

HOSPITAL

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## **Vintage Cherish**

# **A Doctor's Vow**

**CHRISTINE RIMMER**

Mills & Boon Vintage Cherish

Christine Rimmer

**A Doctor's Vow**

«HarperCollins»

## **Rimmer C.**

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Pediatrician Veronica Powers could handle crying babies and sticky-fingered toddlers without batting an eye, but in her personal life, order reigned supreme. So the beautiful and hardworking doctor was unnerved by her fascination with strong, sexy hospital administrator Ryan Malone—especially since his chaotic life involved three rambunctious kids and an inquisitive mother-in-law. Nevertheless, the single father was wreaking havoc with Ronni's well-ordered notions. And whether she wanted it or not, this man and his family were chipping away at Ronni's guarded heart and changing her mind about marriage!

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**“Come on,” Ryan coaxed. “Stay, just a little while.”**

She looked right at him. He smiled. He had the kind of smile that seemed unwilling, as if he didn't do it often—which made it special, made her feel special.

Ronni had heard it said that Ryan Malone could get money out of a stone. He'd spearheaded the plan to raise millions so that Honeygrove Memorial could add on a much-needed wing. Everyone marveled at him, wondered how he'd done it. But looking into his eyes right now, Dr. Ronni Powers understood the mystery completely.

The man possessed a commanding presence, a natural reserve—and a reluctant knock-'em-dead smile. An unbeatable combination, whether it came to convincing wealthy donors to put their money in his hands—or coaxing a woman to stay up all night talking to him....

# **A Doctor's Vow**

## **Christine Rimmer**



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For the ones who take care of the children...

## CHRISTINE RIMMER

came to her profession the long way around. Before settling down to write about the magic of romance, she'd been an actress, a salesclerk, a janitor, a model, a phone sales representative, a teacher, a waitress, a playwright and an office manager. Now that she's finally found work that suits her perfectly, she insists she never had a problem keeping a job—she was merely gaining “life experience” for her future as a novelist. Those who know her best withhold comment when she makes such claims; they are grateful that she's at last found steady work. Christine is grateful, too—not only for the joy she finds in writing, but for what waits when the day's work is through: a man she loves who loves her right back, and the privilege of watching their children grow and change day to day. She lives with her family in Oklahoma.

Dear Reader,

My first PRESCRIPTION: MARRIAGE book, Dr. Devastating, was so much fun to write. I loved working with Christine Flynn and Susan Mallery, creating the doctors and nurses of Honeygrove Memorial. Naturally I was thrilled when our editors at Silhouette asked us to do it again.

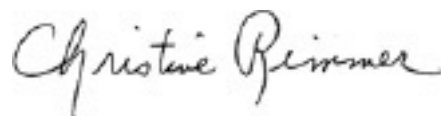
And that wasn't all. Our editors also informed us that the twenty-year anniversary of Silhouette was coming up.

Chris, Susan and I started brainstorming. We thought, what if Honeygrove Memorial Hospital was planning its own twenty-year celebration? What if a big new wing was being added? And what if, this time around, instead of three doctor heroes, we chose three heroines with M.D. after their names?

We also decided to make our heroes three powerful, determined men, each with his own part to play in the creation of Memorial's new wing—and each destined to find love where he least expects it. And then we agreed that our heroes would have more in common than they realized, that this group of stories would be about a family—a family once torn apart by tragedy, reunited at last.

We hope that in these three new PRESCRIPTION: MARRIAGE stories, we've given you a little bit of everything you look for when you choose Silhouette Special Edition: love, laughter, passion, fulfillment, heroes you can fall in love with—and heroines who face life and relationships with humor, heart and honesty.

All the best,



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## Chapter One

A bright flash of hard light cut through Ronni's dreams. Then the sound of a drum, a huge drum. Someone pounding on it. Hard.

With a small, disgruntled moan, Ronni turned over in bed, thinking disjointedly, Lightning. Thunder. A storm coming...

Another harsh flash. More ominous drumming. Ronni opened her eyes—and saw the figure standing beside her bed.

A burglar, she thought. There's a burglar in my bedroom.

A very short burglar.

All at once, as if a huge hand had ripped a hole in the belly of the sky, the rain began. A downpour. It beat on the roof. A sudden angry gust of wind sent it spraying at the French doors to the small patio beyond the bedroom, making a sound like gravel thrown against the panes.

More lightning. A blinding burst of it, flooding in through the gauze curtains, casting the bedroom—and the undersized intruder—into sharp relief.

She thought, not only small, but young—too young to be involved in a life of crime. Eight, maybe. Or nine. In striped pajamas and a dark-colored robe, standing by her bed at—she shot a glance at the clock—one-thirty in the morning.

Recognition dawned.

Not a burglar at all.

Ryan Malone's son, the older one. She'd met him the afternoon before, when she'd stopped by the main house to pick up the keys. "This is Andrew," the boy's grandmother had said. "And this is Lisbeth. And here is Griffin..."

In the harsh wash of light, the boy's blue eyes widened; he had seen that her eyes were no longer shut.

Thunder cracked, roared out and faded off beneath the heavy thrumming of the rain. The boy stepped back as the room plunged into shadow once more. He whirled for the French doors.

"Wait!" Ronni called, the sound a sleep-rough croak.

The boy froze.

"Please." She spoke more gently. "It's okay. Stay."

The boy didn't turn toward her, but he didn't try to run again, either. He remained poised—waiting, no doubt, for what she might do next.

