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ROMANCE

The Family Doctor

BOBBY HUTCHINSON

Bobby Hutchinson

The Family Doctor

Аннотация

He's got lots of patients—but she's the one with patience to spare! Dr. Tony O'Connor, chief of staff at St. Joseph's Hospital in Vancouver, has a short fuse these days. His mother is driving him crazy. His father, whom he hasn't seen in thirty-two years, is coming to visit with the woman he loves, and the members of Tony's family are taking sides. Not only that, Tony has just injured his ankle and gotten himself laid up in St. Joe's. Kate Lewis, the hospital's patient representative, is an expert at coping. Maybe she can help Tony out. Except that soon Tony and Kate are facing even more problems. Like what to do about the volatile feelings between them...and how to stop putting their own needs last.

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“I can’t believe you’re suggesting nondisclosure just to avoid a lawsuit, Tony.”

Undaunted, Kate went on. “That error was intentionally concealed. And not a single person has apologized.”

Tony felt his temper begin to simmer. She couldn’t be accusing him of unethical behavior, could she?

“I’m not trying to avoid a lawsuit and I resent that you’re even suggesting I am. What I’m saying is that you’re overstepping hospital boundaries....”

“I’m not laying blame here, Tony. All I’m saying is that when a mistake has been made an apology is in order.”

The frustration he was feeling pushed him over the edge. “For God’s sake, Kate, stop being a bleeding heart and get practical about your job or you’ll lose it,” he thundered.

She looked up at him with huge, wounded eyes. “Are you threatening me, Dr. O’Connor?”

“Of course I’m not,” he growled. “We’re simply having a discussion.”

“No, we aren’t. We’re having a fight.”

The pain in her voice made him ashamed of himself, but this had gone way too far for him to back down now. “I’m sorry, Kate, but the fact is I think you’re wrong.”

Dear Reader,

Families! We love them, but there are times they make us crazy. What always intrigues me about families is the myriad ways they force us to grow, to adapt, to reluctantly accept traits in them that we'd reject in acquaintances. Family members have the capacity to push all our buttons, to make us question our belief systems, reevaluate our boundaries. If life is a school, maybe they're our best teachers.

Always, I learn from each book I write. It's as if the people I create are actually my teachers, saying with a smile, "C'mon, Bobby, you've avoided looking at this part of your personality. It's time you took a peek, uncomfortable as it might be." This book taught me a lot about anger, and forgiveness, and the unlimited number of ways there are to live a life. I hope it makes you laugh—and maybe cry a little, the way it did me.

Thank you, readers, for trusting me enough to take you on another journey from beginning to end.

With my love and gratitude,

Bobby

The Family Doctor

Bobby Hutchinson



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This book is for Patricia Gibson,
dear wise friend and mentor, who teaches by example
that for every problem there is a solution, and we get there
by giving up blame. For your constant encouragement
and assistance, I am humbly grateful.

Thank you to a charming young lady, McKensy Balch,
for the use of her beautiful name.

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EPILOGUE

CHAPTER ONE

DR. ANTONY O'CONNOR'S mother was making him crazy.

The shouting match they'd had before he left the house this morning was also making him late for the 7:00 a.m. meeting of the ethics committee, which was embarrassing because he was the one who'd insisted the committee convene at that early hour. Tony had only been chief of staff for four months, and punctuality was something he prided himself on.

The meeting was being held in the main boardroom at St. Joseph's Medical Center, just off the lobby. He jogged in from the parking lot, squinting irritably in the glare of the rising sun. He ignored the softness of the June morning, and he was oblivious to the slight breeze that carried the salt tang of the sea up from Vancouver's inner harbor. Shouldering his way through the revolving doors he hit the lobby at full, impatient stride.

"Morning, Doctor. Nice day, huh?"

The cheerful greeting came from his left, and he turned in mid stride to see who it was. The leather sole of his right loafer hit something slippery on the linoleum and he stumbled. Flailing wildly, he twisted to catch his balance, and felt his ankle turn painfully in the instant before he hit the floor. Instinct from years of playing rugby made him break the fall with his shoulder, but the wind was knocked out of him. For a dazed and breathless

moment he lay prone, watching assorted feet rush toward him.

“Hey, Doc, you okay?” The news vendor from the lobby kiosk, in peacock blue trainers, was the first on the scene. Tony could hear exclamations of alarm from the elderly volunteers behind a nearby desk, and he sensed the beginnings of a general stampede.

To avoid it, he rolled to one side, got up on his knees, then pushed smoothly to his feet, ignoring the bolt of red-hot pain that shot from his ankle to his groin. On the floor was the foil candy wrapper he’d slipped on. He bent and picked it up, swearing under his breath, and shoved it into his jacket pocket.

“I’m fine, I’m fine,” he assured two nurses and a clerk who’d joined the kiosk attendant. “Twisted my ankle a bit, nothing serious.”

Before anyone could dispute that, he brushed off his trousers and straightened his jacket, and in spite of the pain that streaked through his leg and made him catch his breath, he headed down the corridor.

ST. JOE’S ER WAS HAVING a memorable morning, and triage nurse Leslie Yates was doing her personal best to sort out sufferers in the order in which they needed treatment when the admitting clerk called, “Les, line three’s for you. I think it’s your mother.”

She hurried to the desk and snatched the phone. “Hi, Mom, thanks for calling back. Listen, I won’t be able to break off at noon to take you to your doctor’s appointment. You’ll have to call a cab. You wouldn’t believe the scene down here this morning.

Think Shriners convention and food poisoning. Yeah, I will. You, too. Talk to you later, Mom. Bye.”

As Leslie hung up, she glanced around and shook her head in utter amazement. It was barely nine in the morning, and the place resembled a war zone. Stretchers were lined up, every cubicle and examining room was filled, and men with urgent, utter desperation etched on their faces stood in front of every bathroom.

Sounds of retching and moaning filled the air, and the putrid odors of feces and vomit hung over the area like a pall. Nurses trying to get the attention of overworked ER doctors raised their voices as they hurried from one bed to another, keeping a wary eye out for puddles on the floor.

“Bed four has a pacemaker and he’s hyperventilating.”

“Did you get the antiemetic into seven?”

“Where are the commodes we asked Geriatrics for? Marvin, get on to Housekeeping and tell them we’re frantic down here, they have to send more staff to clean up this mess. Oh, and, Marvin, try the rehab ward again. They must have commodes we could use.”

Technicians drawing blood cultures and taking stool samples bumped into one another as they hurried from one sufferer to the next while doctors searched for veins and nurses hung more and more IVs of Ringer’s Lactate.

As if elderly Shriners with gastroenteritis weren’t enough, the ER would have to be short staffed. It was late June, and

many of the medical staff were already on holiday, while others had succumbed to a particularly vicious strain of bronchial flu currently doing the rounds.

Leslie questioned still another suffering Shriner who'd attended the annual banquet the day before, filling in information as she listened carefully to the all-too-familiar recounting of symptoms. She slotted him in the lineup for treatment. It was days like this, she muttered under her breath, that reminded her she was fifty-three years old, twenty-two pounds overweight, and had bunions.

"Excuse me, nurse? Leslie? Leslie, I need an X ray on this ankle, and I need it immediately."

The imperious and irritable male voice got Leslie's full attention because it belonged to Dr. Antony O'Connor, St. Joe's chief of staff.

Leslie usually saw his tall, vigorous figure striding down hallways, vanishing into some meeting room or another. She knew him well enough to exchange a polite good-morning, and she'd attended staff meetings where he was present, but she certainly wasn't on intimate terms with him.

Not that she and her friend Kate Lewis hadn't wickedly speculated about O'Connor and intimacy. Leslie surmised there wasn't a red-blooded heterosexual female at St. Joe's who hadn't had lascivious thoughts about Tony O'Connor. Physically, at least, he was a prime specimen.

This morning, however, he wasn't looking as hunky as usual.

He was seated in a wheelchair in her admitting area, one hugely swollen bare ankle propped high on the chair's footrest, with a good six inches of well-shaped hairy calf peeking out from under the cuff of his gray trousers.

The volunteer pushing O'Connor was an elderly man named Harold, whom Leslie knew well. Harold rolled his rheumy eyes at the ceiling and made a face, warning Leslie that his passenger wasn't in the best of moods.

Maintaining the same tranquil expression she'd perfected from seventeen years of dealing with every variety of calamity the universe could devise, Leslie hurried over to the wheelchair, but her serenity was a facade. All the ER needed this morning to top the utter chaos was this—St. Joe's chief of staff requiring medical attention.

"What's happened to you, Tony?" She was pleased that her voice didn't betray any of her inner tumult.

"Fractured ankle—I'd think that was pretty obvious," he snapped in a querulous tone, jabbing a finger in the direction of his swollen foot. "Call the radiologist. I need an X ray just to confirm that the damn thing's broken. And then get hold of Jensen—he'll deal with it from there."

Leslie's heart sank. She knew from long and painful experience that a doctor with an injury was like a bear with a sore tooth—unreasonable, irascible, impossible to deal with and ready to maul the first person in his path.

"First let's get you into an examining room." Which, Leslie

knew, would take a miracle. All the examining rooms were overflowing with vomiting Shriners. But at that moment an orderly whisked a stretcher out of number three, and Leslie breathed a prayer of thanks and hurriedly wheeled O'Connor in. The room stank, so she located a can of air freshener and sprayed it around in liberal doses.

