You have one of the best diagnosticians in the world on the case.

Except even she was stumped.

"I'm on my way. Can you find Dr. Archer for me?"

"She's already there. She's the one who asked me to call you."

Shoving his phone into the pocket of his jeans, he pushed away from the desk and the pile of requisitions he'd been studying. Once on his feet, he dragged a hand through his hair. It had been months. And still no definitive diagnosis. They knew what it wasn't but not what it was that was making Ivy's arms and legs grow weaker by the day. As unfair as it was, he'd been pinning all his hopes on Madison Archer, only to have them dashed time and time again.

Striding across the bridge that joined his section of the hospital with the area that housed the family suites, he tried to avoid looking at the festive ribbons and lights that twinkled with the joy of the season. Joy? He just wasn't feeling it. As much as he tried to put on a cheerful face for the sake of his daughter, the storms raging inside him were anything but cheerful. How long before Ivy noticed?

Maybe she already had.

He took his gaze from the decorations and fixed them straight ahead until he came to Ivy's room. He didn't bother knocking, just pushed quietly through the door then stopped in his tracks. Madison was seated on the side of his daughter's bed, their heads close together, and they were...laughing.

Had he ever actually heard Madison laugh?

He didn't think so. She was professional to a fault. He'd even overheard the word "Scrooge" attributed to her after she'd refused to give an opinion on the lights on the banister leading to the family suites. A quick glance from him had silenced the comment in mid-sentence.

And now? The deep copper highlights of the diagnostician's hair cascaded in waves that covered the side of her face so he couldn't see her, but she was writing something in a small notebook. She giggled again. "Are you sure?"

"Yes," his daughter replied.

Something in his gut gave a painful jerk.

"What's going on in here?"

The second the gruff question came out of his mouth the laughter came to an abrupt halt, and Madison slammed the notebook shut.

He wished he could take the words back. Wished he could take a whole lot of things back, but he couldn't.

Madison's face came into view as she shook her hair back to peer up at him, her indrawn brows causing tiny puckers to form between them.

Hell, he needed to get a grip. The nurse's message a few moments earlier had made him think something was wrong, and he'd buzzed in here like some kind of hornet, looking for something or someone to strike.

Only there was no one. Only some mystery illness that refused to poke its head out so it could be seen for what it was.

A stealer of life. A stealer of joy.

For Theo, the feeling of helplessness was the worst sensation in the world. Worse than the loss of his wife to a drunk driver over four years ago. At least that had been something concrete that he could understand. He'd known exactly where to place the blame that time. But this time there was nothing.

"Are you okay?" Madison's smile had morphed into professional concern, her fingers balancing her pen over the notebook. Scrooge? Hell, he was the Scrooge, not her.

“I’m sorry. You called me down here, and I thought...” His voice trailed away and a lump formed in his throat when Ivy didn’t immediately jump off her bed and squeeze his legs in a tight hug, like she used to.

She couldn’t. Ivy couldn’t even walk now.

The diagnostician tucked the pen and book into the front pocket of her long gray tunic and then got up and stood in front of him. Those long legs of hers brought her almost to eye level. She still had to tilt her head a bit, but she didn’t have to crane her neck like Hope used to do.

He swallowed and threw another log onto the fire of guilt.

“Hey.” Her fingers landed on his arm with a quick squeeze that sent something skittering up his spine to his brain—a flash of something he had no intention of analyzing. “Don’t you quit on me.”

She didn’t have to translate the meaning for him, and Theo was smart enough to nod at her subtle warning not to scare his daughter unnecessarily.

But how about him? He was scared out of his mind right now.

“No quitting involved.” His voice sounded a lot more sure than he felt. Even so, he softened his tone for the next part. “So I’ll ask again. What’s going on?”

“We were just making some plans for... Christmas.”

He blinked. There had been an awkward pause before she’d added that last word. And the way she’d blurted it out—like she couldn’t wait to fling it off her tongue—made him wonder.

Was it because she wasn’t sure Ivy was even going to be around to celebrate the event, which was a short two weeks away? That thought sent icy perspiration prickling across his upper lip. “Plans for?”

Ivy, who had been silent for the exchange, said, “For Sanna Claus. And your presents.”

Her mispronunciation of good old Saint Nick’s name made him smile, relief making his shoulders slump. It had become a running joke between them, with him correcting her and Ivy persisting in leaving out the “t” sound with a nose crinkled in amusement.

He glanced at his daughter and then at Madison. “The only present I need is for you to get better, sweetheart.”

He put a wealth of meaning into those words and aimed them at the diagnostician.

Uncertainty shimmered in the green depths of the other doctor’s eyes and his relief fled in an instant. Theo knew how she felt, though. Before he’d founded the hospital—back when he’d been a practicing surgeon—there’d been a few cases where he’d been unable to promise the family a good outcome. He’d still done his damndest for those patients despite seemingly impossible odds. Was Madison feeling that same pressure? Worse, did she think Ivy’s case was hopeless?

Unable to face what that might mean, he turned his attention to Ivy. “Have you been out of bed yet today?”

“Yes. Madison helped me.” Ivy took the rag doll she carried everywhere with her and struggled to lift it to her chest in a hug. “I had to leave Gerty on the bed. She was too heavy today.”

The ache in his chest grew. Hope had made that doll for their daughter a few months before she’d given birth to Ivy.

“Wheelchair? Or walking?” He kept his eyes on his daughter, even though the question was directed at Madison.

The other doctor went over and laid a hand on Ivy’s head. “I’m going to have a chat with your dad outside, okay? You keep thinking about that list.”

Right on cue, Ivy yawned. “I will.”

Madison led the way through the door. Once it swung shut, she said, “She’ll be asleep in five minutes.”

Was she avoiding answering his question? “Wheelchair or walking?”

“She hasn’t walked in a week, Theo. You know that.”

