



THE SURGEON'S  
FAVOURITE NURSE

TERESA SOUTHWICK



*Cherish*

Teresa Southwick

**The Surgeon's Favourite Nurse**

«HarperCollins»

## **Southwick T.**

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The moment Dr Jake Andrews arrives at Mercy Medical West, all the women swoon – except nurse Hope Carmichael. A widow determined never to love and lose again, Hope is immune to the gorgeous surgeon...but Jake will do anything to win the heart of his favourite nurse.

## Содержание

Jake was an honest-to-goodness hero, judging by the expression on that young mom's face.	6
About the Author	7
The Surgeon's Favourite Nurse	8
Chapter One	9
Chapter Two	16
Chapter Three	22
Chapter Four	29
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	31



***Jake was an honest-to-goodness hero, judging  
by the expression on that young mom's face.***

“You were really wonderful with that patient,” Hope told him.

His eyes narrowed, but not before going stormy as shadows flitted through the gray. There was desolation there, too. Hope wasn't sure how she knew that, except maybe it took one to know one. She'd experienced despair, and when you've gone through something like that, it wasn't hard to recognize the look in someone else.

“It's easy when the news is good.” Jake slid his hands into the lab-coat pockets. “I'm not sure what gave you the impression that my heart is two sizes too small, but I do have one. And I know how it feels to have absolutely nothing.”

Surprise didn't come close to describing what Hope felt. He was the golden boy with the magic hands.

Dear Reader,

As I drove to my semiannual plot group, a song came on the radio that always makes me cry. It's the part where Johnny Mathis and Jane Oliver's achingly beautiful voices blend in the refrain, and sing that the last time they felt like this they were falling in love. In *The Surgeon's Favourite Nurse*, that became the core of Hope Carmichael's conflict.

Two years after the loss of her husband, she takes a temporary job in Las Vegas to escape the painful memories. She never wants to hurt like that again, and her instant attraction to surgeon Jake Andrews is not a happy thing. But the doctor is as stubborn as he is charming and refuses to give up on the woman who is quickly becoming his favorite nurse. He teaches her that life is precious and love is a miracle.

These two characters became very special to me. I hope you enjoy spending time with Hope and Jake as much as I did.

Happy reading!

*Teresa Southwick*

## About the Author

**TERESA SOUTHWICK** lives with her husband in Las Vegas, the city that reinvents itself every day. An avid fan of romance novels, she is delighted to be living out her dream of writing for Mills & Boon.

## **The Surgeon's Favourite Nurse**

Teresa Southwick



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For Gail Chasan, who saw the emotional depth of this story from the beginning.

## Chapter One

Here comes trouble.

Hope Carmichael knew more about trouble than she ever wanted to and recognized it instantly. The man who'd just walked into her office had the big *T* written all over him.

Jake Andrews, M.D. Dr. GQ. That's what the Mercy Medical Center nurses called the hotshot trauma surgeon.

She could see why. The charcoal suit probably had an Armani label. His snappy red tie said follow me home if you're looking for a good time. And the sexy grin aimed straight at her was all about who he intended to have that good time with. Simply put, his fabulous dark hair, chiseled jaw and charismatic career made him a chick magnet.

"Hi. I'm Jake Andrews—Dr. Andrews," he added.

Hope stood behind her desk. Ordinarily she would have walked around it to shake someone's hand. This time she didn't and wasn't sure why. "I know who you are."

"I didn't think we'd met."

"Because your memory is infallible?" she asked, trying to control the nerves tweaked by his shameless scrutiny.

"Because a pretty lady like you is unforgettable."

Oh, please. If she had a nickel for every time she'd heard that line before.

Actually, she'd never heard it before.

Hospital gossip had warned her about him. Two out of the three doctors in his medical practice had recently married and officially resigned from the bachelor ranks. Jake Andrews was the last playboy standing. Her new job meant she'd have to deal with him—whether she wanted to or not.

Two weeks ago she'd arrived in Las Vegas to assume her duties as trauma coordinator of Mercy Medical West, the hospital's third campus which was a few months away from opening its doors. She'd done her employment orientation at the main campus and someone had pointed out Jake Andrews to her, which was why she knew him. Definitely a capital *T* for trouble.

"You're correct," she said. "We haven't been formally introduced."

"A situation I'm here to rectify." He held out his hand. "Let's make this official."

She hesitated to touch him and knew she didn't cover it very well because she was out of practice with men in general and a man like him in particular. Although out of practice would imply that at some point she'd been competent with his type, which was so not the case.

Finally she reached across the desk to place her hand in his. "I'm Hope Carmichael, Dr. Andrews."

"A pleasure. And call me Jake."

Maybe it was his take-no-prisoners smile or his touch, but Hope felt a blast of heat that was nuclear in scope. With good reason she'd hesitated to touch him, but there was no uncertainty when she quickly pulled her fingers from his.

"It's nice to meet you," she said.

"Likewise. So, I'm curious. How did you know who I was?" One corner of his mouth quirked up.

His ego was asking and she resisted the urge to roll her eyes, but on the inside she was groaning. It was a good thing her job was to organize the new hospital's trauma department and not choose the doctor who would run it, the job this surgeon was campaigning for. If she got a vote, it would be firmly in the no column.

"Process of elimination," she finally said.

"Excuse me?" He didn't look puzzled, just amused.

"The other two candidates for trauma medical director have already stopped by to introduce themselves."

“Worthy adversaries both.” He moved closer and rested a hip on the corner of her desk, a blatantly masculine pose. “But neither of them is going to get the job.”

Hope refused to give in to the very strong urge to put space between herself and Doctor Dashing because she suspected he would notice. There probably wasn't much those piercing gray eyes missed and even the slightest retreat would give him more intimidation quotient than he already thought he had.

She remembered his competition for the position—Dr. Robert Denton and Dr. Carla Sheridan, both in their forties. The former was a small, studious man who reminded her of Albert Einstein. The female doctor was all business. If she had charm or a sense of humor, both had been well concealed. Jake Andrews had set both his charm and humor on stun.

“It's my understanding that the hospital board hasn't made a final decision about who gets the contract.” She sat behind the desk and looked at him. “How can you be so sure the position is yours?”

“Because the appointment means more to me than it does to either of them. And I'm the best trauma surgeon in Las Vegas.”

The words ignited something in his eyes that hinted at a fire in the belly. A need for victory. Determination to succeed. A passion for power. Hope didn't remember either of the other doctors exhibiting a similar vibe.

“If it's what you want, then I hope the vote goes your way,” she said.

“Me, too. Even more now.” His eyes gleamed again as he looked her over with an expression of admiration and approval.

“Are you flirting with me?”

“Not very well, if you have to ask.”

Almost as soon as the words were out she wanted them back. He might think she was fishing for compliments, but nothing could be farther from the truth. Part of her was surprised that the thought of flirting even entered her mind. She'd thought the ability to detect it had died two years ago with Kevin on their first wedding anniversary.

Dr. Andrews hadn't exactly confirmed or denied flirtatious intentions, but that really didn't matter. The game required two to play and she wasn't interested. More important, this conversation had already taken a different tone and direction from her meetings with the other two doctors in line for the top trauma job. It was time to fix that.

To do it, Hope knew she needed to take control, but the shimmy in her belly and the buzz in her head made thinking a challenge.

“Here's the thing, Doctor—”

“It's Jake. Remember?”

She was trying not to. This encounter and its ripple of sexual awareness were disturbing, to say the least. The longer he perched on the corner of her desk looking all hot and sinful, the more she wanted to see his bluff, round the desk and raise the temptation factor. That's what the old Hope would have done. There were a lot of reasons it was a bad idea, not the least of which was that she wouldn't take the chance of letting a man close to her.

Flirting led to feelings and that equaled a potential for pain. Losing Kevin had hurt. A lot. She'd rather feel nothing than hurt that much ever again.