He made a disgusted sound, but she ignored it. In her books, freshener was preferable to the alternative.

“Now, what happened exactly?” Leslie put the can down and poised her pen above a clipboard. Usually this information was taken by a clerk, but she didn't have to glance in that direction to know that a long line of moaning Shriners and a few poor unfortunate walk-ins were waiting for the harassed clerks to get to them. It wouldn't do at all to send O'Connor over to sit in line and wait his turn.

“How did the accident occur, Tony?”

“Candy wrapper,” O'Connor growled, his face flushing. “I slipped on the foil from a stupid roll of candies. Damn thing was on the floor in the lobby. What's with the cleaning staff, leaving junk like that lying around?”

“You slipped on a candy wrapper?” She was simply confirming information, but he glared at her from angry brown eyes as if she'd said something insulting.

“Yes, nurse, as ridiculous as it sounds, that's exactly what I did.” His tone was not only sarcastic but strident. “And now I'd appreciate it if you'd call the radiologist immediately. I have

another meeting, which I'm already late for."

Leslie struggled with the impulse, developed over her years as a triage nurse, to inform O'Connor that bullying would get him nowhere, and he was going to have to wait his turn. Good sense overcame impetuosity, however, as she reminded herself that this guy was the Big Kahuna, and she and her mother enjoyed living well on what Leslie earned at St. Joe's.

She knew that Antony O'Connor had been chief of staff for only four months. Leslie had seen him around before that, of course; he had a busy family practice and admitting privileges at St. Joe's.

During these last four months, however, he'd established a formidable reputation. The general consensus was that he was meticulous, impatient, critical of anything he deemed unnecessary, and willing to go to extreme lengths to correct whatever he saw as a waste of the medical center's time and money. It was rumored that his iron fist bore no sign of a velvet glove. He had energy to burn and had maintained a busy general practice after his appointment as chief, seeing his patients in the afternoon and spending his mornings at St. Joe's. Leslie knew he had a great rep as a GP. She didn't know him well enough to guess whether or not he had a sense of humor, though. She suspected not.

The wisest thing she could do, she decided, was to summon one of the doctors and let him or her deal with O'Connor.

After she finished this damned medical history. Pen poised

over the clipboard, she began again.

“Have you been a patient here before, Tony?”

“Of course not.” His tone was beyond edgy. “You know who I am, Leslie. Surely you’d know if I’d been seen in Emerg.”

“Not necessarily.” She didn’t exactly spend twenty-four hours a day here. Although this morning it felt as if she had already, and she was only three hours into her shift.

“Age?”

“Forty-three.”

“What medications are you on?”

“None. Well, I did take four Tylenol to ease the pain after I did this, but nothing on a regular basis.”

“And what time did the accident occur?”

“Seven-fifteen. I was on my way to an early meeting.”

It was now nine-thirty. The time lapse accounted for the extreme swelling evident in his ankle.

“So you walked on it right away?”

“Yeah, of course I did. It didn’t get really painful and start swelling until afterward.”

“You didn’t try icing it?”

“There wasn’t ice available.”

Leslie thought that was a crock, but she didn’t say so.

“Allergies?”

“Eggs. Look, is this really necessary? All this stuff is on record with the hospital already.”

“In your personnel file, perhaps, but not here in Emerg.” She

kept her voice impersonal. “Next of kin?”

“Next of kin? I’ve got a broken ankle, not a broken neck. Damn it all, this is ridiculous.” His brow furrowed and the flash of temper that darkened his thick-lashed eyes might have cowed a younger, less confident nurse. At her age, Leslie wasn’t about to let him intimidate her. She’d seen it all, and she’d learned how best to deal with irate patients.

He glanced at her and recognized relentless determination. His tone took on a pleading note. “Leslie, I’ve got a sore ankle, for cripes’ sake. Next of kin isn’t relevant. This is a total waste of time, in my opinion.”

“I’m sorry you feel that way, but it’s standard procedure.” She wanted to remind him of his own insistence on procedure, but she bit her tongue and added, “We find this the fastest and most beneficial way to proceed. Now, next of kin would be...?”

His lips thinned and he scowled. “My mother, Dorothy O’Connor.” In an exasperated tone he rhymed off address and phone number before she could ask, and as quickly as she could, Leslie finished the rest of the questions on the form.

“I’ll send Alf right in.”

She closed the examining room door gently behind her, took a deep breath before she remembered about the stench, and hurried over to Alf Jensen, who was treating a Shrinker who’d gone into defib.

“We got trouble,” she said in a low voice.

“You’re telling me.” Jensen applied the paddles and everyone

stood back. When the monitor registered a heartbeat and the patient was stable, he sighed and turned to Leslie. “What’s up?”

“Chief of staff’s in three, suspected fracture of the ankle. He’s mad as a hornet and wants an X ray stat.”

“He’ll have to wait his turn. There’s only me and Sorenson and those new med students who don’t know their ass from a hole in the ground.” Jensen was noted for his colorful vocabulary. “And most of these Shriners are a hell of a lot worse off than somebody with a sore ankle.”

“I know, but he’s the chief of staff, and he’s not in a waiting mood. Can you go in and have a word with him? Please?”

With a short expletive, Jensen jogged over to three.

An aide pushing a gurney said, “The patient rep is looking for you, Leslie. She’s over there at admitting.”

Leslie saw Kate and waved a hand, conscious all of a sudden of the nasty stains on her green scrub suit and the fact that her hair was escaping from the clip on the back of her head. As always, Kate was perfectly groomed, her mass of auburn hair gleaming, a sky-blue summer shirtwaist skimming a slender but curvaceous body.

Kate’s eyes, green as new summer leaves, took in the chaos. “Wow, looks like you’re having a busy morning down here.”

“Whatever gave you that idea?” Leslie grinned. Despite the difference in their ages—Kate was a mere thirty-six—and the fact that Leslie would kill for such cheekbones and long legs, they’d become friends.

Six months before, Kate had been an enormous help with a problem Leslie had had with one of the ER staff, another nurse who Leslie was sure was drinking on the job. During the meetings that Kate had set up to resolve the difficulty, it became obvious that she was an expert at conflict resolution. Leslie had discovered that she and Kate had the same irreverent sense of humor. They were both divorced, though neither lived alone. Kate had her stepdaughter, Eliza, and Leslie had her mother, Galina.

“Phew, what a stench.” Kate wrinkled her nose at the smell that no amount of air freshener could disguise. “I thought you might have time for coffee, Les, but it looks like you’re swamped. Give me a call when it slows down and you can get away for a minute. I want to talk to you about a patient who was treated in Emerg last week.”

“I’ll buzz you when it happens. Right now we’re up to our hips in alligators. Shriners with food poisoning and—” Leslie lowered her voice “—the chief in with what he insists is a fractured ankle. Slipped on a candy wrapper in the lobby, no less. Bet the cleaning staff are gonna get reamed out for that one.”

“Tony O’Connor?” Kate’s eyebrows arched, and her green eyes widened. Leslie knew that Kate had had her problems with O’Connor.

“The very one,” Leslie confirmed.

Kate pursed her lips and gave a silent whistle as she glanced around at the loaded stretchers. “Lousy timing.”

“You got that right.”

“Did you get him to take his clothes off?” Kate asked in a whisper.

“Damn.” Leslie snapped her fingers. “I knew I forgot something. What was I thinking?”

“You weren’t thinking of me, that’s for sure. The laughter dancing in Kate’s eyes made Leslie smile. “How many times have I told you I’d like to know what’s really under those Italian suits?”

“And how many times have I told you to just walk up to him and make a formal request?”

Kate grinned and shook her head. “Tempting, but I’m chicken.”

“Rubbish. You’re the bravest woman I know.” Leslie wasn’t joking about that. Where her job was concerned, Kate constantly and willingly put herself into the midst of conflicts that would have made Leslie run fast and far. “I’ve always thought you and Tony would make a striking couple.”

Kate laughed. “I hope it wouldn’t get to the striking stage, but you never know.”

They were giggling when a clerk came hurrying over. “Leslie, paramedics are arriving with an MVA, ETA seven minutes.”

“It’s been such a quiet morning, it’ll be nice to see some action for a change.” Leslie rolled her eyes and waved a hand at Kate as she hurried off.

CHAPTER TWO

KATE LEFT EMERG AND HEADED back to her cubbyhole of an office on the second floor, thinking about Tony O'Connor and his injured ankle. She hated to admit it, even to herself, but she found it difficult to feel any real sympathy for the man, and her lack of compassion embarrassed her. She'd been a nurse before she became an administrator, and she never wanted to lose her empathy for anyone in pain, be it emotional or physical.

As patient rep, her job involved the resolution of conflict—she was the bridge between the system and the individual. She dealt with anger every day, she even gave seminars on anger management, and still she couldn't entirely resolve the ambivalent feelings she had toward O'Connor.

One of his first campaigns when he came to St. Joe's last February was to try to do away with her position. She understood that budget cuts by the government were at the root of his reasoning, but he'd been unsupportive in the extreme, suggesting that having an employee whose sole function was to resolve patient and staff problems was both frivolous and unnecessary. Her salary was a waste of money, he declared openly at one meeting where she was present.

Fortunately, she had powerful support on the hospital board as a result of a dispute she'd resolved just before Christmas that

had saved St. Joseph's from what might have become a lengthy and expensive lawsuit.