“Yes. But I’d hoped...” His eyes shut for several long seconds. “Tell me again what we’ve ruled out.”

“Did you get the list I emailed you? Your staff had already ruled out most of the obvious conditions before I arrived.” She tucked a lock of hair behind her ear, fingers worrying the ends for a second or two before continuing. “There is no brain tumor. No lesions that suggest something is going on with the synaptic connections. And the results of the muscle biopsy I ordered came back yesterday. There’s no sign of limb-girdle muscular dystrophy.”

She must have seen something in his face because she hurried to add, “That’s a good thing.”

“Then why are her arms and legs getting progressively weaker?” As relieved as he should be that there was no sign of the deadly condition, his inability to help his daughter made his voice rough-edged yet again.

“I don’t know.” She pulled in a deep breath and blew it back out. “But I’m still going down a list of possibilities. I just don’t want to rush through them and overlook something and then have to double back. Wasted time can’t be recaptured.”

No, it couldn’t. What was gone was gone.

He did his best to ignore those last words and tried to focus on the positive: she hadn’t exhausted everything. Not yet, at least.

“Multiple sclerosis?” Although MS normally affected adults, he’d researched everything he could think of and had found cases where children were diagnosed with it.

“Again, there’s no sign of brain lesions. I went over the MRI scans with a fine-toothed comb. I saw no anomalies at all.”

“Damn.”

A tug at his sleeve brought his eyes back to hers. “I told you I’d tell you when to worry. We’re not there yet.”

“Yes, we are. I can see it in your face.”

“It’s not that I’m worried. I’m just frustrated I don’t have an answer for you. I’m exploring every avenue I can think of.” Her fingers tightened.

“I know you are, Madison. I’m treating you like Ivy is your only patient, and I know that’s not true.”

“I’m here for her and for patients just like her. She has a great team of specialists fighting on her behalf, and I’m grateful to be included in that. Ivy is a big part of Hope Children’s Hospital.”

Named after his late wife, who’d waited patiently in the wings for him to break ground on his dream, even putting her own career on hold to look after Ivy while he’d worked day and night. She’d died before seeing the fruits of their labor or being able to practice medicine again. And he damned himself every single day for not spending more time with her and Ivy while his wife had still been here.

“Wasted time can’t be recaptured.”

Truer words had never been spoken.

He leaned a shoulder against the wall and turned to fully face her. Her fingers let go of his sleeve in the process.

“Anything I can do to help?” he asked.

“Just throw out any ideas that might help—even if they seem farfetched. I sent a panel off looking for some markers of Lyme disease or any of the co-infections that might be related to it. I should have something back in a few days.”

“Lyme. Is that even a possibility? I keep going back to it being a brain issue.”

Madison’s brow puckered the way it had back in Ivy’s room. She was either thinking or irritated. Maybe she thought he was challenging her readings of the MRI scans. He wasn’t. He just couldn’t get past the possibility that something in Ivy’s head was misfiring or inhibiting signals. The condition mimicked one of the muscular dystrophies. But the biopsies said it wasn’t. So if it wasn’t in the muscles themselves...

“I thought for sure it was too. But there’s nothing there, Theo.”

Every time she used his name, something coiled inside him. Lots of people called him by his given name rather than his professional title, but that husky American accent, devoid of the crisp consonants that peppered the speech of those in Britain, warmed parts of him that had been frozen in time and space.

She provided hope. A fresh perspective. She was unconventional, could think outside the box. Her files listed one of her weaknesses as being her hard-nosed approach. She had difficulty being a team player, and she wasn't afraid to question findings or demand a test be run again if it wasn't done to her satisfaction. He didn't see that as a weakness. In this case he viewed her reputation as a strength, which was why he hadn't insisted she attend the staff meetings related to Ivy's care.

She'd made a few enemies back home—and even here in Cambridge. But she'd also made friends. And one of those friends appeared to be his daughter.

“Where do you look next? She's had no headaches. No symptoms other than the growing weakness in her limbs. And wondering whether that weakness is going to progress to her breathing or autonomic nervous system is making me—”

“Crazy? I know. It's making us all a little crazy. That kid has a lot of people wrapped around her little finger.”

“Yes, she does.” He smiled. “Including her father.”

Her fingers toyed with the edge of his sleeve again, not quite touching him, as if she wanted to give comfort but was afraid of skin-to-skin contact. “We're going to figure this out.”

Right now he was *glad* she wasn't touching him. Because the warm flow of her voice was doing what her hand wasn't. It was permeating his pores and meandering through his bloodstream, where it affected his breathing, his heart rate and his thoughts—taking them into dangerous territory. Territory that only his late wife had occupied. He couldn't afford to let Madison trespass there. If he did, it could spell disaster for both him and his daughter.

“I'm sure you will.” In a deliberate move, he tugged his sleeve from her grasp. “I'm counting on it. And so is Ivy.”

Then he was walking away, before he could ask exactly what she and Ivy had been planning for Christmas, or ask if Madison was including herself in those plans.

* * *

Once back in the tiny office she'd been given while Dr. Camargo's office was being renovated, Madison fingered the notebook in her pocket. She was glad that Theo hadn't asked her to hand it over to him. He'd seemed pretty upset to find the two of them in there laughing, but it hadn't been easy to pretend when her heart was aching over the little girl's revelation. Because the first thing on Ivy's wish list was for her father to like Christmas.

Her eyes had burned. It seemed that she wasn't the only one with an aversion to the season. And the last thing she could promise anyone was that she'd help them learn to like a holiday she detested. Maybe she should put that on her Christmas list too.

Except Madison had no interest in changing her ways at this late date. She did what she could to get through the last month of the year, closed her eyes as she passed the festive trees and lights, and then breathed a sigh of relief once the calendar rolled over into a new year.