“Jake—”

His name on her lips stopped her. Jake—a strong, masculine, heroic name. And wasn't that the stupidest thing that had ever crossed her mind. She didn't want a man and she especially didn't want a hero—although hospital gossip didn't paint Jake Andrews as the type to throw his cloak—or his surgical mask—over a puddle for a lady. He was more rascally rogue than white knight.

“You were saying?” Idly he picked up a supply order list from a stack of papers on her desk and looked it over.

“I'm here to do a job and—”

“You’re from out of state, right?”

She nodded. “Texas. Mansfield, a town halfway between Dallas and Fort Worth.”

“I thought I heard some Southern comfort in your voice.”

Was he flirting again? She couldn’t tell. This was no time for her blarney meter to crash.

“Like I said, I was hired to organize the trauma department and have it ready when Mercy Medical West opens its doors to patients.”

“Tell me about yourself, Hope.” It sounded like he was testing out her name on his lips. “Wait, let me guess. You have sisters named Faith and Charity.”

She had to smile. “As a matter of fact ...”

His laugh was rich with humor. “Am I good, or what?”

She refused to comment without her own independent confirmation, and pigs would fly before that happened. “Faith is older. Charity younger. I’m in the middle.”

“What made you want to be a nurse?” he asked suddenly.

“A strong desire to help people and make a difference. From the time I was a little girl it’s all I ever wanted to do.”

“So it was a calling of the heart. Not because it’s a profession with pretty good pay for a woman who might need to support herself and her family?”

Funny that he should zero in on that because it’s exactly what happened. And it was her fault that the man she’d loved had been in the wrong place at the wrong time.

“Nursing is a noble profession,” she said, a little more sharply than she intended. “And there’s a critical need, like so many other causes.”

“Causes? Plural.” He looked thoughtful. “Such as?”

“Feeding the hungry. Houses for the homeless. Teen pregnancy. Global warming. Vaccinating children in third world countries.”

“Saving the spotted owl?”

“If necessary, to preserve an ecosystem,” she said, lifting her chin a notch. “You’re making fun of me.”

“Heaven forbid.” His expression was exaggerated innocence. “Community service isn’t just for criminals anymore.”

“You don’t believe in helping others?”

“I’m a doctor.” Again he hadn’t answered.

“That’s about helping people for money.”

“It’s my job, yes.”

“And what made you want to be a doctor?” she asked, echoing his question.

He glanced at the paper in his hands. “I’m smart. In school I excelled in math and science. And doctors make a lot of money.”

“So it’s *not* about helping people,” she accused.

“By definition what I do helps people. For doing it I’m well compensated,” he said, putting a finer point on it.

“Wow,” she said wryly. “Let’s all pause and feel the love.”

He looked up and met her gaze. “Medicine is a business. Surgery is invasive intervention to save or improve a patient’s life. But still a business. You know that as well as I do because in addition to your nursing credential and working as a trauma nurse manager, you have a master’s degree in healthcare administration.”

“How do you know all that?”

“I made it my business to know.” He let that sink in, then added, “I checked up on you because we’ll be working together. People will be watching when this facility opens. If we fail, it will be very public and with a direct impact on my reputation. I don’t take chances with my career.”

So a successful launch of this campus was all about him. How was he arrogant? She needed more than the fingers on two hands to count the ways. “There’s certainly a lot of bastard in you.”

“Thanks.” He stood away from the desk and straightened to his full and impressive height. “Coming from a Birkenstock-wearing, granola-munching, bleeding heart liberal like yourself, that’s high praise.”

“I’m glad you think so.” Could they possibly be more philosophically opposed? She hadn’t meant to call him names, but it just popped out. The guy pushed her buttons, all the wrong ones. Apparently her diplomacy meter had also crashed. “I have a lot of work to do. If you’ll excuse me—”

“About your work—I asked for a particular type of surgical instruments. They’re from a German manufacturer and are specifically calibrated. Is there another list?” He pointed to the paper he’d replaced on her desk. “I don’t see what I requested on that one.”

She knew the brand he meant and it was out of the question. “You don’t see them because they weren’t ordered.”

“Just like that?”

“Too expensive.” She blew out a breath. “Every surgeon has a favorite, but it’s my job to whittle down the list to the most commonly used.”

“Even if the most common ones result in limitations that prevent the patient from getting the best possible results?”

Was this his way of pushing back, being difficult, punishing her for the bastard remark? It had been out of line, but so was his flirting. And it had provoked her own fight-or-flight response. She wasn’t running, unless you counted taking this job in Las Vegas to avoid painful memories back home.

“If you’re half as good as you think you are, Jake, you can use a potato peeler and a watermelon scoop to get a positive outcome.”

“And what if that doesn’t fly with me?”

“Then I might have to conclude that you can only make do with one product and suggest that perhaps you need to take another class or something.” She stood, but still had to look up at him and knew this wasn’t a good time to notice how he towered over her. The silence grew bigger and more awkward until she felt compelled to fill it. “Jake, you’re not my boss.”

“Yet.”

“Even so—”

“I’ll see you tonight, Hope.” His grin was highlighted with smug self-confidence that was darn sexy. And hot.

The resulting sizzle and burn fried all the electrical impulses in her brain, but she managed to stay on her feet and avoid embarrassment. Then she realized he was waiting for a response and tried to remember what he’d said. “Tonight?”

“The hospital’s private open house for state and city officials. Dignitaries on parade. It’s where we get to show off. There’s a rumor that the governor plans to drop in.” He stopped in the doorway and slid his hands into the pockets of his slacks. “You’ll be here, right?”

“I’m giving guided tours of the trauma department. But why are you coming?”

“It would be rude to miss the moment when they announce my name as the new trauma medical director.”

He flashed a wicked grin before sauntering out of her office. She took a deep cleansing breath, but it didn’t help. Her pulse was pounding. Her heart was racing. And she was pretty sure if she looked in a mirror, her face would be flushed. Wasn’t it just her luck that the most arrogant, annoying, exasperating man on the planet had put the color back in her cheeks.

Also just her luck that this was the most alive she’d felt in a very long time.

Trouble had definitely paid her a visit and she would do her level best to avoid it tonight.

Jake didn’t dislike obligatory hospital functions, but he rarely anticipated one with as much enthusiasm as he did now. And there was only one reason.

Hope.

He'd parked his car in the lot outside Mercy Medical West on the corner of Warm Springs and Durango roads, then leaned into the cold January wind as he walked toward the brightly lit facility.

The bilevel architectural design combined with artistic touches and made this house of healing pleasing both to the eye and the spirit. On each floor of the building walls were painted a different color—blue, lavender, green or yellow—and the furniture and floors were done in coordinating shades.

Medical equipment was state-of-the art, the latest technology available. This hospital was going to be the jewel in Mercy Medical's crown and it would do the same for his career. Maybe, *finally*, he could silence the voice inside him that warned he would always be that homeless white-trash kid who would never be good enough for the prom queen.

When he got to the facility's double glass doors, they whispered open and released the noise from the crowd inside. Men in dark suits and women in cocktail dresses jammed the usually quiet, serene lobby. Waiters in black pants and crisp white shirts circulated with trays of food and glasses of champagne.

Jake scanned the gathering, searching for a blonde, but not just any blonde. There was a certain shade of honey in Hope's hair and she had the prettiest hazel eyes he'd ever seen.

But it was her mouth that amped up his anticipation. Very defined, full lips curved up at the corners and were just about the most tempting thing he could imagine, and he could imagine a whole lot of temptation. If Hope Carmichael had been as provocative as a potato, he could have put her out of his mind, but his life had never been that simple or uncomplicated.

Jake glanced at his watch. The shindig had been under way for almost two hours and judging by the crowd concentrated in this area, tours of the facility were complete. So if she wasn't jumping through hoops for dignitaries, where was she? Before he could decide what to do about that question, the president of the hospital's board of directors introduced himself over a microphone. Jake located former Congressman Edward Havens on a dais set up for the occasion.