When he learned of it, O'Connor had grudgingly withdrawn his objections to her position. He no longer actively opposed her, but neither had she felt any positive support from him.

At the time, she'd felt betrayed and deeply angry. She'd tried to let it go, but it was there, just under the surface, whenever she was around him, which was often. She saw him regularly at staff meetings, and they were on several committees together. It had been necessary many times to meet with him and discuss various concerns that had been brought to her attention involving patients and staff. Although he'd always been fair, he'd certainly never gone out of his way to be understanding, and she resented him for it.

Why, then, was she so powerfully, physically aware of the damned man? Sometimes he had a way of looking at her from those unreadable brown eyes, as if there was no one but the two of them in the room. She was all too conscious of the graceful, athletic way he moved, and she'd noticed that his unruly dark hair curled a little above his collar, and his hands were big and muscular.

It was such a waste. In Kate's opinion, Tony O'Connor had been richly blessed with compelling good looks, and he'd gone and sabotaged the package with a personality that could only be described as unsympathetic. Offputting, she amended. Downright objectionable? Yup, at times he could be a proper

pain in the butt.

She certainly didn't want O'Connor to suffer any real pain from his injury, she assured herself as she closed the door of her windowless office and sank into the comfortable chair behind her narrow desk. Clicking on her answering machine, she started listening to the dozen messages that had accrued that morning, making careful note of the ones that required immediate responses.

Pain, no. She wouldn't wish that on anyone. But a dose of what it felt like to be caught up as a patient in the machinery of a big hospital wouldn't hurt Dr. Tony O'Connor one tiny bit.

FOR THE FOURTH TIME in ten minutes, Tony glanced at his watch. He'd now been in Emerg for one hour, twelve minutes and forty seconds. He'd had to ask a nurse to call and make his apologies for the ten o'clock meeting he'd missed. His cell phone was in his pocket, but when he'd tried to use it, a nursing aide had snatched it from him.

"Pacemakers, Doctor. The man in the very next cubicle has a pacemaker. You know you aren't allowed to use a cell phone in Emerg."

He did know, of course, but he'd forgotten. His irritation had reached the borderline of outright fury by the time Alf Jensen burst through the door with the results of the X rays.

"It's about time," Tony growled. "Fractured, right?" He'd resigned himself to the fact that he'd be hobbling around on a cast for the foreseeable future. His ankle was swollen to more

than twice its normal size, and it was so painful he could barely stand the weight of the ice pack a nurse had slapped on it.

Alf closed the door and perched on the side of the bed.

Tony frowned at him, wondering why the hell Alf had such a grim look on his face. “Well? What’s the verdict? If it’s fractured, I know I’ll have to wait for the swelling to go down before we can cast the bloody thing. Let me have a look at the X ray.” He grabbed for it, but Alf quickly moved it out of his reach.

“The ankle looks fine, Tony, no fracture.”

“Well, that’s good news.” It didn’t make it any less painful, but at least a sprain would heal faster. “So let’s just bind it up with a tensor bandage, and I can hobble around on crutches.”

“I’m afraid the X ray picked up something we hadn’t expected.” Alf got up and slipped the negative into the viewing frame. “See this shadow right here?”

Tony frowned and studied the film. It showed an ankle and part of a leg. Alf was pointing to a spot on the fibula, just above the ankle joint.

“There’s a lesion right here, Tony. I had Crompton take a look at it—that’s what took so long. He was up in Surgery and I had to wait until he could break for a minute. He agrees with me that it looks like a possible sarcoma.”

Stunned, Tony gaped at the other doctor. “You’ve got to be joking. Sarcoma? That’s not possible.”

“I wouldn’t joke about a thing like this, Tony, you know that.”

It was a struggle for Tony to keep the utter horror he felt from

showing on his face. The ramifications sent a bolt of fear straight into his gut. Sarcoma was a fast-acting cancer. He could lose his leg.

No, he corrected as his stomach knotted and bile wormed its way up into his throat. No could about it. If this were sarcoma, he would lose his leg. He swallowed hard and did his best to control his expression.

“I’ve ordered a CAT scan. They’ll come and take you over there in a minute.” Alf looked uncomfortable and didn’t meet Tony’s gaze. “We could well be wrong. Let’s just keep our fingers crossed. And we have to be grateful for the X ray. If it is sarcoma, the sooner we treat it the better—although I don’t need to tell you that, Tony. You know as well as I do.”

He did, but it wasn’t any comfort. After mouthing another half dozen platitudes, Alf finally left, and for the first time all morning, Tony was relieved to be alone in the tiny room.

He could let go of the rigid control he’d maintained in front of Alf. His fists were knotted, and he realized it was because his hands were trembling. In fact, his whole body was shaking. His stomach felt sick. He could feel his heart hammering against his ribs, as if he’d just run a fast mile, and his breathing was jerky and rapid.

Shock. For the first time in years, he felt on the verge of tears. Jumbled thoughts raced through his head, all of them centered on his small daughter. Losing a leg was one thing, but what if the cancer had spread?

What would become of McKensy if he died? She was only nine, and he was the parent raising her. His ex, Jessica, had left them when McKensy was about to turn four. Jessica wanted to be a jazz singer, and when an offer came to travel with a blues band, she'd taken it.

He and his ex-wife were friends now, but it had been a tough four years. Tony knew Jessica loved their daughter, and she came to visit whenever time and distance permitted, but the life she'd chosen to lead wasn't one that could include a child.

After his divorce, and after two bad experiences with housekeepers, Tony had asked his mother, Dorothy, to move in with him and McKensy. The timing was right. Dorothy had just sold the family home and bought a condo, which she promptly rented out. The extra income meant she was better off than she'd ever been, and of course Tony paid her well for caring for McKensy.

He was grateful to his mother, but for very good reasons he absolutely didn't want Dorothy raising his daughter single-handed. His mother was a kind and loving grandmother, but she was also a neurotic and bitter woman, still obsessed with the fact that Tony's father had walked out on her years before.

He had a brother and two sisters, but to which of them would he entrust his daughter? They all loved McKensy, but their lives were busy and full. Two of them had children of their own. His single sister was plowing her way through med school and had another grueling three years to go.

For a moment, he gave in to the despair that overwhelmed him, and felt the strange sensation of tears welling up in his eyes. Horrified, he used his fist to swipe at the moisture that escaped down his cheeks.

With no warning knock, the door opened. “Tony O’Connor?”

He scrambled for a tissue and turned his head away until his eyes were dry.

A white-smocked young woman ignored his distress and gave him a wide smile. “Hi, I’m Lisa Bently. I’m here to take you down for a CAT scan.” She released the brakes on the bed and whizzed him out the door and down the hall, chattering as they sped along.

“Wrecked your ankle, huh? I did that last year, out jogging. I fell off the edge of the sidewalk. Hurts like fury, doesn’t it? Here we are. Looks like you’ll have a bit of a wait—this place is crazy today.” She angled the bed against the wall, one of four others.

“Look, Ms.—” Tony had to squint at her name tag. “Ms. Bently, would you just go in and tell the tech that I need this done stat?” He hated to pull rank, but there was no choice in this case. “Tell them the chief of staff is waiting and needs to be seen immediately.”

“Oh, they know, Doctor. But see, it’s first come first served. You’ll have to wait your turn like everybody else. Here’s a couple magazines.”

She plopped two outdated copies of Newsweek on his lap and was gone before he could say another word.

“Hell of a thing, ain’t it?” The elderly man in the bed across

the hall propped himself up on his elbow and twisted his head around to talk. “S’posed to be the best medical system in the world, here in Canada, and still you gotta lie around goin’ rotten waiting for some test or another. What’re you in for?”

“My ankle.” Tony tried to be distant without being rude, but the old man was oblivious to subtlety. For the next thirty-five minutes, he regaled Tony with the entire history of his bowels and gall bladder operation. By the time an attendant finally came and wheeled him in, Tony felt numb. He went through the test without saying a single word, grateful for the silence, anxious for the results. When it was over, he asked to see the negatives, but the female attendant insisted that Jensen had to see them first.

“Look, I’m a doctor,” Tony insisted. It was getting harder to summon up his usual authoritative tone. He felt exhausted, and his stomach was upset again. The sense of unreality that had begun with the X ray intensified. Still, he tried. “I’m the chief of staff at this hospital. Surely I have the right to see my own results.”

“Sorry, Doctor.” The older woman shook her head. “You’re Dr. Jensen’s patient, and he didn’t leave any orders of that sort.”

By the time he’d been wheeled back to Emerg, Tony was seething again, focusing on the ridiculousness of the rules rather than thinking about what the results of the scan would reveal. But underneath the justifiable anger, he could feel anxiety eating away at his gut like acid.

Jensen came bustling in after another twenty-minute wait,

a brown envelope clamped under his right arm, and Tony's stomach cramped hard. The bile in his throat burned, and he had to swallow repeatedly before he could croak out, "Is it sarcoma?"

"Tony," Jensen began in a hearty tone, avoiding eye contact again, "I don't know how to tell you this. There's been one hell of a mix-up—I owe you an apology. When I looked in the computer for the results of your X ray a while ago, I had no idea another Antony O'Connor had been seen in Emerg this morning. He was complaining of a sore lower leg, and he had an X ray shortly before you did. Turns out it was his X ray we were looking at, not yours. He does indeed have sarcoma." With a triumphant gesture, Jensen whipped out the negatives from the envelope. "Now, this is you, and as you can see, there's no fracture, and definitely no sarcoma. We can safely assume all that's wrong is a severe sprain."