Fingering the thick file folder on her desk, she flipped it open to the first page, where Ivy's vital statistics were listed in bold clinical letters. The child was far wiser than her five years. And she saw things Theo probably didn't even know she was aware of. Or maybe his daughter had already shared her longing with him. Madison didn't think so, though.

She knew he was widowed, from the hospital grapevine. And his ring finger no longer held a wedding ring, so he'd gotten over the loss. Or had he? Some people never really got over that kind of life change.

Another thing Madison could relate to. Although her loss had nothing to do with a husband, or even a boyfriend.

Shaking herself free of her funk, she pulled the notebook from her pocket and dropped it onto her desk. She'd have to figure out a way to get a few of the things on Ivy's list without making her dad suspicious. Or angry. He had to know how fortunate he was to have a daughter who was worried as much about him as he worried about her. She was small and so very ill, and yet her determination to do all she could to get better—for her dad's sake—was one of the most touching things Madison had seen in a long time.

She flipped the first page open and perused the list, forcing her glance to leap over that first item. The rest of the things ranged from sweet to hilarious.

A new stethoscope—in purple, if Santa has one, because that is Ivy's favorite color.

A book about horses so he'll fall in love with them like she has.

An adult coloring book. One of Ivy's nurses talked about how every grown-up should have one.

Somehow, Madison couldn't picture those big hands clutching a crayon—although he was very much a paint-by-numbers type of person. No coloring outside the lines for him.

Macaroni and cheese. Evidently Theo's favorite food. Santa must carry casseroles around in his toy sack.

A puppy. Ha! Wouldn't Theo love coming home to find a puppy under the tree.

That was all they had so far on the list. Except for that very first thing. Her eyes tracked up to it against their will.

Make Daddy love Christmas.

God, even the real Santa would have a tough time granting that wish. The rest was doable. Well, maybe not the puppy. But everything else could be gotten for a relatively inexpensive price, wrapped and listed as being from Santa.

Why did she even care? She wasn't here to buy anyone gifts. Or to make a little girl happy.

She was here to help solve difficult diagnoses. That was it. And to fulfill a lifelong dream of visiting the UK. She should be on cloud nine. Instead, she felt itchy and slightly uncomfortable, like wearing a new wool sweater without anything else beneath it.

You need to get out and see more of England. Staying around this hospital day in and day out isn't healthy.

But there was something about Ivy...

She'd found herself spending more and more time with the little girl, almost succeeding in convincing herself it was to help figure out the child's condition. Except she knew it was a lie. She was here for Ivy, even if being around her dad made her squirm in discomfort.

She wasn't exactly sure why that was, but she'd better figure it out before she did something stupid. Really stupid. Like wish Ivy were hers, maybe?

She stood in a rush and clasped her hands behind her back, lifting them away from her body while bending forward at the waist, hoping the resultant stretch would help clear her head of its current thoughts. Higher and harder she stretched, vaguely aware of her door opening with a couple of light taps.

"Dr. Archer?"

Madison froze in place. Oh, Lordy. But at least the voice was female and not the man who'd jerked away from her a couple of hours earlier. How humiliating had that been? She'd just been trying to help.

Letting her arms drop back to her sides, she stood and saw Naomi Collins, one of the physical therapists at the hospital. Her romance with pediatric surgeon Finn Morgan was the stuff dreams were made of.

"Hi. Sorry about that. I had a kink in my neck and was trying to work it out." More like a kink in her head, but it was pretty much the same thing.

Naomi chuckled. "It's fine. You should see the things I do when I'm alone." Another laugh. "Forget I said that. I didn't mean that quite the way it sounded."

“I didn’t think it sounded odd at all.” She smiled to reassure her. After all, if Naomi could have gotten a good look at what was rattling around in her head, she might be a little more than shocked. “Can I help you with something?”

“I just wanted to talk with you about Ivy. What you wanted me to work on with her tomorrow.”

With her clear complexion and deep gorgeous skin tones, Naomi was beautiful. And she was a huge hit with all her young charges, including Ivy.

“I’m not her only doctor, you know.”

Naomi entered the office and closed the door behind her. “Maybe not, but right now everyone—if they’re smart—is deferring to you and hoping you’ll solve whatever is going on with her.”

“And if I can’t?” The words that she hadn’t dared say aloud in the hallway with Theo came tumbling out before she could stop them. She dropped into one of the metal chairs that flanked her desk.

The physical therapist came over and sat in the other one. “It’s a bit of pressure, yes?”

“Yes. And I want to figure it out. But I’m at a dead end at the moment.” She didn’t know why she was suddenly voicing her fears, but there was something in the other woman’s eyes that said she’d known fear—intimately—and had come out on the other side.

“Sometimes we just have to give ourselves a bit of space to regroup. And that’s when it normally comes to us. That realization that’s been in front of us all along.”

Were they still talking about Ivy? Or about something else?

“I hope you’re right.”

“I am. You’ll see.” Naomi leaned forward and captured her hands. “Just give yourself permission to take a step or two back and look at the problem with a wide-angle lens.”

Something about those words caught at an area of her brain, which set to work in the background. “Thank you. I think I needed to hear that.” She squeezed the other woman’s fingers before letting go. Gently. Not the way Theo had done in the hallway. “How are things with you and Finn, if I may ask?”

Naomi’s smile caused her nose to crinkle in a way that was both adorable and mischievous. “You can. And it’s great. Better than I have a right to expect.”

“It’s exactly what you *should* expect. And what you deserve.” From what Madison had heard, Naomi had had a hard time of it, losing loved ones in a terrible conflict in her home country. But she’d overcome it and had learned to live her life in the present.

Maybe Naomi should write a how-to book on how to do that. Madison would be one of her first customers if that ever happened.

“Thank you. Finn’s a good man.” Naomi sucked down a deep breath and squared her shoulders. “Now, about Ivy...”