Ed introduced the governor, senator, mayor—blah, blah, blah. Then he ticked off the names of the campus president, department directors, etcetera. Finally he made eye contact with Jake and smiled, before announcing that the contract for trauma medical director was going to Dr. Jake Andrews.

Jake nodded, waved, smiled politely at everyone applauding around him and mentally high-fived himself. He loved it when a plan came together, and in this case the plan was all about his career and long-term financial security. All the hard work had paid off. He would be able to write his own ticket now. No one would ever again look at him like he was something worse than dirt on their shoes.

Searching faces in the crowd, he still didn't see Hope. Suddenly he had an overwhelming urge to tell her "I told you so." He wandered the facility and was oddly disappointed when his search didn't produce the result he wanted. On his way back to the lobby, he passed the closed door of her office and tried the knob. When it turned, he pushed into the room and saw her there.

"Knock, knock," he said, then softly tapped his knuckles on the door.

She looked startled before her eyes widened in recognition. "Doctor ... Jake," she corrected.

He walked inside and closed the door. Her desk was littered with computer equipment and stacks of folders. Around the perimeter of the room were moving boxes with flaps opened. The office paraphernalia inside looked as if it had been rifled through but not put away. So she was still settling in.

"How about a tour?" he asked.

"Sorry. You're too late."

Her eyes went from surprised to sad and he wondered what would make such a pretty lady unhappy. Then he wondered why he would notice at all. Or why he should care. It could have

something to do with her bastard remark earlier. He liked that she didn't scrape, bow and kiss his ass. That kind of crap got old real fast.

Jake slid his hands into the pockets of his slacks. "You're missing the party all locked away in here."

"It's work to me, and I'm taking a five-minute break."

"Want some company? I'd like to talk to you about something."

Her gaze turned suspicious which was better than sad. "You're not here to pester me about getting Bugs Bunny bandages, are you?"

"Something like that." He moved closer, near enough that the sweetly sensuous scent of her perfume nearly made his eyes cross. "I was looking over the names and certifications on the trauma team and wondered why there was no admitting specialist in the group."

She put her hands on her hips and her eyes narrowed. "So you want designer scalpels, Bugs Bunny boo-boo covers *and* a personal assistant?"

"Yes."

"Are you aware, Doctor, that it takes a hundred and fifty million dollars of up-front money to open a facility like this?"

"I think I heard that figure somewhere." Although he found her figure in the snug little black dress with almost-not-there straps far more interesting. Mile-high heels made her legs look incredible. One glance was better than a shot of adrenaline to get his heart pumping.

"Did you also hear that a new facility is expected to lose money at first, because there's no revenue stream?"

"Makes sense." Unlike the fact that he couldn't seem to take his eyes off her mouth.

He knew she was attracted to him because he knew women and this one wasn't very good at hiding her feelings. Her tone was full of Southern fried deference. She was trying to bow and scrape, but it was more about establishing a safe zone for herself.

She hadn't wanted to shake his hand earlier and that was to avoid touching him. Because of her attraction. It was incredibly inconvenient that the feeling was mutual.

"My job is to keep expenditures within limits and confine losses to conform to the budget." She let her gaze run over his pricey suit and tie before asking, "You do understand what a budget is?"

Oh, yeah. He'd learned the hard way, although having money was a prerequisite for learning how to spend it wisely. His mother hadn't had enough to pay the mortgage after his dad left them. Their house was foreclosed on. A rented roof over your head takes first and last month fees and a security deposit. If his mom had had a chunk of cash like that she'd have been able to make the loan payment. So they ended up homeless. He'd been thirteen.

Memories of that long-ago fear and humiliation rippled through him. "My point is that an admitting specialist will more than make up for the initial salary and benefit costs in revenue recovered."

"Really?"

"Yes, really."

He figured she knew her stuff or she wouldn't have been hired for this job. So this attitude of hers must be about him personally. He wasn't sure what he'd done to tick her off, but apparently annoyance was contagious because he was feeling it, too. He'd caught it from her. Now was the time to let her know that she wasn't the only one who knew their stuff.

"Care to explain how an admitting specialist earns their keep?" she said.

"I'm glad you asked." He took a step forward, close enough to feel the heat from her body. "I'm sure *you're* aware that per diem charges mount up fast. And I'm also certain that you've heard of DRGs."

"Of course. Diagnosis-related groups."

“Give the lady a gold star. So you also know that every medical problem, difficulty, malady or disease has a price tag. Just like a bathing suit at the mall.”

“What’s your point, Doctor?”

“An admitting specialist is necessary to set up protocols for screening every case that comes into the E.R. for insurance information, any secondary financial help the patient might have, anything that will assist in charges. Because without proper billing, codes and patient details, payment can be delayed indefinitely or denied altogether. And that kind of a loss is something your budget can’t absorb no matter how it’s structured.”

“Do you care more about money than medicine?” she challenged.

“And there’s the gray area. Best answer? We can’t afford to care more about medicine than money. You can’t have one without the other. In the end it’s a business and if we can’t meet our expenses we go out of business. If that happens, we can’t help anyone and the people of this community lose a valuable healthcare resource.”

“Maybe my short-term memory is on the blink, but aren’t you the same doctor who just hours ago, in this very spot, hit me up for pricey precision instruments?”

Hit her up? No way. She’d know if he hit on her because there’d be no question.

Jake was almost certain there was a vein throbbing in his forehead. “I don’t care about that.”

“What do you care about?” She shook her head. “Never mind. I don’t want to know. I have to go.”

She moved too fast when she tried to sidestep him and ended up unsteady on those sexy high heels. He caught her as she stumbled and pulled her into his arms.

He couldn’t say that kissing her hadn’t crossed his mind, but he’d never planned to act on the impulse. Now here she was with her curves brushing against him and the pulse in her neck fluttering as awareness flashed in her eyes.

At that moment he couldn’t think about anything *but* kissing her, and lowered his mouth to hers.

## Chapter Two

Hope was pretty sure a kiss had never before made her toes curl, but that changed the moment Jake's lips touched hers. It was insane. She should back away from the heat. The problem was, insanity and heat had never felt so good. There was nothing aggressive or insistent about the way his mouth moved slowly, seductively, deliciously over hers. It was all lazy, luscious sizzle and simmer. She felt oddly safe and wanted to stay exactly where she was for as long as she possibly could.

He pulled back first and let his gaze wander boldly over her face as a small, puzzled smile curved his mouth. Apparently he saw something that made him thread his fingers in her hair and cup her cheek in his palm, brushing his thumb over her bottom lip. Her heart pounded almost painfully and her chest rose and fell rapidly with the need to draw in air. It felt as if she'd caught fire and the flames fed on every last ounce of oxygen in the room.

"Hope, that was ..." He shook his head. "I didn't mean for that to happen."

Not what her quivering hormones wanted to hear. She was pretty good with a snappy comeback, a quick retort, witty one-liners. But her senses were in freefall and they'd taken rational thought along for the ride.

"And I didn't mean to kiss you back. This is a bad idea. The worst. Like kissing common sense goodbye."

Amusement turned his eyes silver. "Sometimes common sense is highly overrated."

"That's probably the first thing you've ever said that I agree with."

She wasn't sure, what with the blood rushing to her head, but she thought he groaned softly before taking her mouth again. Her lips parted and his tongue slid inside, thoroughly plundering any reserves of willpower she had left.

Their hands were all over each other as they panted and moaned and turned in circles, the intricate choreography of a sensuous waltz. Hope felt the wall at her back and Jake pressing against her front. Want tightened in her belly as need pooled between her thighs.