The relief that flooded Tony was so intense he felt dizzy. It took several moments before utter fury edged out the thankfulness. How could such a gross mistake happen in his hospital? He opened his mouth to ask and the turmoil in his stomach intensified.

Suddenly he knew he was going to vomit. He stretched across Jensen, groping for a kidney basin. Jensen shoved one at him only seconds before he threw up.

With each expulsion, the burning in Tony's chest intensified, and he began to have difficulty catching his breath. His intestines were on fire, and as his stomach convulsed in agony, he moaned

and bent double.

“Easy, Tony.” Jensen was checking his blood pressure. Two ER nurses materialized and took over the task of monitoring vital signs.

“Acute GI symptoms,” Jensen concluded. “You have any history of intestinal problems, Tony?”

Tony gasped and shook his head. “Tylenol,” he managed to croak. “Four Tylenol...empty stomach...need water...”

Jensen gave him a small paper cup of water, and Tony swallowed it in one sip. “I just need some food,” he groaned, his eyes streaming from the pain in his chest and abdomen. “That Tylenol I took is killing me.”

Being told he probably had sarcoma hadn’t helped, either, but Tony didn’t have the breath to say so.

“Go down to the kitchen and ask for a bowl of clear broth,” Jensen barked at an aide, “and be quick about it.”

The burning subsided enough so that Tony could straighten. A nurse stayed with him, and when the aide arrived with a large bowl of broth on a tray, she cranked the back of the bed higher so he could sit more comfortably.

Tony had never been as grateful for a simple bowl of beef broth. He spooned it up, and almost immediately the pain in his chest and abdomen began to ease.

“Better?” The nurse smiled at him, and he was able to give her a facsimile of a smile in return.

He finished the entire bowl in less than two minutes. The

nurse set the tray on a cart. Sinking back on the bed, he heaved a sigh—and with the speed and intensity of a killer wave rolling in, a sensation of extreme heat rushed over him. It grew more and more intense, and as he felt his throat begin to swell, panic overwhelmed him.

“Allergy,” he whispered with the last of his breath.

He heard the nurse shouting and was dimly aware of bodies surrounding him and voices talking in urgent tones. In the few moments before he lost consciousness, he knew he was about to die, after all.

CHAPTER THREE

“DID YOU HEAR THAT O’CONNOR’S now on a respirator in ICU?”

Leslie was taking hungry bites of her tuna sandwich. It was past two in the afternoon, and she and Kate were sitting in the hospital cafeteria.

“The whole story’s been flying back and forth on e-mail all day,” Kate said with a shake of her head that sent her auburn hair flying. “It’s hard to believe there could be such a series of problems, and with the chief of staff, of all people.”

“It would be funny if it hadn’t almost been tragic,” Leslie agreed. “The final straw was that new French chef in the kitchen.”

“Rene Lalonde,” Kate said. “I heard that he put eggshells in the beef broth. Now, why would he do that?”

“Apparently it’s a traditional French custom. It clarifies it or something. How was he to know that O’Connor was violently allergic to eggs? We had his allergy marked down on the admitting form, but none of us suspected there’d be eggshells in the broth. I tell you, I’ve seen some panic situations in the ER, but today took the prize. Practically every doctor in the entire hospital was down there at one point. Nobody could see any obvious reason for such extreme symptoms. It was Jensen who finally asked for a detailed list of what the broth was made of.”

“Tony’s going to be okay, isn’t he?” Kate felt ashamed of her earlier lack of sympathy for his medical problems. He certainly didn’t deserve to be in ICU on a respirator.

Leslie nodded. She finished her sandwich and gulped some of her coffee, swearing when it burned her tongue. “He’s stable at the moment, but it was touch-and-go there for a while. They even called next of kin—his family’s upstairs right now. Apparently his mom is really up in arms. According to the nurses, she’s been making noises about suing the hospital for malpractice.”

They looked at each other and shook their heads.

“Can you imagine the headlines?”

Kate could, only too well. “Sounds like Tony’s mom is really scared,” she mused. She struggled again with her personal feelings, but she knew what her professional role was. “I’ll go up and see what I can do. Maybe just talking to somebody would help her feel better about things.”

“Better you than me,” Leslie said, sounding skeptical. “One of the nurses up there told me the woman’s a real piece of work.”

“Well, I’d rather have her unload on me than on a lawyer.”

Leslie raised her eyebrows. “Anybody ever tell you that the normal reaction to a bad scene is to run the other way?”

Kate grinned. “Yeah, but I get paid good money for standing still and deflecting bullets. Back when I was nursing, I told myself I could do a lot more for emotional issues than I ever could for physical ones.” That conviction had inspired her to go back to school and take one course after the other in psychology and

conflict management. “And you’re a great one to talk about running away from emergencies, Les. Besides, I’d like to meet Tony’s mother. Talking to someone’s mother can give a lot of insight into why their kids are the way they are.” Kate chewed the last of her bun, reflecting that she could use all the help she could get as far as Tony was concerned. It was humiliating to be able to resolve everyone else’s anger but her own.

“Yeah?” Leslie gave her a narrow-eyed look. “So that’s what you and Galina talk about each time I go to the bathroom, huh? You’re trying to analyze me.”

“Don’t flatter yourself. Your mom tells me how sexy the guys in Rehab are and asks why you and I don’t spend more time down there. Beats me. By the way, how’s Galina doing with rehab these days, Les?”

Leslie’s mother, Galina Poulin, was in her seventies, stubborn, opinionated, funny and delightful. In January, she’d decided to wash the bathroom walls in the town house she and Leslie shared, and she’d fallen and broken her hip. Galina had stubbornly refused to consider physiotherapy until the night Kate came to dinner.

It had taken a great deal of persuasion to convince Galina to even visit the rehab unit. When at last she agreed, Kate introduced her to the therapists, and one of them, Isaac Harris, had charmed her and talked her into coming twice a week for therapy.

“She loves Isaac—she giggles and blushes when I tease her

about him,” Leslie laughed. “She’s really making headway. I wondered there for a while if she’d ever walk again, but now she’s off the crutches, just using a cane. I owe you for that one, Kate.”

“Hey, your mom’s done it all by herself. I only hope I have half her energy when I’m her age.”

Leslie beamed. “Me, too. She’s one of my best friends.”

“Not many people can say that about a parent.” She never could, Kate reflected sadly. “It says a lot about the kind of person you are, Les, that you and Galina get along the way you do.”

“Yeah, doesn’t it? Divorced single female, emotionally dependent, insecure and tied to my mom’s apron strings.”

They looked at each other and chorused, “Not.”

The hospital’s PR system came on. “All ER staff please report back to Emerg, all staff back to Emerg, stat.”

Leslie groaned, gulped the last of her coffee and got to her feet. “I’m not sure I even wanna know what that’s about.”

“Good luck.”

“Today we need it,” Leslie sighed. “Let me know how you make out with Mother O’Connor.”

“I will. See you later.” Kate watched her friend hurry off, then finished her coffee and reluctantly made her way up to the Intensive Care Unit.

The nurse at the desk indicated which waiting room the O’Connor family were in and confirmed that Dr. O’Connor was steadily improving. As Kate headed down the hallway, she could hear a woman’s loud, angry voice.

“—never heard of such a thing, eggshells in soup. It had to be deliberate. God knows Tony has enemies here—he’s in a position of power and that always means stepping on somebody’s toes. Did you call the pastor like I said, Wilson? I’d like Reverend Anderson to come. I know they say Tony’s improving, but did you see his color? White as a sheet.”

Kate paused in the doorway. There were five people in the room, two men and three women. The plump, older woman with the tightly permed white hair must be Tony’s mother, Kate deduced. She’d been the one talking when Kate came in.

They all turned toward her. “Hello,” she said with a reassuring smile. “I’m Kate Lewis, the patient rep.” She directed her attention to the older woman, stepping toward her and extending a hand.

“And you are...?”

“I’m Dorothy O’Connor. I’m Dr. O’Connor’s mother.” She gave Kate an assessing look.

Dorothy’s eyes were red rimmed behind her pink-framed glasses, and her face had settled into what Kate thought were permanently dissatisfied lines. “How do you do?” Kate kept her hand extended, but Dorothy ignored it, so she turned to the others with a questioning smile.

Dorothy immediately took control. “This is my oldest son, Wilson O’Connor, and my son-in-law, Peter Shiffman.”

The men mumbled greetings, and then Dorothy introduced the two women. “And these are my daughters, Judy Shiffman

and Georgia O'Connor.”

Judy was obviously older than Georgia, but both sisters were slender and of medium height. Judy had Tony's dark hair, and was wearing a tailored dress, stockings and heels, her makeup meticulous. Georgia's hair was fiery red, drawn up in a careless knot at the back of her head, and she wore jeans and no makeup. They each gave Kate a strained smile and a nod, although neither said anything beyond hello.

“I wonder if there's something I can help you with?” Kate began. “Do you have any questions you need answered regarding Dr. O'Connor's care? Any concerns you might have that you'd like to talk over? I know this is a very stressful time for you, and I'd like to make it easier in any way I can.” She directed her remarks at Dorothy.