Madison went over what she would like to see happen with Ivy’s therapy tomorrow. Although she couldn’t walk or even hold herself up on the parallel bars they used to help people learn to walk again, they could still try to utilize what muscle strength she did have to its best advantage. Having her kick a large exercise ball and do some resistance bands to hopefully keep things from atrophying any faster than they already were was the biggest goal at the moment.

“I agree. That’s the perfect thing for her. I did a little work with the bands today, in fact. Right now the hope is to slow that downward spiral as much as possible, to buy ourselves time to find whatever’s going on.”

“Yes, and thank you. Do you want me to check with Theo to make sure he agrees?”

Naomi shook her head. “He’ll agree. He’s desperate to find anything that will work. As are we all. We all want her to beat whatever this is.”

With that she stood to her feet. “I think I’ll check in on her on my way out.”

“Thank you. And thanks for the pep talk.”

The physical therapist fixed her with a look. “It wasn’t a pep talk. It was the truth.”

She showed herself out, leaving Madison to think about what the other woman had said. Maybe she was right. Maybe she was going about this the wrong way. Maybe she really was using a microscope and focusing very narrowly when she should be casting a wide net and seeing what she could haul to shore.

Ha! That was easier said than done, but the more she mulled over the idea, the more it felt right. Now all she had to do was figure out what it meant. And then how to go about implementing it.

And she'd better do it soon. Before that slow downward spiral increased its pace, becoming something that no force on earth could stop. Before a child's modest wish list was nothing more than a memory, and a father's last hope was pulverized into dust.

CHAPTER TWO

SHE WASN'T IN her office.

Theo had knocked and then peeked into the small space before moving inside. He felt a little bit like an interloper, but figured he could as easily wait for her in here as go looking for her. The fact was, he was half-afraid of going to Ivy's room and finding them in a cute little huddle like he had three days ago. Since then he'd forced himself to let Madison alone to do her work. If he hounded her every moment of every day, he would do more harm than good.

Or so he told himself. In reality, he wasn't sure he was ready to face her after his panicked flight the last time. And he wasn't sure why.

He dropped into one of the little chairs, wondering why her office was so spartan when most other doctors' spaces were decked out with squashy leather chairs and the personal touches of its occupants.

It was because this hadn't been an office at all. It had been a supplies cupboard, but it was all they'd had available, since the renovations on Dr. Camargo's office were running behind schedule. But she hadn't offered one word of complaint or acted like they'd set her in a place that was beneath her status. They were damned lucky to have someone like her, and Theo knew it.

He glanced at her desktop, finding it neat and mostly empty except for the stack of file folders on the left-hand side, at the top of which was Ivy's chart. His fingers brushed across the cover, the temptation to open it coming and going. There was nothing in there that she wouldn't have already told him. Then he spotted a small notebook. It was on the right side of the desk toward the back. He was almost sure that was the same notebook she'd tucked into her pocket after her *tête-à-tête* with Ivy. What was in it? Notes about the case?

No, she'd been scratching in that when he'd caught them giggling. They'd been making plans, Madison had said.

About Christmas.

The notebook was on her side of the desk, so he'd have to stretch across to reach it.

It's not like it's a personal diary, Theo.

And if it had anything to do with Ivy, didn't he have a right to know what was in it?

His palm slid across the smooth wooden surface of the desk, and he had to lean slightly to reach it. His fingertips landed on the cover, preparing to drag the item toward him, when a slight breeze swept across his nape, sending the hairs rising in attention.

He pulled back in a hurry, turning to face whoever'd entered the room.

Damn.

It was Madison, and she'd caught him red-handed. Well, not really, since he hadn't got a chance to crack the cover on that book.

"Theo, this is a surprise. Were you looking for me?" Her voice was slightly breathless, and she hurried around to the other side of the desk and opened a drawer, sweeping the offending item into it.

There was definitely something in there she didn't want him to see. And that just made him want to look even more.

Dressed in a black cowl-necked sweater that hugged its way from her shoulders to the tops of her slender thighs, it set his senses on high alert. Just like the last time they had been together. He swallowed and tried to regroup and remember his reason for coming here. It certainly hadn't been to ogle her.

"I was, actually. I wanted to know how Naomi fared with Ivy. She told me you changed tack a bit on her therapy. You're no longer actively trying to get her to walk?"

"Not at the moment." She dropped into her office chair and explained her reasoning pretty much the same way Naomi had described the plan to him. And he had to admit he agreed, even if it felt like they were giving ground to some hidden monster—one that was busy pulling a rope from the hidden safety of a screen. It might be out of sight but the effects were apparent to anyone watching the display. They couldn't use brute force to overpower the lurker so they were simply trying to stop it from gaining traction.

"What's our next step?"

"I'm not quite sure. The treatment team is meeting today. I'll digest their findings later."

"I'm aware of the meeting. So what are you bringing to the table?"

"Table? I've been to one or two of the meetings, but wasn't planning on going to today's."

Theo's heart chilled in an instant, even though he'd been the one to say she wasn't required to go to them. "Reason?" Maybe this was where she conceded that she was giving up.

"I wasn't invited."

That made him sit back for a second. "You're always invited. And they'll want you there. *I* want you there. If you're waiting for a formal, gold-foiled envelope to arrive on your desk, that probably isn't going to happen." He forced a smile he hoped reflected reassurance, although it certainly didn't match what was churning around on the inside. What if she decided she wanted to focus on other cases and not spend the bulk of her time on Ivy anymore? Or, worse, what if she'd noticed the tugs of interest he'd felt—even just a minute or two ago—despite his efforts to sweep them under the rug and out of sight? Would she think he was using his position to try to pressure her to prioritize Ivy's treatment above anyone else's?

His instinct as a father was to do exactly that. Help his child in any way he could. Use whatever means he could.

And yet he knew he had to push all of that aside and hold tight to his professional ethics. He'd started this hospital as a way to help people. If he chucked that aside and gave anyone preferential treatment, he would be flying in the face of his convictions.