It was as if their minds and bodies had melded. Jake cupped the backs of her thighs and lifted at the same time she wrapped her legs around him. The harsh sounds of their breathing filled the room and fueled the fire of her wild abandon.

He kissed her neck and brushed away the skinny strap of her dress in his impatience to get to her bare shoulder. Then he trailed his lips down to the very top of her breast just visible over the neckline. He drew his tongue over her skin before blowing on the moistness. The sensation of cool on her heated flesh drove her crazy and she wanted him inside her more than she could remember wanting anything in her life.

When his cell phone rang, she changed her mind. Now more than anything she wanted to put the heel of her stiletto straight through his SIM card.

He pulled back, breathing hard. "I'm on call."

"Uh-huh."

"I have to answer." His voice was harsh.

"Right."

As she let her legs slide to the floor, he reached to the holster on his belt and retrieved the phone, turning his back as he answered.

"Andrews."

Hope smoothed her palms over the skirt of her dress as she drew in a shuddering breath. This was like stubbing your toe and the too-short span of time before the inevitable unfortunate consequences registered in the brain. It was going to be uncomfortable and she wanted to hang out in limbo for just a while longer. Otherwise she'd have to admit that a cell call was the only thing that had prevented her from having sex with a virtual stranger against the wall of her office.

Her only excuse was that she hadn't had sex for a very, very long time.

"Everything went as expected." Jake's voice was surprisingly normal. "Yeah. Not a single hitch in the plan. Right. Thanks." While listening, he glanced over his shoulder to look at her. Intensity glittered in his eyes as his gaze settled on her shoulder and the dress strap trailing down her arm. "Definitely. Details when I see you."

She slid her thumb under the strap and righted it as he ended the call. "Emergency?"

It hadn't sounded that way. But she could hope. Maybe he would have to rush off and spare her an awkward conversation.

"No." He raked his fingers through his hair.

She blew out a breath, not quite meeting his gaze. "So ..."

"So ..."

The corners of his mouth tilted up. Clearly he was amused. Hope was not. Irritation aimed at herself straightened her spine and fueled the need to regroup.

"I take full responsibility for that," she said.

One dark eyebrow arched upward. "That?"

"You know."

"Not so much. The receptors in my brain are fried. Put a finer point on it for me."

He was enjoying this, she realized and started to fume. But she'd be darned if she'd give him the satisfaction of confirming her acute discomfort. Or the fact that he'd majorly turned her on.

"The kiss," she said, deliberately lifting her chin so their gazes locked. "My mistake. I freely own my part in what just happened."

"Very generous of you." He slid his hands into the pockets of his charcoal slacks. The black shirt and tone-on-tone tie fit his trim body perfectly. Dr. GQ wouldn't have to worry about the fashion police.

"Not generous. Honest."

"Still ... An admission like that could be construed as encouragement. How do you know I won't stoop to using it to my advantage?"

She refused to give any ground. "That mistake is on me, but the bigger one would be assuming you could use it for your own personal agenda."

"Agenda? Personal?" A wolfish expression settled on his handsome face making it an uphill battle to get this conversation back on a professional plane.

"Don't miscalculate, Doctor. My slip-up will not give you currency in the workplace."

"Oh?"

"You can't come up with an unrealistic wish list and expect me to smile politely just because I kissed you."

Jake's sinful smile was a clear indication that the message missed its mark. "At the risk of shattering your illusions, Hope, nothing about that kiss was polite, which suits me just fine."

She groaned inwardly, still living in limbo and guarding herself from the guilt. "You're deliberately misunderstanding my point."

He shook his head. "On the contrary. I got it. But you don't have all the facts."

"Which are?"

"I actually came to see you tonight to tell you I told you so."

"I don't get it," she said.

"Okay, here's the deal. My wish list just might carry more weight since earlier tonight I was offered the contract to be the chief trauma surgeon. I'm officially your boss."

And Hope was officially in trouble.

She'd missed sex.

She hadn't realized how much until Jake kissed her. Now she missed it a whole lot more.

The next day Jake sat in on Hope's meeting with the department directors to assess their status regarding the target date for the Mercy Medical West opening. He had the chair to her left and knew she was talking because her lips were moving. The thing was, he was so fascinated by her mouth that he couldn't concentrate on what she was saying.

Only last night he'd tasted her just down the hall from this conference room. If Cal Westen, his medical practice partner, hadn't called to find out whether or not he'd been appointed to oversee trauma services, Jake would have done a whole lot more than just kiss her.

That had never been part of his plan, and he always had one. You didn't go from living on the street to chief trauma surgeon without a disciplined and detailed blueprint of how to get there. Kissing a colleague wasn't so much as a footnote on the blueprint, even if she did have a mouth in desperate need of a kiss.

"I'm sure you all know Dr. Jake Andrews."

The sound of his name yanked him into the moment and he smiled at the directors of radiology, respiratory therapy, the emergency department and the E.R. doc, all gathered around the mahogany conference table. He was acquainted with them all.

"Dr. Andrews was appointed Mercy Medical West's chief trauma surgeon last night." A hint of pink creeping into Hope's cheeks told him she hadn't forgotten what else happened last night.

And what *almost* happened.

Everyone applauded the announcement and seemed genuinely pleased at the news. It was worth the price he'd paid—all work, no play or much pay for more years than he cared to remember. Now that he was at the top, nothing was going to get in the way of his staying there.

"Congratulations, Dr. Andrews," Hope said. She barely met his gaze, then glanced at the agenda on the table in front of her. "Next I'd like a report from each department, in terms of how we stand in supplying trauma personnel."

As the directors took turns getting her up to speed, Jake studied Hope and knew she was aware of him, too. The pulse at the base of her throat beat just a little too fast. He didn't know whether or not to be pleased about that. The timing of *this*—whatever it was between them—was damn inconvenient.

"All right," she said nodding. "Now I want to make sure we're on the same page with identifying the levels of trauma. Mechanical injury—broken bones—is level one. Penetrating wound is level two. Head or traumatic brain injury is level three. Preliminary paramedic evaluation in the field will determine the trauma level of patients transported by ambulance. And walk-ins will have to be assessed by the E.R. doc who will determine the trauma level."

A murmur of general agreement followed her remarks as the directors took notes.

"Next on the agenda is medical staff. We will apply for a level-three designation since Dr. Gallagher's group signed on for neurosurgery and agreed to be in-house 24/7. That doesn't mean on standby or on call. They will be physically on premises. Dr. Andrews can fill us in on whether or not we have adequate trauma surgeons signed on."

"I'm in the process of interviewing several surgeons right now," Jake said. "I'll be ready before the doors open."

"Good." She was all business, the polar opposite of the tantalizing temptress of just a few hours ago. "Now for Radiology. Dr. Edwards, about the Nighthawk system ..."

Jake knew that radiology used the Nighthawk system to send nonemergency tests to Australia via the Internet for interpretation. But the state of Nevada mandated that an interventional radiologist be in-house for invasive procedures that required diagnostic imaging or guidance for tapping blood buildup in the chest cavity or other emergency situations. Edwards was a hard-ass and not receptive to change, making Hope's job a challenge.

The heavyset, balding doctor tried to glare her into submission. "It's cost-effective to use the Nighthawk system."

“In most cases, yes,” Hope agreed. “But there isn’t a choice about this. We can’t be designated a trauma center without an interventional radiologist in house.”

“And I need to pay the I.R., Miss Carmichael,” he said stubbornly. “They don’t come cheap. I have a budget.”

“Don’t we all.” She glanced at Jake, her hazel eyes narrowing slightly. “But there are other ways to trim.”

“None of them pretty.” He rested his elbows on the table. “What if there are no traumas?”

“It doesn’t matter. We’re a trauma center and have to staff for what could happen.”

“And I still have to pay the staff for doing nothing. My partners will not be happy and neither will I.”

“You agreed to the terms of the contract, Dr. Edwards,” she reminded him.