“And just how can you make anything easier?” Dorothy's voice was sarcastic. “This hospital won't get away with this fiasco, you know. You just tell me how my son could sprain his ankle this morning and then end up in intensive care with his life slipping away from him.” She raised her glasses and dabbed at her eyes with the lacy handkerchief she held clutched in one hand, but anger overpowered tears. Her voice rose. “Why, it's malpractice, plain and simple, any idiot can see that. My son's a doctor, and he's chief of staff here, too. It makes you wonder what happens to the ordinary Joe when he walks in off the street. What would the papers do if they got hold of this news? I can tell you there'd be an uproar, and rightly so.”

Tony's brother, Wilson, stepped forward and put an arm around his mother, nodding in agreement and looking at Kate as if it was all her fault.

"Maybe we ought to give the Vancouver Sun a call," he said to Kate in an accusing tone. "You people need to know that gross carelessness of this sort simply won't be tolerated." He sounded pompous and self-righteous. "Like Mother says, it's malpractice, and someone should pay."

Kate waited until he was finished speaking, reminding herself that this wasn't about her. She took a deep breath and kept her voice even, her tone friendly and nonjudgmental. "It sounds as if you're all very upset and angry, and you have every right to be. This must be terribly stressful for you."

Dorothy snorted. "Darned right it's stressful. My poor son is lying in there not able to talk—" she pointed dramatically toward the Intensive Care Unit, and her voice wobbled "—and not one person is doing anything about it. As far as I can tell, nobody even cares."

Kate had to bite her tongue hard in order to keep from telling Dorothy that she was totally wrong, that the entire hospital was in an uproar. Specialists had been called in, and every physician, nurse, tech and aide was horrified at the series of events that had led to this emergency.

Everyone, down to the newest member of the cleaning staff, cared a great deal. But Kate knew that blocking Dorothy's anger would only exacerbate it. Listening and sharing information were

tried-and-true ways to defuse that anger, difficult as they were.

Now Georgia O'Connor stepped toward Kate, and she sounded more worried than angry. "Could you find out exactly what's going on with Tony? They asked us to leave because a couple of doctors were examining him, and the nurse said they'd speak to us when they were done. They came out, but so far, nothing." She drew in a shaky breath, obviously on the verge of tears. "We just want to know how he's doing." Her large brown eyes were filled with concern, her forehead creased in worried lines.

"Absolutely," Kate said. "I'll go now and check with the nurse, then I'll come right back and let you know exactly what she says."

Kate found four doctors grouped around the nursing station, and when she asked, they assured her that the chief was improving rapidly. She suggested that the family needed reassurance, and Dr. Clark agreed. He walked to the waiting room. Kate followed, listening quietly as the doctor, with admirable candor, explained the entire sequence of events to the O'Connor family without making a single excuse.

Dorothy interrupted repeatedly, her tone accusing, her manner confrontational, and Kate had to admire the way Clark listened with patience and forbearance and then each time quietly reiterated the fact that the patient was improving rapidly and it looked as if there'd be no further side effects. Tony would remain in intensive care overnight, but there was every reason to believe he'd be back on his feet within a day or so, and the medical staff

were doing everything in their power to help him recover.

“Exactly what does that mean?” Wilson O’Connor demanded. “It sounds as if my brother’s at death’s door already because of the incompetence of the staff around here.”

“What’s happened is unfortunate,” Clark said. “But we really are doing our best for Tony, I assure you. I consider him a friend as well as a colleague.”

Tony’s mother gave another snort. “With friends like he’s got here at St. Joseph’s, I’d like to know who needs enemies.”

Dr. Clark’s face flushed at this obvious insult and he gave a pointed glance at his watch, nodded to everyone and walked out of the room, murmuring excuses about being late for an appointment.

“Can’t stand to hear the truth,” Dorothy said in a self-satisfied voice.

“Actually, you were pretty rude to him, Mom.” Georgia’s chin rose, and she returned her mother’s belligerent gaze. “He was only trying to be helpful.”

“Well, we all know whose side you’re on, don’t we?” Dorothy’s skin flushed magenta, and her eyes narrowed as she glared at her daughter. “Just because you’re hoping to be a doctor yourself doesn’t mean you ought to defend something like this.”

Georgia swallowed and it was obvious she was holding back tears. “I’m on Tony’s side. All I care about is that he gets better. I don’t think laying blame on anybody is helpful.”

Kate silently applauded.

“Well, I’m sure you’d handle everything so much better than I do,” Dorothy said in a sarcastic voice. “Although two divorces aren’t exactly what I’d call an example of good judgment.”

Georgia’s face flushed and Kate felt a rush of sympathy for her.

“I don’t think this is any time to be jumping down Mom’s throat, Georgia,” Wilson admonished, again taking his mother’s side. “She’s under a lot of stress here.”

“We all are,” Georgia said in a trembling voice. “Why does everything always have to turn into a huge fight? We’re in this together. We’re all worried about Tony.”

There was silence for a few seconds.

“Georgia’s right,” Judy agreed. “We should pull together instead of arguing at a time like this. And it sounds as if the worst is over, which is a good thing because Peter and I are going to have to leave now, Mom.” Judy pointed at her watch. “Otherwise we’ll get caught in rush hour traffic and be late picking up the kids from school.”

“School! Oh, my goodness.” Dorothy clapped a hand over her mouth. “I forgot all about McKensy. How could I do such a stupid thing? She’ll be waiting for me when her class gets out. She won’t know why I’m not there.”

This time, Kate noted, Dorothy’s hysterics rang true.

“When that call came, I got so upset I didn’t think to make arrangements for her,” Dorothy wailed.

“We’ll go and get her,” Judy soothed. “We have to pick up

Ryan and Tricia anyhow, and we can collect McKensy on the way. Her teacher knows me. We'll take her home with us for the night, Mom."

"She'll need her teddy and her quilt and some clothes," Dorothy said, rummaging in her purse. "Here's the house key—just drop it next door with Mrs. Draycott."

After Judy and Peter left, Wilson explained that he had to go back to his office, but he promised he'd come and drive Dorothy home later on.

"I can drive you, Mom," Georgia offered. "I've got my car."

"Oh, I'd rather go with Wilson," Dorothy said. "There're things I need to talk over with him."

Georgia shrugged. "Whatever you like, Mom."

When the nurse told Dorothy she could go in and see Tony for ten minutes, Kate was left alone with Georgia.

"Sorry about all that," Georgia said in an embarrassed tone. "I guess it's pretty obvious Mom and I rub each other the wrong way."

"It's a tense time for all of you."

"Yeah, it really is," Georgia sighed. "I should try and be more patient with her, I guess."

Kate felt that Dorothy was the one who should do the trying, but she didn't say so. "It seems as if you all have busy lives and lots to think about," she remarked. "Do you have kids, Georgia?"

"Nope. I was smart enough to know that wasn't a good idea for me."

“McKensy is Tony’s daughter?” Kate knew very little about Tony’s personal life. She vaguely remembered hearing through the hospital grapevine that he had a child and he was divorced, but she’d assumed the child lived with his ex-wife.

“Yeah. McKensy’s nine, she’s a great kid. Mom lives with Tony and takes care of McKensy for him.” Georgia’s eyes reflected the affection she felt for her niece. “Tony’s the best father any little girl could have.” Kate thought she detected a wistful note in the other woman’s voice.

“Sounds as if you and Dr. O’Connor are really close.” It was Kate’s turn to sound a little wistful. Her only sister lived in San Diego. Marie was eight years older than Kate, and the age difference had meant that they’d never really gotten to know each other. Kate sent gifts to her niece and nephew for birthdays and Christmas, and now that they had a computer she e-mailed them regularly, but she missed being close to family.

Georgia nodded. “I always say Tony’s my guardian angel. When my second marriage fell apart, he was there for me, and when I wanted to go back to graduate school and study medicine, he offered to support me.” She swiped at her eyes. “Mom thought it was totally nuts, me going back to school. But Tony convinced me I could do anything I set my mind to. I’d never have made it through the first year if it weren’t for him.”

Kate was beginning to see Tony O’Connor in an entirely new light.

“What branch of medicine are you planning to practice?”

“Obstetrics.” Georgia’s face became animated. “I think bringing babies into the world has to be the most exciting way anyone could spend their working hours.”

“I agree.” Kate smiled, but deep inside was the usual twinge of sadness and regret that nipped at her whenever babies were mentioned. Because of an ovarian cyst and a resulting hysterectomy when she was nineteen, she could never have babies of her own. Ironically enough, she’d been the kind of little girl who’d had dozens of dolls and played with them long past the time she should have lost interest in them. She’d always dreamed of growing up and having lots of kids, and the operation had sent her into a depression that lasted on and off for several years, until she met Scott and his daughter, Eliza.

Dorothy came bustling back into the room. “Well, they say he’s improving, but I can’t see it. Go in and see what you think, Georgia.”

Georgia hurried off and Kate tried again to get to know Dorothy O’Connor. “Georgia was telling me about your granddaughter, McKensy.”

Kate hoped it was a topic that would steer Dorothy in a more positive direction, even if only for a few moments. The woman was difficult, no doubt about it.

“McKensy’s my darling girl.” The angry set of Dorothy’s mouth softened into a smile, the first Kate had seen. The older woman looked pretty when she smiled, and the frown lines between her eyes eased.