Madison pulled her hair to the side and let it flow over her shoulder, the golden highlights contrasting with the dark knit of her sweater. And there it was again. That tickle in his midsection that was wreaking havoc with his objectivity.

Dangerous territory. Yes, it was. And his earlier thoughts about her trespassing? If he was the one putting out the welcome mat, he could hardly accuse her of wandering where she wasn't invited.

She leaned forward, some of those silky strands of hair brushing across the surface of her desk.

He swallowed again, trying to think of something to say to cover the moment. She beat him to it.

"I know this is going to sound strange, but I've been sending my findings to the group, and they've relayed any information they wanted me to have. It's how I've always worked, even back at my own hospital in the States. I look at all the pieces and try to put them together to form a diagnosis. It's hard for me to do that with a bunch of voices and emotions tangling with each other."

Like the ones going round and round his head right now?

Maybe this was why she wasn't getting on with one or two of the doctors at the hospital. He knew some of those sessions could get heated, with specialists vying for a chance to be heard, but Theo had always thought that was a healthy atmosphere. Hope Hospital emphasized working as treatment teams with the idea that more input was better for the hospital's patients. He was finding out that Madison's file was right. She preferred prowling around the outskirts.

But she was much sought after in the States. So maybe they shouldn't try to stuff her into a box she didn't fit into. Even if Theo himself had created that particular box.

"I understand. And I'll respect that decision. To a degree."

What had happened to not pushing Ivy's needs to the forefront? Or telling her that those meetings were optional?

"I'm sorry? What does that mean?"

"Just that the hospital uses these meetings not only as a chance to bounce around ideas but also to provide accountability to all the players."

"Accountability." Her palms pressed against the surface of the desk, an edge of tension beginning to infuse her words. "As in you don't think I'm carrying my weight here?"

She was getting angry, and hell if he didn't like the little hints of emotion: the sideways tilt of her head, the color sweeping up her cheeks...the way her gaze remained riveted to his face.

Especially that last part.

Damn. So much for keeping this cool and impersonal.

"I phrased that badly. Let's call it curiosity. I would like to know your thoughts on their thoughts. I was hoping to get to that meeting today as well."

Her hands dropped into her lap and the tension seemed to flow out of her.

"I'll be happy to share my thoughts. I just don't want to waste my..." She smiled. "Sorry, badly phrased. I don't want to spend two hours in a chaotic team meeting when I could be looking down other avenues. I promise I do glance over what the team discusses. It just takes me a while to get into my work mode, and having my day cut into pieces with meetings makes it doubly hard, especially if I'm trying to piece together a complicated list of symptoms."

"Understood." Theo, whose days were often "cut into pieces," as she put it, often wished he could just put a "Do Not Disturb" sign on his door and get in eight hours of uninterrupted work. "Would you prefer to just write up your findings and send them to me?"

"I think it would be faster to tell them to you directly, if that's okay. It can be a voicemail, if you're too busy to take my call."

He was never too busy to discuss Ivy. "I'll make time. But if you want to pass on information directly, why don't we set up our own face-to-face meeting of sorts? You tell me the time that works best for you."

"Okay, that's easy. The end of my official work day. Six o'clock or so?" She sat up, so the ends of her hair no longer brushed along the top of her desk. As hard as he tried, he couldn't stop the image of that hair sliding across his skin—skin in an area that was suddenly shifting upward at an alarming rate.

She tossed the offending locks behind her shoulder, going back to that professional demeanor he'd come to recognize, while he struggled to regain control of thoughts that were anything but professional.

"That works for me. I was just getting ready to head down and see Ivy. Do you want to go with me?"

He shouldn't. He should put some distance between them for a while—at least until his strange reaction to her had a chance to power down.

Then his gaze went to the right-hand side of her desk, where that little notebook had sat. Was she taking that with her?

That made his decision. "I haven't checked on her in a couple of hours, so I think I'll join you."

A buzzing came from the other side of the desk and she lifted a finger, asking him to wait. Lifting her cellphone, she looked at the readout and then put the device to her ear. "Dr. Archer here."

She listened to whoever was on the other end of the line, frowning slightly. "And the others?"

Her chest lifted and she expelled an audible sigh. He could fairly see the tension that had gathered in her shoulders. "Okay, thank you for letting me know."

Setting the phone on the desk, she pressed her fingertips against the surface for several seconds.

“Was that something about Ivy?”

“The test results came back from her Lyme panel.”

“And?” He waited, his heart in his chest. Was this the answer they’d been looking for?

“I’m sorry, Theo, but they’re negative. All of them. Ivy doesn’t have Lyme disease.”

* * *

Sitting on the side of the bed a half-hour later, listening to her little patient talk about what she’d had for lunch, caused a lump to form in Madison’s throat. It looked like Santa was going to have a hard time delivering the first wish on Ivy’s list.

Had Theo peeked inside that book before she’d come into the office? She should have written the list somewhere besides the first page, but she’d had no idea at the time that the girl’s first request would be something of such a personal nature.

Looking at the stiff way he stood in the corner, watching them, it was hard to imagine him ever liking the holiday, especially since the news they’d been waiting for hadn’t materialized. She had pinned her hopes on Lyme disease being the culprit, especially since the symptoms of it were often vague and could appear like those that Ivy had. They were back where they’d started yet again. She should be used to it. And she was. The challenging nature of her work had always energized her.

But not today.

For each terrible disease that was ruled out, another waited in the wings.

And right now Theo looked pretty exhausted, the smile lines around his eyes now tinged with white.

She ached for him. Wished there was something she could say or do that would make this easier.

She’d been surprised to find him in her office earlier. Surprised at the way her heart had jumped to attention.

Was that why she’d agreed to meet him personally to review the details of the case?

Not smart, Madison.