“Terms can be amended. I think hospital administration should absorb some of the cost.”

Hope stared him down. “I understand that the tendency is for every department to become territorial and insular, but the goal is for all the parts to function as one. Just like the body which can’t sustain life without a brain, heart or liver, a trauma response relies on all the departments for a successful outcome.” She glanced at each department director in turn before saying, “But I’m sure you’re all as aware of that as I am.”

Dr. Edwards shook his head. “When I can’t justify expenditures, it’s my reputation on the line. My ass in a sling.”

“As is mine,” she said.

Jake glanced in the direction of the body part in question which she was currently sitting on. From what he remembered, it was an excellently curved butt that fit nicely in his hands.

“This is not the time or place to be discussing financial arrangements. I suggest you speak to the administrator regarding your concerns. Bottom line,” she said, momentarily glancing at Jake as if she could read his thoughts, “I need your assurance that you’ll be prepared with an in-house radiologist around the clock.”

The radiologist stared at her for several moments, then finally nodded, albeit reluctantly.

“Good,” she said, smiling sweetly. “And last but not least, I’d like to discuss who should respond to a codetrauma page.”

Jake knew how he wanted it to go and was acutely interested in how she’d present this.

After glancing at her notes, she looked around the table. “In my opinion there should be someone from the lab, Radiology, Respiratory Therapy, Admitting and an ICU nurse. Just in case.”

“How about housekeeping and dietary?” Jake asked. “Or lions and tigers and bears, oh my.”

“Excuse me?” She met his gaze.

“You’re aware of the limited space in the trauma bays?”

“I am.”

“If you get all those people in there, it’s like an IV push of adrenaline. Looky-loos show up in droves. It will be a three-ring circus and you might as well sell tickets.”

Around the table everyone laughed and Hope narrowed her gaze on him.

“You didn’t let me finish, Doctor.”

“So you were going to say that the key to an organized trauma team response is ...”

“Security,” she finished, one eyebrow raised. “Security will be trained to monitor who should and should not respond to a code trauma.”

He nodded, more than satisfied with her response. She knew her stuff. She was a smart cookie and sexy as hell. Damn inconvenient this thing arcing between them.

“That’s it for me,” she said, glancing at everyone around the table. She looked at him. “Dr. Andrews, it’s your meeting.”

“Gripes anyone?” They all got a chuckle out of that, including the radiologist. It took the edge off the tension of moments before. “Any other business?” Before they could answer, he stood and said, “Hearing none, I call the meeting to an end.”

Jake figured that everyone had had enough for today. Especially Hope. The room cleared quickly, as if they were afraid he’d change his mind and bring up something really complicated, like open-heart surgery with a cheese grater.

He remembered Hope telling him if he was as good in surgery as everyone thought, he could get a positive outcome with a potato peeler and a watermelon scoop. That made him smile.

“Something funny, Doctor?”

“Nope. Not a thing,” he said. Her frown said she wouldn’t find his thoughts amusing.

“Not even throwing me under the bus with the three-ring circus remark?”

“It was an attempt at humor. To keep tempers in check.”

“At my expense,” she accused.

“Did it occur to you that they were testing your resolve? That I set you up to show these guys you know what you’re doing?”

“Actually, no.” She folded her arms over her chest and leaned back against the table. “Did you?”

“Actually, no.” He wished that had been his motivation. “I was testing you.”

“You didn’t think I knew that a free-for-all in the trauma bay is a whole different kind of trauma?”

“I only know what’s on your résumé. Not your philosophy on setting hospital protocols.” Or anything else for that matter. Part of him wanted to know everything about her and that was bad.

“Apparently I passed.”

Oh, yeah. His gaze settled on her mouth and the memories came flooding back. One minute they’d been on opposite sides of the money-versus-medicine debate and she’d skewered his last nerve with her stiletto. The next he had her up against the wall and both of them were breathing hard while he kissed her senseless.

And she kissed him right back.

Another thirty seconds and he’d have been inside her. He’d been almost grateful when his partner’s call interrupted what would have been a huge mistake. But he carried around a big fat regret that he would never know what loving Hope would feel like.

“Yes,” he finally said. “You passed the test. Obviously you’ve been through a trauma situation with no one directing traffic.”

She nodded. “You do the best you can to think of everything, all the medical consequences. Sometimes you forget to factor in human nature. Basic curiosity.”

“Speaking of that—” He was so damn curious about her. If only he had internal security to direct that somewhere it wouldn’t bite him in the ass.

“Yes?” She tilted her head and her hair swung sideways, revealing the smooth expanse of sexy skin on her neck.

“Edwards is a pain in the butt. I’ll speak to him and make sure he backs off.”

“Why would you do that?”

Good question. He hadn’t planned to offer his help. Watching his own back had been top priority for a long time. “I know him. It might help.”

“Thanks. But it’s my job to deal with him.”

He nodded. “Okay, then.”

She was right; not his responsibility. Since when did he run interference for anyone? That was way too easy to answer. Hope Carmichael had tripped the switch on his protective instincts. There was something fragile about her that made him want to keep her safe when she should be dead last on his priorities list.

He hadn't worked his ass off and scraped out a living all his life just to let sex with a tempting coworker derail his career plan.

"Okay, then," she echoed. She straightened from the table and started to walk away. "I have work to do and I'm pretty sure you do, too."

"Wait, Hope ..."

She stopped and looked up. "Yes?"

"We need to talk."

Something flickered in her eyes. Heat? Awareness? Regret? "I really have to go, Jake. You're the one who ended the meeting because there was no other business."

"It's not about the hospital."

She tucked a silky strand of honey blond hair behind her ear. "Then this must be about last night."

She'd blamed herself, but he'd been a more-than-willing participant. He hadn't meant for it to happen. He'd told her common sense was highly overrated, but that was lip service. No pun intended. Common sense had gotten him to where he was now. His career trajectory was right on target.

"Yeah. About last night—" He pushed his suit jacket aside as he rested his hands on his hips. Kissing Hope came under the heading "Seemed Like a Good Idea at the Time." They'd even agreed that kissing common sense goodbye was a very bad idea. Then they'd turned the bad idea on its ear and went for each other again.

It was time to clarify the mistake, clear the air and put the personal behind them. Get back on a professional footing because he had a lot at stake.

"Our priority needs to be getting the hospital open and running smoothly. At a profit," he added, bracing for her reaction.

"You're absolutely right," she said.

"Anything of a personal nature between us would distract attention from that goal."

"I agree completely." She nodded so eagerly that it made his head hurt.

"This is important for the community."

Not to mention himself. Success equaled power and security. Only someone who'd been powerless and insecure could understand how vital those intangibles could be.

"I'm really glad you brought this up," she said seriously. "It's like lifting a heavy load from my shoulders. What happened was a momentary, involuntary, reflexive, impulsive, spontaneous, inconsequential, insignificant—thing."

"Agreed." And yet her qualifying it to the size of something you could only see under a microscope was starting to tick him off. He'd spent a lot of time and energy worrying about how to handle this. "So we'll just forget it ever happened."

"Right. I *so* don't need any problems in my life. Already forgotten. Thanks, Jake."

Could she be any happier to be done with him?

He wanted to stop her when she walked to the door. He wanted to take back his words, but she might claim it was such a nonevent that all memory of their lips touching and sparks flying had been completely removed from her memory bank.

And how perverse that erasing it had been his goal in bringing up the subject. Talking about the elephant in the room was supposed to make it go away. He felt as if the effort had been a complete failure to meet the objective he'd had in mind.

Not only could he *not* forget about kissing her, but he was also annoyed that she could. Being frustrated at the success of his strategy was too stupid for words.

## Chapter Three

“How many traumas would you guess come into this E.R. in a month?”