“She’s thoughtful, and so smart. Straight A student, just like Tony was.” In the next moment the smile faded and the frown lines reappeared. “It’s just a blessing she took after him and not that flyby-night mother she has.”

Kate heaved a mental sigh. It seemed that nothing was entirely positive in Dorothy’s view. She didn’t want to pry further into Tony’s private affairs, but she found herself paying close attention when his mother continued with a disapproving sniff. “Fancied herself a singer, Jessica did. Everybody knows what kind of life those singers lead, what with dope and liquor and men. No morals whatsoever.” Her mouth pursed into a prim line. “At least she had enough sense to leave McKensy for Tony to raise, only sensible thing she ever did. I told him before he ever married her what the outcome would be, but he didn’t listen.”

“How nice that you have a chance to get to know your granddaughter,” Kate persevered. “My grandparents lived too far away for me to visit more than once every couple of years, so I never really got to know them at all.”

Dorothy’s chin lifted, and her voice was filled with pride. “My own children were lucky. They had the best grandfather in the world. My father was a wonderful man. He supported me and the children after my husband deserted us.” Her voice became bitter again. “He walked out before Georgia was even in school.”

It was hard not to think that Dorothy would drive anyone off. “That must have been very difficult for you, raising a family on your own.” Kate was trying to get a better sense of Dorothy’s

life.

“Oh, it was hard.” Dorothy shook her head. “Four kids, and no husband to help raise them. It was a struggle.”

“You must have been very self-reliant. What sort of job did you have?”

“I taught piano,” Dorothy announced with great pride. “I come from a very musical family. My father was a professor of music at the University of British Columbia.”

“How wonderful. I love music, but I can’t play any instruments.”

“All my children play—my father and I taught them. Piano, violin. Georgia had promise as a professional pianist, but she didn’t pursue it.” Dorothy’s mouth turned down in a disapproving line. “She only plays the guitar these days—a total waste of God-given talent, if you ask me. And of course Tony was very talented as well. He took up the saxophone.”

In her mind Kate immediately saw his tall figure, knees bent, eyes closed, passionately playing Dixieland jazz. By now she felt a bit like a voyeur, but she couldn’t help asking, “Does he still play?”

“Oh, yes. He used to be part of a jazz group that played in piano bars all over the city, but now that he has McKensy, he no longer has the freedom to go out at night. Once you have children, your life changes.”

“Yes, it does.” Kate was thinking of her stepdaughter, Eliza. She hoped her ex-husband had remembered about the birthday

party the little girl was attending this afternoon.

Kate glanced at her watch. Her workday was almost over. "I'm going to be going home soon. Is there anything more I can do for you, Mrs. O'Connor?"

Dorothy gave Kate a look that said she didn't think Kate had done anything to begin with. "No, I really don't see what anyone can do. There's no way that what's done can be undone, is there?"

"Unfortunately, no." Smiling at Dorothy was becoming more and more of a struggle, but Kate did her best. "I'll leave you, then, and I hope Dr. O'Connor continues to improve."

"So do I." It was plain from the tone of her voice and her deep sigh that Dorothy expected nothing of the kind.

As she hurried down the hall to the elevator, Kate wondered what made some people so negative. She'd met plenty of them in the course of her job; they were the ones who found the most to complain about, so they were the ones she dealt with on a regular basis.

She loved her job, she reminded herself as she finished the day's work, then retrieved her purse from her drawer and headed out to the parking lot. Defusing hostility was challenging, and Kate knew she did it well. But that didn't mean she wasn't glad to leave her work behind her and head home at the end of the day.

She was relieved that the late afternoon meeting she'd had scheduled was canceled. It was the weekly one the chief of staff held with department heads, and Kate had been asked to attend because of a staffing complaint. Tony O'Connor was obviously

in no shape to conduct a meeting.

After all that had happened, Kate felt she knew him better than she had that morning. She was sorry now that she'd been unsympathetic toward him. He had a lot of family issues to deal with, and she knew how that felt.

So he played the saxophone, huh?

Kate sent him good thoughts and headed home.

CHAPTER FOUR

TWENTY MINUTES LATER, she pulled up in front of her modest frame house, annoyed that her ex-husband, Scott, had once again parked his battered car in the paved driveway. The ancient vehicle sat there, flaking bits of rust, its hood up and various pieces of its innards spread across the lawn, which Kate had mown and trimmed just two days before.

But it wasn't the battered car that made Kate frown and hurry up the walk. Eliza was sitting on the front steps, her bare knobby knees clasped between her arms, tears trickling down her cheeks.

Her golden blond hair, clipped fashionably close to her skull by Kate's hairdresser, stood up in stiff peaks, carefully sculpted in place with the mousse Kate had given her, and she was wearing her bright pink party dress. Kate knew the birthday party she was supposed to attend must have started at least half an hour before.

"Eliza, what's wrong, honey?" Kate raced up the steps and sank down beside her stepdaughter. "I thought you were supposed to be at Melanie's party."

Eliza nodded, her wide blue eyes overflowing. "I was, but Daddy forgot to get me a gift. He said he would when I got home from school, but then he couldn't drive me because the car's broken again." She rubbed at her face with the palm of her hand. "I made her a card, but I can't go without a gift. Everybody got her something special—they all told me what they got her in

school today.” Her voice wobbled. “I wanted to give her some of that sparkly lotion from the Body Shop, but it’s too late now.”

Frustration at her ex made Kate’s heart pound. She had to struggle to keep her tone neutral. “And where’s Daddy gone?”

“He went to see if he could borrow Mike’s van. But he’s been gone a long time.”

Kate could guess why. Chances were good Mike’s van was out of gas or had some problem with the carburetor or the battery or the alternator. Scott’s friends could have been his clones. None of them could organize anything except getting together for a beer at the pub. Last-minute emergencies with vehicles were the norm rather than the exception. And like Scott, none of them held down a steady job.

“Would an unopened package of kid’s bubble bath and dusting powder do for a gift, you think?”

“Yeah.” Eliza’s little face brightened. “But where will we get it?”

“I just happen to have some in my dresser drawer.” Eliza’s own birthday was coming up soon, and Kate had bought the items on the weekend.

She rushed in the house and found them, then grabbed some purple tissue, tape and a pink ribbon as well. Eliza could wrap on the way to the party.

They hurried to the car and Kate slid behind the wheel. She didn’t bother leaving Scott a note—he’d know she’d bailed him out yet again. Eliza concentrated on wrapping as Kate drove

swiftly to the address the little girl recited from the printed invitation. Fortunately, it wasn't too far away. Eliza would be late, but not hopelessly so.

Kate went to the door with Eliza, and a cheerful young woman answered.

"Hey, you must be Eliza," she said with a wide grin. "Melanie's going to be so happy that you're here—she's been missing you." She rubbed her hand on her jeans and then stuck it out to Kate. "Icing sugar, sorry. Hi, I'm Belinda Rogers. You must be Eliza's mom."

"I'm Kate. Sorry she's late."

"No problem, the girls are still in the pool. You did bring your swimming suit, Eliza?"

Kate's heart sank, but Eliza nodded. "It's under my dress."

"Off you go, then."

Eliza gave Kate a fast, fierce hug and then ran off to join her friends.

"She doesn't have a towel." Kate felt like a negligent parent. Eliza had forgotten to tell her it was a swimming party.

"No problem, there's a whole stack of them by the pool."

"What time should I come and collect her?"

"Seven-thirty's good."

Kate thanked Belinda and then drove home, trying to get past the irritation that simmered in her. She'd made a point of reminding Scott about the party, and the fact that she wouldn't be able to drive Eliza because of the meeting. He'd promised

he'd do it.

Why, just once in his life, couldn't he carry through on the promises he made so glibly and then never kept?

You know he's unreliable, so why do you go on expecting him to change? They'd been divorced four years now, after five troubled years of marriage during which Kate gradually and painfully gave up her illusions, admitting at last that Scott Bauer didn't want to be anything other than what he was, an unemployed bum.

Kate was the one with dreams, the one who'd chosen to believe his oft-repeated promises about getting a job, buying a house, trading in the battered car for a decent one.

She realized now that she had only herself to blame. Scott had been a means to an end for her. She'd liked the amiable young man, but she'd fallen head over heels in love with Eliza, six months old when she met Scott. The baby needed a mother so desperately it almost broke Kate's heart to look at her, dressed in mismatched and discolored clothing, sucking on a pacifier, her huge blue eyes staring hungrily into the face of every stranger. To this day, Kate couldn't read the Dr. Seuss book, *Are You My Mother?* without crying.

Eliza's teenage mother had died of a drug overdose when Eliza was two months old. Scott had sworn he hadn't known his wife was using, but Kate thought now that he probably had, and in his usual fashion, simply chose to ignore it.

Thankfully, there was no indication that Eliza's natural mother

had used drugs during her pregnancy. Eliza was bright, usually cheerful, the most normal of little girls.

Because of the baby, Kate overlooked things she should have noticed, such as the fact that Scott, who had a degree in chemical engineering, was out of a job when she met him. He'd never had a steady job, and Kate knew now he probably never would.

But during the years of their marriage, she'd continued working as a nurse, volunteering for night duty several times a month so she could afford classes at university. She'd gone on believing that when the right job came along, he'd take it. She'd been patient and understanding when one opportunity after the next came to nothing. She'd agreed that Eliza needed a parent around, and she'd been willing to work so that Scott could be their daughter's caregiver. But it hadn't taken long to realize that although he took reasonable care of Eliza during the day, he did absolutely nothing else.