There was something about the man that touched a spark within her, though. Maybe it was the brave front he was putting on for his daughter’s sake. Or the fact that he’d walked through some hard years, something to which she could relate. She’d struggled through some heartache of her own as a kid. Since reaching adulthood and graduating from medical school, though, things had been smooth sailing.

Sure they had. Because she was on a roll as far as the dating scene went.

Actually, things were pretty dry. Men weren’t exactly lining up to go out with a diagnostician. Then again, she wasn’t scrambling to go out with them either. Her days had been too full of work and...work. She was busy. Which made the lonely nights a little easier to bear. Right?

Her glance tracked back to Theo, and she swallowed.

“Did you get to see Doodle?” she asked, forcing her thoughts back to Ivy.

Doodle, the labradoodle, had been a regular visitor around the hospital, thanks to Evie, the ICU receptionist who was slated to return to nursing school after the holidays. She’d come up with the idea of bringing in a Pets as Therapy dog. He’d been such a hit with the children that the dog and his handler, Alana, came by most days to visit the different pediatric areas. The family suites were probably some of the last on the list today. But Evie had said the pair would be by soon.

“Yes, this morning. He was so sweet and nice. I really would love...” Ivy’s eyes went to Theo, and then her shoulders slumped. “Oh, well.”

Madison’s heart cramped. The little girl had almost blurted out that she wanted a dog. Maybe she should have. It was better for Theo to give her a definite answer than for Ivy to pine after something she might never have.

Like the love of a mother?

Madison’s breath stalled for a few painful seconds.

Ivy's mom had died, but surely she'd loved her daughter.

That didn't make the loss any easier. But at least she hadn't simply wandered in and out of Ivy's life, until one day she hadn't been there at all—leaving a heartbroken child to wonder what she'd done to make her mother go away.

Was she thinking of Ivy? Or herself?

Madison had done the rounds in various foster homes after her mom had disappeared. Finally, she'd been sent to a group home when she'd been a teenager, where she'd stayed until she'd graduated from high school.

The chaos of moving from place to place had made it hard to develop long-term friendships. Maybe that was why she preferred working on her own. And why colleagues saw her as aloof and unfriendly. She'd relied on herself for so long that she didn't know how to ask for help. Or to trust that someone would catch her if she fell.

"I didn't realize they brought the dog in here." Theo's low voice was neutral. A little too neutral.

"They did, and I loved him so much. He even fell asleep on my bed while I was stroking him." She pulled her covers up to her thin chest. "Do you think Doodle can come and see me again?"

Theo moved from his position against the wall to sit in a chair beside her bed. "I'll have to see how those visits work, exactly, but I think it can be arranged if you would like that."

"Oh, I would!"

Theo glanced at Madison with brows that went up slightly. In accusation? Had Ivy shared with him her desire for a puppy of her own, or...and here went her wandering thoughts once again...had he looked inside that notebook after all? She gave a slight shake of her head to indicate she hadn't put Ivy up to it.

"They've been trying to bring him by to visit all of the children before Christmas. He's been wearing his elf hat, since he's one of Santa's helpers." She hoped he'd understand what she was trying to say, that they were linking the visits with the man the hospital had hired to play Santa. "I guess it was just Ivy's turn for a special visit."

"I guess it was. An elf, huh?" His voice, like his eyes, had a speculative sound to it. So what if he thought she was behind Doodle's visit or that she was inserting herself where she wasn't welcome? Once they were alone, she would set him straight. Or maybe she would ask Evie to make Ivy a priority and have the labradoodle stop by more often.

Although why she wanted to make him uneasy, she had no idea. A little quid pro quo for the way he hung around in her thoughts—where he most definitely was *not* welcome?

"Yep, an elf. It seems Santa sometimes uses locals to help him do his work."

"And sometimes he uses people from a long way away to do his miracles." The graveled plea behind the words made her tummy twist and turn.

So much for a quid pro quo. Any desire to make him uncomfortable vanished, replaced by a plea of her own.

Please don't pin all your hopes on me.

And yet he was. She knew it. Knew he'd called her to come to the hospital because of this very skill set. Normally Madison thrived under that kind of high-pressure atmosphere, the urgency making her job exciting and unpredictable. Her mind seemed to revel in taking a scattered array of seemingly unconnected symptoms and somehow fitting them together.

Only she'd never been colleagues with a parent before. Or connected with a child the way she had with this one.

Her fingers tweaked Ivy's hair and she forced a smile, pretending the wordplay hadn't suddenly become deadly serious. "Miracles can come from many different sources."

"Will Pablo get a miracle?" The little girl glanced up at her.

Madison saw Theo go still at the mention of the little boy diagnosed with muscular dystrophy who'd been a couple of doors down from Ivy's room until they'd moved him to PICU.

Madison swallowed. “Pablo left today.” She tried to put enough subtle emphasis on the word “left” that Theo would realize she wasn’t talking about going home.

A muscle went to work in his jaw, pulsing a couple of times before going quiet. He got it. He lowered himself into a nearby chair, elbows on his knees, head down.

Thinking about how Pablo could just as easily have been his daughter?

Unwilling to leave him to figure out a way to respond to Ivy’s question about miracles—or the lack thereof—Madison spoke up. “Why don’t we see if we can challenge your dad to a game of Go Fish?”

Up came Theo’s head, eyes fixed on her. “Go Fish?”

Those two words had never sounded as elegant as they did in that accent of his. It forced a smile from her.

“It’s a card game that uses a special deck.” She never knew what kind of cases she might be called in on, so she’d gotten used to carrying a pack in one of her pockets. Sometimes getting someone’s mind off an illness helped calm nerves, whether it be children, parents, or anyone else. She’d been kind of famous for producing that deck of cards at her hospital in the U.S., had often being called on to help calm a child who was being prepared for surgery. It was the one time she’d felt wanted—needed—for something other than her skills at diagnosis.