Hope put the question to Dr. Cal Westen, a pediatric trauma specialist, and Dr. Mitch Tenney, the E.R. doc on duty. They were Jake’s partners in the trauma practice. Both worked at Mercy Medical Center’s main campus and they stood with her in a hallway just outside the emergency room.

Mitch thought about the question for several moments. The dark-haired, blue-eyed hunk was dressed in green scrubs. He was on duty but had taken a few minutes to answer her questions after waiting patients had been triaged and sent to rooms where they’d be seen in the order of symptom severity.

Dr. Tenney had a reputation for passionate intensity, but had been eager to help when she’d explained she had staffing questions regarding the soon-to-open hospital.

“In a month we probably get ten to twelve level threes,” Mitch said. “Those are usually head trauma from MVA—motor vehicle accidents. Or GSW—gunshot wounds.”

“How many children?” she asked the pediatric specialist.

Cal Westen was no less super-hot than his partner, but his coloring was different. Dark blond hair and blue eyes made him look more relaxed, but his skill and rapport with kids was well-known.

“We probably get twenty-five kids a day,” he said, sliding his stethoscope over the back of his neck, letting the ear tips and circular chest piece dangle. “Fever is the most common complaint followed closely by wheezing—a level-one nebulizer.”

Hope jotted down a few things in a small notebook. “I’m guessing that those kinds of issues are seasonal?”

Cal nodded. “Spring and fall pick up because of allergies. And we get a surge when kids go back to school. In large groups the germs spread faster. They get colds and flu. Wheezing is a secondary complication.”

“As far as staffing we need to take that into consideration.” She’d been an E.R. nurse, but every hospital had its way of doing things. It was her job to observe Mercy Medical’s procedures and improve on them with the new campus. If possible. “What’s the work flow like? What happens when patients hit the door? Where do they go?”

“Sometimes we sit around and twiddle our thumbs. Sometimes it’s saturated.” Mitch rubbed a hand across the back of his neck. “We assess everyone right away. If we’re really busy, the least severe cases see a nurse. Next would be E.R. doc. Me. The level threes are evaluated by the trauma surgeon.”

“That would be Jake.” When both doctors looked at her she said, “We’ve met.”

Especially their lips and bodies from chest to thigh had *met*. The memory made her hot all over even though she’d enthusiastically agreed with his suggestion, just yesterday, that they forget all about that *meeting*.

“I understand Jake was with you the other night when he was appointed to chief trauma surgeon.” There was a gleam in Cal’s blue eyes.

“I did see him. Right after Congressman Havens made the public announcement.”

She remembered Jake’s gruff, curt responses when he’d answered his cell that night. Probably Cal had been on the other end of the call. He’d be curious because the appointment would impact their practice. Did he also know that he’d interrupted an intensely personal moment? If he didn’t, she certainly wasn’t going to confirm. All business. She and Jake had agreed.

“So,” she said, looking from one hot doc to the other. “You both put in a lot of hours here in the hospital?”

“Yeah.” Cal checked the pager at the waist of his scrubs. “We’re in the process of looking for another pediatric specialist and E.R. intensivist for the practice. Both of us are married and want to spend as much time as possible with our families.”

“You have children?” she asked.

“I have a little girl,” Cal said, a proud smile curving his mouth. “Almost two.”

“And I have a son.” Mitch’s smile was pleased. “Going on a year.”

So hospital gossip was right. Two of the trauma docs were no longer single. All evidence pointed to the fact that they couldn’t be happier about losing their playboy position to Jake.

“Is it hard,” she said, “seeing sick children when you have little ones of your own?”

“It was hard even before I became a father,” Mitch answered. “I went through a cynical phase and had to work through some issues. A lot of patients come in for things that could easily have been avoided. I had little tolerance for that. It was my wife who helped me mellow.”

“Really?”

“Yeah,” Cal said. “Jake and I are incredibly grateful to Sam for this kinder, gentler Mitch.”

“Bite me,” his partner said.

“Seriously,” Cal continued. “I don’t see my daughter in every child I treat. But I do understand now how parents feel and try to be more sensitive to that.”

“I see.” Hope saw a nurse in the E.R.’s doorway signaling to the doctors. “One last question. Stryker gurney or Hill-Rom? Hospital administration has a contract with the latter. We get a rebate after a certain number ordered. But I like Stryker.”

Mitch thought for a moment. “Hill Rom is fine.”

“The goal is to see patients as quickly as possible,” Cal interjected. “But when it’s nuts in the E.R. people have to wait and the Hill-Rom beds are more comfortable. We’re so ready for the new campus to open and take a little of the heat off us.”

“I bet.”

Mitch nodded. “In fact administration is training a sales nurse to channel people in your direction when the hospital’s up and running.”

“Really?” She hadn’t heard about that yet and wasn’t sure how she felt. Sales and patient care seemed mutually exclusive—or should be.

“Yeah—”

There were footsteps behind her and she saw recognition in both doctor’s expressions.

“Hi, partner,” Mitch said.

“Hi.” Jake was looking at her.

Hope noticed the green scrubs and knew he’d come from the OR. She’d heard he was working on a young boy. The dashing hero. At the moment he didn’t look dashing, just dog-tired and she asked, “How are you?”

“Bushed,” he confirmed.

“How’s the kid?” Cal asked, worry sliding into his eyes.

Jake looked at his partner, then met her gaze. “Daredevil boy plus flashy bike equals belly trauma. He won’t be taking jumps off the curb at warp speed again anytime soon. But he’ll be fine. I just gave the good news to his parents.”

“Glad to hear it,” Cal said. “Speaking of parents ... I have to go.”

“Me, too,” Mitch agreed.

“Thanks for your time.” Hope wanted to beg them to stay and not leave her alone with Jake, but she knew they were busy. “It was a pleasure to meet you both.”

“Happy to help.” Cal disappeared through the double doors.

“Good luck with the new E.R.,” Mitch said, then followed his colleague to where the trauma bays held patients waiting for treatment.

She was about to excuse herself when Jake unexpectedly said, “I need caffeine. Stat.”

“Rough day?” The words just popped out.

He nodded and even that small movement seemed an effort. Normally he looked magazine-ad perfect, every hair in place. Not so much right now. Gray eyes were dull with fatigue and his cocky, confident attitude was missing in action.

“Want to join me?”

She found him dangerously endearing, which seemed an oxymoron, but definitely dangerous because she was unable to tell him no.

“Are you buying?”

He grinned. “I think I can handle a cup of coffee.”

She walked with him through the hospital lobby and its high dome that allowed lots of sunlight. They passed the information desk staffed with volunteers, then out-patient admitting and down a hall. Jake opened the door to the doctor’s dining room and let her precede him inside where she saw a scattering of tables covered with white cloths.

He took two mugs from a side table, then stuck each in turn beneath the spigot of a large silver coffee urn. After snagging a dessert plate, he filled it with several chocolate chip cookies and a couple of blueberry muffins. Then he sat at a table by a floor-to-ceiling window that looked out on the front parking lot and Mercy Medical Center Parkway. He leaned back and let out a long sigh.

Hope took the chair to his right. “Your partners were filling me in on what to expect when the new hospital opens.”

“Patient load is just a guess. Mercy West will be slow at first, just because it’s new. Although I understand people are coming in asking if it’s open because the outside looks ready. But the type of trauma will be different just because of the location in the southwest valley.”

“Oh?”

“Not as many MVAs or shootings.”

“I see.” She remembered something Mitch said. “Have you heard there’s going to be a sales nurse to channel patients to the new hospital?”

“It was my idea.” He blew on the wide opening of his steaming mug.

“Why?” she asked, surprised.

“It’s human nature to resist change.”

Not a news flash. She was a prime example. Her husband died and she’d had no choice but to accept the sudden traumatic differences of having the man she loved ripped away from her. Somehow she’d managed to move on with her life. Now she had a choice and alone was how she planned to stay. That would exclude the possibility of any unexpected and painful changes in her future. Pain was a warning system and she got the message. Alone equaled safe.