Arriving home exhausted after a twelve-hour shift on the geriatric ward, Kate would find the breakfast dishes still on the table, clothing scattered wherever he'd seen fit to drop it, no groceries in the house. He never once made dinner, cleaned the house, did the laundry or mowed the lawn. All household tasks were left for her to do. She paid all the bills and she also did all the housework, indoors and out. The moment she was home, he handed over Eliza, as well.

When Eliza started kindergarten, Kate had had enough. She gave Scott an ultimatum. Find work in three months, or the

marriage was over.

By this time Scott was grossly overweight and made no effort at all to look for a job. Kate at last faced the facts. She was married to a man who had no ambition and who had never really loved her—at least not in the way she wanted to be loved. Somewhere during the five years of their marriage, she'd lost all respect for him, as well as any affection. He refused to move out of the apartment they shared, so Kate packed her belongings and left, but the pain of leaving Eliza had nearly killed her. She saw a lawyer, explaining that she and Eliza adored each other. She was the only mother the little girl knew, and Kate wanted custody.

The lawyer explained that she had a fair chance, but it might mean a long and costly court battle. Scott was the girl's biological father, and despite his laziness, he did take reasonable care of her. Kate couldn't deny that Scott loved his daughter. The apartment they'd shared, which she'd painted and decorated, wasn't in any way an unsuitable home for a child.

After three months of painful visits with Eliza and tearful partings, Kate came up with a plan. Her own parents, dead for some years, had left her a small legacy, so Kate took the money and bought a house on Vancouver's east side, one with a bright and spacious basement apartment. Banking on his laziness, his cheapness, and his penchant for always taking the easiest route, she'd offered the suite to Scott at a reduced rent. He and Eliza had moved in and had lived in Kate's house ever since.

The arrangement was far from ideal. Scott took flagrant

advantage of the situation, using Kate as a built-in baby-sitter, relying on her to buy the majority of Eliza's clothes, even borrowing Kate's car to drive his daughter to the dance classes Kate paid for. She tried not to get angry with him, but it was a challenge.

When Kate drove up in front of her house, Scott's ample rear end protruded from under the hood of his car.

No blame, she reminded herself. The problem is the problem. Errors are just opportunities to learn and forgive. But the mantra wasn't working. She remembered Eliza's tearful little face and wrath took the place of reason.

Slamming the car door unnecessarily hard, Kate stalked over to Scott. "I've just taken Eliza to her birthday party," she snapped. "She was crying her heart out when I got home, and she was late by the time we got there. I thought you said you'd take her to buy a gift and make sure she made it to the party?"

Slowly, like a turtle emerging from a shell, Scott's jowly grease-smeared face appeared from the car's innards. He had the nerve to smile at her. "Oh, hi, Kate, how's it going? That's good you took Eliza, because I couldn't get Mike's van. He'd promised to deliver furniture with it."

His nonchalance infuriated her.

"Eliza was excited about that party. You let her down."

"I knew you'd get her there. No harm done."

Don't blame. Don't accuse. Kate knew her own rules, but somehow Scott pushed her into situations where she couldn't

apply them. “How can you do that to your own daughter?” Her voice rose. “You just assume I’ll come along and pick up after you. Well, Scott, I’ve had enough of it.”

It felt good to explode. But they’d been down this path before, and Kate knew more or less what was coming.

“Chill out, Kate. If you feel that way about it, I’ll take Eliza and go. My cousin called about a job in Nova Scotia. He promised me a place to live.”

Did he even have a cousin in Nova Scotia? Kate had never been certain, but the very possibility of his taking Eliza away made her stomach tighten. She’d never see Eliza again, and she couldn’t bear that.

As always, she backed down. Trembling, she stabbed a finger at the greasy auto parts now littering the lawn. “I want you to get this mess off the grass and find another place to work on this wreck of a car. The neighbors are complaining—the whole front yard is an eyesore this way.”

“Hey, hey, temper, temper. Aren’t you the one always preaching patience?” His grin was snide, and for an instant Kate longed to bring her hand up and smack him hard. With every ounce of self-control she possessed, she walked around him and up her front steps. Closing the door behind her, she collapsed in an armchair as the full effect of the quarrel washed over her.

She’d engaged, breaking rule number one. She’d accused, and she’d blamed, and she hadn’t listened. How could Scott push every single button the way he did? And not once, but every

single time something like this came up.

At least she could take a cool bath and eat some dinner before she went to pick up Eliza. She tried to concentrate on those pleasures and ignore Scott's goading. She hadn't asked him to pick up his daughter, because she knew he'd simply borrow her car to do it.

Times like these, she felt trapped and hopeless. Also defeated and a failure, she admitted as she kicked off her shoes. Whatever made her think she could defuse anger? She couldn't even manage it in herself. She thought of Dorothy, of the deep-seated anger that had surfaced when she mentioned her husband deserting her.

If she went on this way with Scott, would she eventually end up like Tony's mother, a bitter, sour, resentful woman?

The very idea made her long for something sweet. Kate headed for the kitchen. She needed chocolate chip cookies, and she needed them right away.

CHAPTER FIVE

THE FOLLOWING AFTERNOON, Kate set the homemade cookies she'd brought Tony on the bedside table, hoping she didn't appear as awkward as she felt. "Hi, Tony. It's good to see you looking so much better."

"Cookies?" His voice was gravelly and still weak.

"Yup. I baked them myself, I guarantee there're no eggs in them. I found a recipe in an allergy cookbook."

"Thanks, Kate." She was rewarded with a smile, but she still felt uncomfortable. Maybe she should have brought him flowers or a magazine instead of the cookies. They seemed too—too intimate.

Cookies are cookies. There's nothing sensual about them.

She was relieved that he was alone, but she was also disturbed by it. He was lying on top of the sheets, wearing a pale blue short-sleeved T-shirt and a pair of loose-fitting black track shorts. He had great muscles in his arms—and his legs, too. She swallowed. She'd never really seen his body this uncovered.

His silky hair was ruffled, but he'd had a shave. Although he was still pale, he looked more like himself again. She noticed that he was too long for the standard hospital bed. His uninjured foot stuck out of the bars at the end of the bed. It was long and narrow. Elegant. Sexy.

Sexy? Get a grip here, Lewis. How could a foot be sexy? She

jerked her attention away from his foot and cleared her throat.

“They told me at the desk they’d sprung you from ICU this morning. This room is nice, great view.” She walked over to the window and pretended to gaze down on the small interior courtyard, giving herself time to collect her ridiculous thoughts.

“If you’ve got to be a patient, I guess this is as good as any.” He sounded grumpy, and Kate’s guard went up. If the tightness of his jaw and the narrow-eyed look he gave her were any indication, he was in a bad mood.

She decided to get down to business. “The nurse said you wanted to speak to me?” Kate turned from the window and sat down in the chair beside the bed. She tried to put aside the slight nervousness she felt. There was also the stupid sexual tension that zipped through her, caused by her ridiculous awareness that he was in bed. She could smell the shampoo he’d used on his hair. Or maybe it was aftershave?

For heaven’s sake, Lewis, concentrate on his concerns and get your mind out of the gutter.

After all, he was a patient first, chief of staff second, attractive male third—way, way down the list. It was her job to do everything she could to set his mind at ease. And just because he was lying in bed, there was no reason to think lascivious thoughts.

“You’re the only person I could think of who might pay attention and treat me like an adult,” he began in a disgruntled voice. “I’m finding out first-hand just how few rights patients have in this place. It’s appalling.” He tried to sit up straighter and

swore when the movement hurt his ankle.

It was petty to feel triumphant at the fact he needed her, but she couldn't help it. Ashamed of her reaction, Kate made a move to assist him, but he waved her away with an impatient gesture. She flopped back down in the chair and tugged her skirt closer to her knees. Why had she worn this snug knit thing, anyhow? She should have put on something loose and long around him.

"I asked to see my chart this morning," he continued, totally oblivious to the way her mind was deviating from the issue, "and I was refused." He sounded irate. "In the ER, I demanded a look at the CAT scan and was told that wasn't possible. Well, that's just not good enough." His eyes darkened and he said between gritted teeth, "I want a full accounting of what happened, Kate. I want to know exactly who screwed up and why. Some of it I already know. The mix-up with the X rays—now that was a fiasco." He shook his head in disgust. "The whole thing's a damned fiasco, come to that. What's gone on in my case is exactly the sort of thing I've done my best to prevent at this hospital. It's inexcusable, from start to finish." He smacked a fist down on the bedcover and roared, "There'll be a full inquiry the moment I'm out of this bed, I can assure you of that."

Kate had anticipated this, but the full effect of his wrath was still disconcerting. She'd come prepared, however. She breathed deeply, drew a small notebook out of her jacket pocket, recrossed her legs and referred to it as she outlined, in a quiet voice, the exact series of events that had led to his respiratory arrest.

“You slipped on a candy wrapper in the lobby and went to the ER several hours later, where there was a mix-up with the X rays.”

“Inexcusable. Absolute inefficiency.”

She let him emote, and then she went on with the accounting.

“You had a severe gastrointestinal response to the acetaminophen you’d taken for pain.”

“Are you trying to insinuate that what happened was my own fault?”