“I know what it is. I’m just not sure how you’re going to manage—”

Out came the pack of cards. Theo’s head gave a funny little tilt as if he couldn’t believe his eyes.

“Now I’ve seen everything.” His glance landed on her. “Madison the magician.”

The way he’d said that...

A shiver rolled over her that she did her best to suppress.

“It’s good therapy for cognitive and fine motor skills.”

And it gave Madison a way to observe her patients, looking for any tiny changes that she might miss otherwise. If she played a quick game over a period of a couple of weeks—or months—she could see disease progression. The first game gave her a base from which to compare progress or deterioration. In this case, she prayed she wouldn’t see the latter.

She let the magician comment stand, instead of going into that kind of explanation. Maybe later.

Nodding at the spot on the bed next to her, she said, “Move closer, Doc, so I can deal.”

There was a moment’s hesitation, but he finally got up and sat on the mattress, watching as she dealt the first hand and placed the rest of the deck face down between them. She hoped he didn’t see the slight tremor in her hand as she did so.

Although she’d come prepared to play, Theo’s presence was threatening to derail her. And although she’d invited him to sit next to her, she was now wishing she hadn’t. She was hyper-aware of everything about him. His scent. The way the fingers of his left hand rested on his thigh.

The way he was avoiding looking at her.

Lordy. She was in trouble.

When dealing with children, she sometimes adopted rather goofy voices as a way to make her patients laugh. Ha! There was no way she was going to do that today.

Ivy picked up her hand, although it took some effort to do so. The little girl’s struggle poured an icy dose of reality over her. Madison tensed, resisting the urge to offer help, and when Theo looked like he might intervene, she spoke up. “She can do it. Let her.”

“Yeah, Daddy, I can do it.” She carefully separated her cards, fumbling a little and dropping one of them in the process. There was silence as she recovered and picked it up again.

“Player to the left of the dealer goes first.” She would have had Ivy go first, no matter which side she’d been on.

The girl’s eyes swiveled between the two of them before focusing on her father. “Do you have any threes, Daddy?”

Theo handed over a card. “I have one.”

Ivy's grin lit up the room. "I knew it." She asked for another card, this time from Madison, who didn't have the requested item. Then it was Theo's turn.

"Madison, do you have any aces?"

"Go fish."

He didn't move for a second. "How about up your sleeve? Do you have any there?"

She froze as his eyes finally met hers. Nerve endings crackled as she stared back at him.

"Daddy! That would be cheating, and Madison doesn't do that."

Madison snapped her gaze back to her cards, none of the numbers coming into focus.

She would cheat in a heartbeat if it meant outsmarting whatever was going on inside Ivy's small body.

It took them fifteen minutes to declare Theo the winner, and to Madison it seemed like an eternity. All she wanted to do was retreat to the safety of her office, lay her head down on her desk and try to come up with some kind of answer. For Ivy. And, heaven help her, for her father.

Especially after seeing slivers of change in Ivy over the course of the game. Her cards appeared to get heavier and heavier, the young girl having to set them down in between hands. But her mind was as sharp as ever. In fact, she seemed to make up for her deteriorating condition by memorizing what was in her hand. And when she said, "Go fish," without even looking, neither Madison nor Theo challenged her. By the end the girl was yawning, even though it was only six in the early evening.

"Tired, kiddo?" she asked.

"No."

Theo gathered the cards into a neat stack then leaned over to kiss his daughter's head. "Why don't you rest for a little while, and I'll help Dr. Archer put these away, okay?"

"Will you tell me a story later?"

"Of course."

Ivy lay back against her pillows, her face pale, the muscles in her thin arms lax and still. She made no move to hug her dad. Or wave goodbye. For a child who was normally so affectionate, it struck a chord of fear in Madison.

If she felt it, then that chord had to be a million clanging gongs going off in Theo's head.

God, why couldn't she figure this out?

A hot wave of nausea seared up her esophagus as she pictured Theo tucked in next to his child, reading her a bedtime story.

How many stories did she have until that bed was empty? Just like Pablo's.

Twenty? Ten?

Two?

The pain grew, engulfing her with a terrible sense of responsibility.

She needed to fix a picture of that bed in her head and stare at it. Force herself to get to grips with the reality that this was life or death.

Wasted time can't be recaptured. Hadn't she just said that not very long ago? Yes, and it was true. It couldn't.

Neither could lost opportunities.

She straightened her backbone. So she needed to do something about it. Needed to work faster. Harder.

Theo led the way from the room and handed her the rest of the cards. "I gather there was a reason for that. Quite clever, actually."

It took her a few seconds to realize he hadn't read her thoughts but was talking about the game.

She drew a careful breath, trying to tamp down the chaotic emotions that had been racing through her a few seconds ago. "I wondered if you would figure it out."

"Only after I caught those eagle eyes studying Ivy as she played. After the third or fourth time it hit me that you were monitoring her." He sighed. "She's getting tired more quickly."

“Yes.”

“What else?”

“Theo...”

He shook his head. “I want to know.”

And he deserved to. She just didn’t want to be the one to tell him. But she owed it to him to be honest.

“Her arms have developed a tremor when holding them in front of her.” Muscle wasting from lack of use. The problem was, no one had any idea what was causing them to atrophy. “By the time we were ready to leave the room she was completely spent. I have a feeling she forced herself to keep going. For you.”

“Hell.”

Theo put his hands behind his neck and stretched his arms out to the side. A pop sounded in one of his joints, the sharp sound making her flinch slightly.

“Sorry. Bad habit.”

She could understand that. She had her little quirks as well. But they were more along the lines of insomnia when she was dealing with a puzzling case. She’d had more than her share of nights doodling symptoms on a whiteboard and looking for something that would ring a bell. Ivy’s symptoms were plastered on a board she’d propped in the dining room of her apartment. And she had definitely spent more than one sleepless night searching for a clue.

“Her treatment team wants to do more blood tests,” he said.