So that begged the question—why in the world was she sitting here with the guy whose kiss had reminded her how much she missed being with a man? But they’d agreed that their relationship would be professional only. Back to business.

“Mitch mentioned that there’s a real need to take some of the patient load to the new hospital. But a sales nurse?” she asked.

“Patients and family members used to coming here aren’t going to want to go somewhere else.”

“How can you be so sure?”

“Like I said, people resist change. But the load here is becoming overwhelming.” Amusement chased some of the fatigue from his face. “Not long ago a former patient was here complaining about the bill he’d received from the hospital regarding his bed.”

“Why?”

“He was billed for an ICU bed. Then he was downgraded to IMC—intermediate medical care. And then lowered to floor status.”

“What was his problem?”

“He never left the E.R.” The corners of his mouth turned up. “It was explained to him that he still received the same care he would have in the unit, but there wasn’t a bed available upstairs for him.”

Hope couldn’t help smiling, too. “I know it’s not funny. That poor man.”

“When Mercy Medical West opens, someone in those circumstances here will be offered a bed there. A sales nurse will sweeten the deal with a promise of hot meals, privacy and a computer in every room. All the comforts available.”

“I see your point. Maybe it’s the ‘sales’ part that bothers me. Couldn’t they call the job Patient Placement coordinator?”

“PPC? Perfectly politically correct?”

“Why not?” she demanded, laughing in spite of herself.

“No reason I know of.” He took a cookie and chewed thoughtfully. “So you had a nice chat with Cal and Mitch?”

“Yes. They were very informative. And I’m wondering ...”

She stopped herself just in time. Wondering about Jake was another dangerous activity.

“What?” As he blew on the steaming coffee, his gaze never left hers.

Damn. Even tired he didn’t miss anything. Ignoring his question would just get more attention. “It just occurred to me that both of them are married and have families. You don’t. Why is that?”

“I have different goals.”

“Oh?”

“I want other things from my career. Being chief trauma surgeon will get me where I want to be in terms of practicing medicine. After that the sky’s the limit. I’ve thought seriously about politics.”

“That seems self-indulgent. A power trip.”

“You don’t approve.” He wasn’t asking.

Without confirming, she said, “Medicine is community service in its purest, most basic form. It’s a higher calling than self-gratification.”

“Without politics, policies don’t change and people don’t get help.”

“But not just anyone can save a boy with belly trauma. You’re highly trained to save lives. Let someone else without those skills change policy.”

His expression turned stormy. “Someone with my particular skill set has a unique perspective in shaping the future of health care in this country.”

“Maybe. But I can’t help thinking that it isn’t people in general, but you in particular at the top of your priority list. It seems to me that you’re all about money and power.”

Fire turned his eyes to quicksilver. “Does taking shots at me make you feel better about kissing me back?”

“That’s not what this is about.” Although she knew his question wasn’t far from the truth.

“I’m glad burying your head in the sand is working for you.” He looked at the pager at the waist of his scrubs. “I’ve got patients.”

Without another word he stood and walked out. Suddenly she was alone. It’s what she wanted and it should have made her happy, but it didn’t. And it had everything to do with her damned attraction to that man. It simply refused to go away. What she needed was anger, buckets and buckets of being mad as hell. That’s what had gotten her through the first stages of grief after losing her husband.

She needed to get angry and channel her *mad*, use it in any way possible to protect herself.

But she shouldn’t have to work so hard. The allocation of that much energy didn’t make a whole lot of sense given the fact that she didn’t have an especially high opinion of Jake. His medical expertise was exemplary. His moral high ground? Not so much. And yet, her mouth still tingled every time she saw him.

The trick would be *not* seeing him at work as much as possible.

Twenty-four hours after running into Hope, Jake was still intrigued and annoyed in equal parts. He walked into the office he shared with his partners where their billing and paperwork were done. Mitch and Cal's specialty was emergency medicine, which meant no long-term care. Jake had a single exam room for his occasional follow-up on a surgical patient. In the back, their conference room held a classy, mahogany table and three high-backed leather chairs for monthly status meetings. He was hoping that seeing his friends would take his mind off Hope.

She was deliberately trying to piss him off. Really working at it. What the hell had he ever done besides kiss her? He had to admit it was a really great kiss, but still ...

"Are you going to stand out here in the hall and daydream?" Mitch had walked up behind him. His smile was set on screw-with-a-friend. "We were foolishly hoping our fearless leader would come inside and celebrate his shiny new promotion with the peasants."

"It's not daydreaming if one is gathering one's thoughts," Jake defended. Only he knew the lie for what it was.

"You have that look on your face," Mitch said. "The confused-about-a-woman expression."

Just then Cal walked by and made a dramatic show of putting his hands over his ears. "I don't want to hear. I'm an impressionable and sensitive man."

"Sensitive like a water buffalo." Jake was glad his partner had given him an excuse to ignore the "woman" comment and dodge that bullet.

The three walked in the conference room and took seats around the table with Jake taking the head and his friends on either side, as usual. They were barely settled when Cal pulled out his wallet. As usual.

"Before we get down to business you have to see this picture."

Mitch took the photo and grinned. "Look at those blond curls Annie's got."

"Looks just like me," Cal said proudly.

Jake studied the photo of Cal, his daughter and wife, Emily. "Annie's really getting big."

"So is Em. At least she will be," Cal answered. "Before I'm accused of being a pig, you should know she's pregnant. We're going to have another baby."

"That's great." Mitch reached across the table for a congratulatory handshake. "How did she pull that off? Surely you didn't have anything to do with it."

"Yeah. Right. Immaculate conception." Cal glared. "Buddy, you need a refresher course in anatomy and the reproductive process."

"Hardly." Mitch wasn't intimidated by the glare. In his glory days he could give lessons on the care, feeding and fringe benefits of a really good glare. "Samantha and I have the whole birds-and-bees thing goin' on just fine." He slid his wallet from the back pocket of his jeans and took out a picture. "Equal time. This is the latest one of *Lucas*."

Cal took it and smiled. "Tall, dark and dandy, just like his dad. Look at those teeth."

"Two on the bottom and he's working on the uppers." Mitch's tone was rueful. "He's waking up a lot at night and Sam thinks it's teething."

"I feel your pain." Cal tucked his picture away. "Annie is getting her two-year molars and it's not pretty."

"Great. More to look forward to. I can hardly wait."

Without comment Jake listened to his two friends go back and forth about who was losing the most sleep. Once upon a time they'd both resisted love, even after meeting the right woman. Compelling personal reasons had put a fear of commitment into each man until a lonely future was far worse than taking a chance. Now when they gathered to discuss finances, goals, problems and growing their practice, the monthly status meeting started with an update on married life and growing their families.

Jake had always tolerated this part of the monthly meeting, not that he wasn't happy for his friends. It's just that he had career goals and success aspirations different from theirs. But today he

was having a strange reaction to news about wives, kids and a new pregnancy. He always cared, but only half listened. Today he was interested. What was that about?

It was definitely new and he wondered what was different since last month. There were only two changes. His appointment to chief trauma surgeon.

And Hope.

He heard his name and realized they'd been talking to him. "What's wrong?"

Mitch's expression was intense. "That's what I'd like to know."

"Yeah." Cal rested his forearms on the table. "You have something against marriage?"

"Not if it's working for you."

"It definitely is," Mitch said. "Marrying Sam was the smartest thing I've ever done."

"So says the man who in this very room swore up and down that he didn't need conflict resolution counseling and it would be a waste of time," Jake reminded him.

"You neglected to tell me that my counselor would be sexy. And smart. And the love of my life," he added.

"My bad." Jake grinned.