It would have been easy to cower. He was intimidating, the way he was glowering at her. She retaliated with dignity. “Absolutely not. In fact, what I’m trying to establish is that we should forget fault altogether.”

“Easy for you to say. You’re not the one lying in this bed.” He gave her a pitying look, as though she was some dimwitted dogooder beyond sensible reasoning.

But at least he listened without interrupting after that.

Each time she glanced at his face, however, she could see that he was growing more outraged by the moment. His skin was flushed, his dark eyes glared, the frown between his brows deepened.

She swallowed and went on with the recital. She referred to everyone involved by name so he’d be reminded that they were individuals.

“The cook, Rene Lalonde, was in my office this morning. He’s terribly upset. He feels personally responsible for what happened

with the broth, and he's also really worried about his job. He's recently moved his family out here from Quebec, and now he's afraid he'll be out of work. He has three small kids and his wife is pregnant with their fourth."

Tony snorted. "He must know I can't just fire him, he's a member of the union. Anyhow, I have no intentions of firing him. But it was negligent of him to add those damned eggshells to what was supposed to be a clear broth. He definitely deserves a reprimand, and I intend to be the one to give it to him."

Kate knew she shouldn't defend the man, but she couldn't help it. "He was doing the best he knew how. Mistakes are simply opportunities to learn."

"Literally over my dead body. I came that close, Kate," he said, eyes narrowed, finger and thumb millimeters apart.

She was tempted to say that close only counted in horseshoes but managed to restrain herself.

"Fortunately, you've made an amazingly fast recovery," she said instead. Was he really like his mother, always expecting the worst?

Kate thought of his sister, Georgia, and reminded herself of the things she had revealed, how good and kind Tony was to his family, what a great father he was to his daughter. Maybe Kate could appeal to that generous part of him.

"People make mistakes," she began. "No one did anything deliberate."

"What about that mix-up with the X rays? That was

inexcusable. That was negligence. I actually thought for a few hours that I had sarcoma. Thank God the other patient didn't get my results. I blame the ER staff for such incompetence."

"I can imagine how terrible the whole thing was for you, but blaming only makes you the problem. The thing we should concentrate on is the solution, don't you agree?"

He didn't respond, and he didn't seem mollified by her sympathy or her appeals to reason. She reverted to facts. "The ER was unusually busy that morning. There were dozens of Shriners with gastroenteritis, as well as the usual run-of-the-mill patients. And the other man did have the exact same name as you."

He grunted.

It was wicked of her, but she did it, anyway. "Each and every individual who was involved with your case has asked me if they can visit you to apologize," she said in a sweet voice. "Shall I tell them to come in today?"

He jerked upright, then swore, rubbing his sore leg. "God Almighty, not on your life. Tell them no." He was horrified, and she hated herself for enjoying it. "I can't face all those people trooping through here, making excuses."

"But they feel responsible. And it would make them feel better."

"Well, it wouldn't do a damned thing for me. And it's not up to me to make them feel better about nearly killing me, is it?"

He was a tough case. "Absolutely not," she agreed. "But keep in mind that it was a system failure. Mistakes were made, but

there was no malice whatsoever involved. Everyone is deeply concerned and upset over what occurred.”

“Which makes it all the more frightening,” he said with vehemence. “Concerned and upset aren’t what we’re aiming for at St. Joseph’s, warm and fuzzy as the words might make you feel, Kate.”

His sarcasm finally got to her. She had to struggle to stay calm. She reminded herself that an angry person was asking for love, but it wasn’t easy to believe that of the large man glaring up at her from the hospital bed.

“What is it you really want, Tony?”

Did she imagine it, or did his eyes flicker to her breasts?

He recovered fast and she couldn’t be absolutely sure.

“What I want for St. Joseph’s,” he finally ground out between his teeth, “is professionalism, competence, the best medical care humanly possible. And what I want from the staff is assurance that they aren’t going to screw up this way again.” His voice rose, echoing in the small room.

“Exactly how do you see that assurance? In writing?”

He frowned. She’d confused him. She felt wickedly pleased.

“What do you mean, ‘in writing’?”

“Well, you just told me you want assurance from the staff. In what form do you want it?”

“Are you putting me on? I’m not being literal here, for God’s sake. This isn’t kindergarten.”

“I understand that.” Ah, the power of sweet reason. “I’m

simply trying to pinpoint what would make you feel better about all this. Would you like to meet with the staff and tell them how you feel?”

For a moment he considered that. Kate was relieved to see that his anger had diminished.

“Yeah, I sure do,” he finally said in a gruff voice. “Not right away, but in a few days. When I feel better, when I’ve got my strength back, then I’ll meet with them all and lay it on the line.”

Her heart sank. He was going to blast them, in spite of her efforts.

“Great.” It was anything but. “I’d be happy to arrange that meeting for you, if you want me to.”

“Yeah. Get hold of my secretary. She’ll help you set it up.”

There didn’t seem to be anything left to say. Kate stood up and started toward the door just as it swung open and a young girl skipped into the room. She had a mop of stick-straight strawberry-blond hair escaping from a ponytail, an engaging freckled face, and a smile that was like a magnet. Kate couldn’t help but respond to it.

“McKensy begged me to bring her to see you, Tony.” Georgia followed Tony’s daughter into the room and waved her fingers at Kate. “We’re both on our lunch hour, so she can only stay fifteen minutes. The traffic’s a nightmare and I promised her teacher she wouldn’t be late getting back. I’m going to grab us each a sandwich from the cafeteria. Be back in a few minutes.” With that, she hurried out the door.

“Papa, Papa,” McKensy squealed, racing for the bed. She threw herself up and into Tony’s welcoming embrace, covering his face with smacking kisses. “Oh, Papa, I’m so sorry you hurt your foot. I missed you so much. I was scared when I heard you had to stay here. Auntie Judy took me home with her. She drove me to school this morning. Uncle Peter took us all to Pizza Heaven for supper last night and I won a free root beer. Are you better now? When can you come home?”

“Hey, duchess, how you doing? Slow down a little, okay? We’ll take one question at a time.”

Kate was fascinated to see that Tony’s features had undergone a remarkable transformation. The frown had disappeared, and a wide grin lit his face. He had dimples in his cheeks that Kate had never been aware of, and the usual guarded expression in his eyes was replaced by warmth and such obvious affection it made her catch her breath when he turned to her, still smiling.

God, he was downright hazardous to her health when he looked like this.

“Kate, I’d like you to meet my daughter, McKensy. McKensy, this is Ms. Lewis.”

The shape of McKensy’s mouth was the same as his. She had his exact smile, but hers had no restraint. It was spontaneous, trusting and generous. It made her animated little face radiantly beautiful, even though, feature by feature, she wasn’t quite.

“How do you do, Ms. Lewis? Do you work with my papa?”

Kate smiled in return. “It’s a pleasure to meet you, McKensy.

And yes, I do work with him. Please, call me Kate.”

“May I, Papa?”

What an endearing child, Kate thought, returning McKensy’s megawatt smile. And such beautiful manners.

“Yes, of course you may. Kate’s just said it’s okay.”

“Goody.” She clapped her hands. “I love it when grown-ups let me call them by their first name. It makes them more intimate.”

Tony rolled his eyes and Kate laughed. “I think you’re right,” she agreed. “It certainly makes it easier to get to know one another.”

“That’s what I think.” McKensy nodded enthusiastic assent.

“Which school do you go to, McKensy?” Kate was enchanted by the little girl.

“St. Regis Academy. It’s so-o-oo fun.”

“I’ll bet it is.” It was known as one of the best private schools in the city. Kate had tried to convince Scott that Eliza should go there, but he’d balked at the cost, even though Kate had offered to pay half.

“Do you have any kids, Kate?” McKensy was perched on the side of Tony’s bed, her gray eyes taking in every detail of the room.

“A stepdaughter, Eliza. She’ll be nine next month.”

“I was nine in April, we’re nearly the same age. Which school does Eliza go to?”

“Collingwood.”

“I think that’s the school right across the street from where I

go to dance classes, isn't it, Papa?"

Tony nodded.

"DanceCo?" Kate asked. "Eliza goes there, too. What are you studying, McKensy?"

"Ballet and tap."

"So is she," Kate exclaimed. "She just moved up into Madame Bloor's class for the last couple of weeks."

"I take that class," McKensy squealed, her eyes huge. "There're two Elizas in my class. Does yours have brown braids or blond, sticky-up points?"

"Sticky-up points," Kate said.

"Oh, super." McKensy threw herself back on the bed, not noticing Tony's grimace when she bumped his sore leg. "I'm so glad. She's the one I like. The other Eliza's sort of snobby."

"McKensy," Tony admonished in a gentle tone.

"I'm not being rude, I'm just telling the truth." She sat up and gave her father a wide-eyed innocent look. "And I wouldn't have said it if she was the other one," she assured him in a whisper.

Kate met Tony's eyes and this time they both laughed.

"Why haven't I seen you at DanceCo?" he asked.

"Eliza's been going on Wednesdays. She's just started the Thursday class, and her father often drives her."

"I go Thursday, right, Papa?"

Tony nodded, and Kate got up. "I'll be off now and let you two have some time on your own." She moved toward the door, but before she reached it, Georgia was back, carrying a bag of food.

“Sorry, McKensy, but we’ve gotta go now,” she said. “I’ll bring you back tonight so you can have a nice long visit with your dad.”

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