“I know. I asked that the report be sent down. The list of what it’s not is growing longer, which is good in that the list of what it could be is getting shorter.”

“Is it?” His arms went back to his sides. “How long can she go on like this? At some point it’s going to reach a point of no return.”

Hadn’t she thought something very similar moments earlier?

Fighting through the catch in her throat, she turned toward him, wrapping her fingers tightly around his wrist. She wasn’t sure if she was clutching him to reassure herself or to lend weight to what she was about to say.

“Hey. We’re not there yet. She’s still breathing.” *Not* the best way to word it. She hurried to add, “The weakness is only in her limbs and hips at the moment.”

“Thank God for that.” The second he reached up to cover her hand with his, she knew touching him had been a big mistake. The heat from his skin was electric, unseen calluses scraping across her nerve endings and bringing them to life.

She should move. Tug her hand free. But since she’d initiated the contact, she had no one to blame but herself.

“I’ll take as many of those ‘at the moments’ as I can get,” he murmured. “Until we can figure this out.”

The hallway was completely empty. There were fewer people staying in this section over the holidays, since everyone who could go home to be with their families did.

Ivy could probably have a great team of caregivers if she went home as well, but Theo wanted her here. Near him. They had an amazing bond. One she’d never had, growing up.

A tightness in her chest warned her that her emotions were venturing far too close to the surface.

She glanced up and caught him staring at her. She wanted to promise him miracles and happy endings and anything else he was looking for. But she couldn’t. “Sometimes we just have to do our living in those moments.”

“Yes. I agree.”

The seconds stretched into minutes. Neither of them moved. Until—real or imagined—his thumb brushed the back of her hand.

Her body erupted instantly, nipples drawing tight inside her thin bra. God, she hoped he couldn't see them. Hoped he couldn't—

“Madison...”

A sharp *ping!* signaled the arrival of the elevator. Jerking free, she took a hurried step back. Then another, struggling to catch her breath.

She needed to escape while she could. “I'll see you tomorrow for our meeting.”

“And another game of cards?”

“Cards?” Her brain was a huge mudslide of buried thoughts and emotions at the moment, and so it took her a second for the words to make sense. “Oh. You don't have to be here for that, if you don't want to.”

The less contact she had with him the better. At least it was looking that way. What had she been thinking?

She hadn't been.

Evidently neither had he, if his response to her living-in-those-moments comment was any indication. It had certainly veered away from the professional and into the personal.

Her lack of dating life had shown its ugly face. She'd lapped up the attention like a lovesick teenager.

“I'd like to be, if it's okay. It gives me a chance to measure her abilities as well.”

Two people stepped off the elevator, one of them giving Theo a wave that asked him to wait before heading toward them.

Madison did not want to hang around. Her face was already burning. Someone was sure to notice, since she had the worst poker face in history. Theo seemed to be thinking the same thing. “I'll see you tomorrow. Call me when you know a time.”

“Okay.”

And with that, she fled down the hall in the opposite direction of the approaching staff members. It would take her longer to get back to her little cubicle this way, but she didn't care. Right now, all she was worried about was how she was going to face Ivy's father tomorrow. Or keep herself from doing something else stupid. Like hurtling down a road that led from professional courtesy toward unprofessional crush.

CHAPTER THREE

“WE WOULD LIKE to congratulate Naomi Collins on moving in with Finn Morgan. He is one lucky devil.”

Madison, who'd been talking to Naomi about Ivy, saw the woman's eyes widen in surprise as the voice continued over the hospital PA system.

“Oh, my God,” the physical therapist muttered. “Is that Finn?”

Madison's lips curled in a smile. She knew Finn and Naomi were an item, but had had no idea their relationship had progressed to this point. “It certainly sounds like him.”

“He said he wanted to keep it under wraps.”

That made her laugh. “Well, he's evidently changed his mind.”

“So it would appear. That man has some explaining to do.” Naomi didn't sound angry, though. She sounded...in love. Completely and madly in love.

And the fact that Finn was announcing to the world that they had moved in together? It was dreamy in a way Madison had never experienced. The quick fumbling in the back of her prom date's car had been anything but a dream. It had left her feeling empty and confused. And the guy had never called her for another date, something that had hurt almost as much as her mother's abandonment. She'd been wary of relationships ever since.

So why was Theo affecting her the way he was?

She glanced at Naomi. She didn't seem empty. Or confused. She seemed very, very sure of what she wanted. And what she wanted was Finn.

And that, my dear, was love. The kind that real dreams were made of. The kind she'd never found.

"Congratulations, honey." She gave her new friend a quick hug. "If anyone deserves this, you do."

Naomi waved a hand in front of her face. "Stop or you'll make me cry. Or he'll make me cry. Or someone will."

"I'd go find him if I were you, before he adds to his story and says something really embarrassing."

"Good idea." She gave Madison's arm a quick squeeze. "Can we continue this another time?"

"Of course. Go."

With that, Naomi hurried down the corridor in the direction of the elevators.

Madison watched her go until she disappeared into a small group of people.

What would it be like to find someone like Finn and settle down?

She wasn't likely to ever settle down, wasn't sure she even knew how to stay in one place longer than a few months or a year. Even her job changed repeatedly. Well, not the job itself. Just where she practiced it. She seemed to gravitate toward the hardest of the hard cases. Her last hospital had been different in that regard. She'd been there for two years. And now she wasn't. But she'd left there expecting to go back. Hadn't she?

Or had coming to England put something into motion that felt both familiar and unsettling? Like pulling up her tent stakes and wandering to a new city with new faces and new challenges.

Was she really bored so easily?

Or was she too afraid to get attached, expecting what was familiar to be yanked away from her at any moment?

Like her prom date? Or her mother's love? Or all those foster homes she'd lived in?

One thing was for sure. No one would be announcing she'd moved in with them over a hospital intercom. She'd made sure of it.

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