He remembered when Mitch's attitude had ticked off most of the Mercy Medical staff, some of the physicians and administration. His behavior had put the trauma practice in jeopardy of not having their contract renewed. That would have dealt his own career trajectory a serious blow. But his friend salvaged the professional relationship with the hospital *and* found personal happiness.

"Darn right your bad," Cal said. "I'm grateful every day that Emily came back into my life and gave me another chance. I don't know what I'd do without her and Annie."

"You sound like girls," Jake teased.

The two looked at each other before Mitch said, "We're okay with that."

"So you guys are blissfully happy and recommend marriage. Good for you."

"Don't knock it till you've tried it," Mitch cautioned.

"I'm not knocking anything," Jake protested. He looked at Cal on his right and Mitch on his left. "I get it. You guys are happy. Can we talk about business now?"

"One question. What's going on with you and what's-her-name? The daughter of the president of the hospital's board of directors?" Mitch settled an intense look on him.

"You mean Blair Havens?" She was definitely Congressman Havens's daughter and he was definitely president of the board of directors. Jake answered, "We're dating."

"Is it serious?" Cal asked.

"What are you? Her father?"

"I have a daughter," he said. "And if any guy messes with Annie he'll have me to deal with. So, I'm just saying ..."

"Well, I guess it depends on what you mean by serious." Jake was dodging the question.

"Serious as in settling down. Marriage," Cal spelled out.

"I've thought about it," he admitted. "Blair is beautiful, smart and connected. Her father was in Congress and still has political influence. It would be a good career move. But ..."

"Ah. *But*," Mitch said, a knowing look in his eyes. "A three letter word that means not so fast."

"Something like that," Jake agreed.

His personal life had flatlined a long time ago when he fell in love but didn't pass her family's white-trash test. In their eyes, once you've been homeless the smell of loser never goes away. The experience taught him not to take anything for granted. Hard work alone didn't guarantee success or happiness. So, a relationship should buy you something. A career boost. Connections. The path to power. *Something*.

"Okay, guys." He looked from Cal to Mitch. "Can I start the meeting?"

"Fine." Mitch nodded.

“Okay with me.” Cal met his gaze. “The sooner we’re done here, the sooner I can get home to the family. Go, bro.”

Agendas were passed out and the first item was a status report on hiring new doctors for the practice. While his friends talked, Jake’s mind wandered to the memory of a pair of pretty hazel eyes flashing with humor and intelligence. A mouth, with its defined upper lip and full bottom one. A mouth that could be cute and crooked when she smiled. It was just a memory, but still had the power to drive him crazy.

And, dammit! This was his practice. The one he’d started with nothing but determination and guts. His career and the stability of his future was on the line. Everything he’d ever wanted was now his for the taking. This was an incredibly inconvenient time to lose focus.

He and Hope didn’t have a relationship, let alone anything that would guarantee him success. In fact, what was between them had the potential to implode all his plans.

Maybe he needed to talk to her again about keeping things between them purely professional.

## Chapter Four

The sports bar across the street from Mercy Medical West was noisy and Hope didn't really want to be there. But a couple of the E.R. nurses had reached out to her and socializing was a good way to generate trauma team spirit. On second thought, maybe a sports bar was the perfect place to be. She sat with her coworkers at a tall bistro table in the far corner of the room to the right of the walk-up bar. Flat-screen TVs were mounted on the walls and visible from every seat in the place.

Karen Richards, a petite strawberry blonde, was a hard worker and experienced E.R. nurse, by all accounts one of the best on staff. When the newest campus opened, her reputation would be put to the test. She held up her longneck bottle of beer and said, "This is your official welcome to Las Vegas, Hope."

Green-eyed brunette Stacy Porter held up her pink cocktail. "I second that."

"Thanks." Hope touched her glass of white wine to each of theirs. "So, tell me about yourselves. Married? Kids?"

Karen toyed with her beer bottle. "I'm divorced. Two girls, Cassandra and Olivia, ages six and four. We live with my mom who's a nurse at Mercy's main campus. I'm twenty-six and still live with my mother. Is that pathetic, or what?"

There were worse things, Hope thought. "Is it working for you?"

"Yeah. She's my rock and helps with child care."

Hope nodded. "What about you, Stacy?"

The twentysomething held up her left hand and wiggled her fingers, showing off a diamond solitaire. "Just got engaged. Tim works in Human Resources at the hospital."

"Congratulations."

Even as she smiled, Hope tried to suppress the pang of envy. She remembered the huge joy of being with the man she'd loved and the shimmering anticipation of their life together. A life that barely got started before it was gone. Losing Kevin had nearly crushed her.

"When's the big day?" Hope plastered a big, fat, fake smile on her face.

"April," Stacy said. "Before Vegas is hotter than the face of the sun. It will be a church wedding, not in the Garden of Love Chapel with an Elvis impersonator."

"Are you sure?" Hope held her palms up and lifted each in turn as if weighing something. "Elvis? The Chapel of Love? Church could be boring."

The women laughed, but Hope knew from personal experience that boring was a blessing. Just then a cold wind blew into the bar and blasted boring into oblivion because Jake Andrews had walked through the door. It felt as if her heart hit a pocket of turbulence that made boring look even better. Some kind of radar drew his gaze to their secluded corner and he nodded at her before heading in their direction.

"Look who's here," Karen said when he joined them. The tone of familiarity indicated they knew each other. "Hi, Jake. To what do we owe the honor?"

"Ladies." He looked around, then let his gaze linger on Hope. "There was a rumor that the E.R. department was here for happy hour."

"All three of us," Stacy said.

"Is this a ladies-only initiation rite for the new girl in town? Or can anyone join?"

"Have a seat, Doc," Karen said. "This is the first annual Mercy Medical West employee-bonding ritual."

He sat on the empty chair between Stacy and Hope. His shoulder brushed hers, sending a blast of heat through her. The waitress took his drink order and brought him a bottle of beer, as if he were just one of the guys. But he didn't look like just one of them.

Except for scrubs after surgery, she always saw him in a suit and tie, as if he were running for elected office. Tonight was no exception. The charcoal slacks, matching jacket, crisp white shirt and tone-on-tone silver tie made him look *so* good, broad-shouldered and masculine. The pocket of turbulence spread from her chest to her stomach and made her as nervous as a fearful flyer.

She didn't like being aware of him. She didn't like being aware of him in a way she hadn't been aware of a man since her husband. Jake Andrews? Really? It made no sense. He and Kevin were nothing alike. Jake was mercenary and ambitious—not at all her type.

She wanted to get up and leave but felt it would appear rude. Not to mention weird. So she toughed it out until everyone had finished their drinks.

Then she pushed away her wineglass. “I think I'll call it a night.”

“So soon?” Karen said.

Hope slid down from the high chair. “Busy day tomorrow. The fire department is inspecting the building and if we don't pass they'll revoke our certificate of occupancy. But you all stay and have fun.”

“Don't have to ask me twice. Mom's got the girls.” Karen looked at Stacy.

“I'm free. Tim has a late meeting.”

“I'll see you both tomorrow. This was really great,” she said. “Good night, Jake.”

He stood beside her. “I'll walk you to your car.”

“I'm parked just across the street.” It was an effort to keep her tone light when her heart was beating like crazy. “Don't bother.”

“It's no bother.” He smiled at the other two women. “See you later.”

Then he settled his palm at the small of her back, escorting her through the crowded bar and into the chill air of the late-January night. Hope felt the pressure and heat of his fingers. Just that casual touch made her heart pound and her knees wobble. It wasn't okay and she stepped away from him as they walked side by side across the dark, hardly used street between the strip mall and the recently black-topped hospital lot.

“My car is by the E.R. entrance,” she said and walked as fast as she could toward it.

“Do you have somewhere to be?”

Glancing up at his profile, the lean line of his cheek and jaw she said, “No. Why?”

“Then you're cold?”

His touch had gone a long way to taking the chill out of the dark night. “A little. Why?” she asked again.

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