Very slowly, so as not to send him fleeing, Ronni reached over and turned on the bedside lamp. The boy flinched when she did that, but he stayed where he was.

"Andrew." Ronni schooled her tone, made it soft, nonthreatening. She pulled herself to a sitting position. "That's your name, isn't it?"

The boy squared his shoulders, sucked in a breath—and resolutely remained facing away. "My name is Drew," he corrected her, speaking to the French doors. "My dad and my grandma still call me Andrew. I keep telling them I'm Drew now, but they keep forgetting."

"Drew, then," Ronni said. "I like that. Drew."

With a deep sigh, the boy turned toward her at last. They studied each other as the rain drummed away and lightning flared again, a boom of thunder following seconds after.

Ronni asked, "What are you doing here in the middle of the night, Drew?"

The boy chewed on his upper lip for a moment, then replied gravely, "I couldn't sleep. I had to check and be sure about you."

Ronni frowned. "Be sure?"

“Yeah.” He was defiant now, the dark head held high. “Be sure. That you’re really okay. That you won’t...hurt anything. Here in the little house—or at my house, either.” He glanced again toward the French doors—and escape.

“Did something make you think I might not be okay?”

“No. I don’t know. I’m the oldest, that’s all. I should be watching out. But I guess it was a bad idea.”

He was way too far away, in the shadows. “Drew, I can hardly see you.” His shoulders tightened, his body tensed. She thought again that he would bolt. But no. He was caught and he knew it. “Won’t you come here?”

He took three reluctant steps in her direction. “What?”

She pushed back the covers and swung her feet to the floor. “I’m a doctor, did you know that?”

He answered with a careful nod. “I’ve seen you. At Dr. Heber’s office. He’s my doctor.”

“Yes.” She dared to stand, to reach for her robe at the end of the bed. “And did you also know that when you’re a doctor, you take a solemn vow?”

His eyes narrowed. “A solemn vow?”

Quickly, she stuck her arms in the sleeves of the robe, flipped her thick braid out from under the collar and tied the belt. “Do you know what that means—a solemn vow?”

His black brows drew together. “Solemn. That’s like...very serious, and vow means like a promise you can never, ever break.”

“Exactly. A serious, unbreakable promise to ‘First, do no harm.’ That means, more important than trying to help someone get well, is not to harm them. Not to hurt them.”

Was he buying? She couldn’t be sure. And right then, even her five feet two inches felt a little too tall. She sat again and gave a small pat to the edge of the bed.

He looked at the space she’d patted, mauled his upper lip some more—and then gave in. He came and sat beside her—but not too close, nearer the end of the bed than to her.

“Do you see what I mean, Drew?”

“Yeah, but you don’t need to help me get well, because I’m not sick.”

“I can see you’re not. And what I’m saying is, that as a doctor, I’ve taken an oath not to hurt people no matter what.”

“An oath?”

“An oath is the same thing as a vow.”

He peered at her closely, gauging the truth of her words. At last he conceded, “Well. Okay. Since you made a solemn vow like that, I guess you have to keep it.”

“I do. It’s a promise I will never break.”

He went on staring at her. He looked so...dignified. So young to be so old.

She longed to reach out and put her arm around him, to comfort with a touch. But she sensed a deep reserve in him. And a desire to be considered mature. A hug would be too much—too forward, and too patronizing.

All right, she thought, if hugs are out, what next?

In the silence, the rain sounded even louder and harder than before. Lightning flashed twice, and thunder rumbled in the distance. It would be a wet walk back across the big yard to the main house.

“Drew, how did you get in here?”

He squirmed a little, as if the edge of the bed had suddenly become an uncomfortable place to sit. Then he admitted, “My mom always kept a key under the flowerpot outside there.” He pointed toward the French doors. “I put it back where I found it.” Another sigh, a gusty one. “But you’re gonna say I shouldn’t have used it, huh?”

“That’s right. You shouldn’t have.”

He sniffed, and pulled his shoulders square once more. “Well, I’m sorry. I won’t do it again.” He stood. “And I’ll just go back to my own house now.”

Nice try, kid, she thought. She rose to stand beside him. “Fine. Let’s go.” As she said that, she thought of the boy’s father, her temporary landlord, Ryan Malone. Chief administrator of Honeygrove Memorial Hospital, Ryan Malone was an imposing man, a man who wore designer suits and came across as both cordial and aloof at the same time.

Ronni had only really talked to him once—at a fund-raising dinner about two weeks before. Marty Heber, Drew’s doctor and one of the two other pediatricians in her practice, had made the introductions. Somehow the talk had gotten around to her new condo, which wouldn’t be ready before her apartment lease was up.

“I have a guest house. You’re welcome to use it,” Ryan Malone had said. He’d pulled out a gold-embossed business card. “Call my secretary at Memorial. She’ll handle the details with you.”

She hadn’t spoken to Ryan Malone since. She’d called the number on the card. His secretary had described the little house to her and told her no rent would be required. Ryan Malone’s mother-in-law had shown her around a week ago and turned over the key just yesterday.

And now here she was, about to wake a virtual stranger in the middle of the night to return his wandering son to him. The idea did not thrill her. But what else could she do?

Evidently, Drew’s thoughts mirrored hers. “My dad won’t like this. I think it’s better if I just go back alone.”

“Drew. You know I can’t let you do that.”

“Yes, you can. Nobody has to know I was here. And I promise I’ll never do it again.”

Ronni gave the boy a long, patient look. Drew stared back, his eyes pleading. Ronni kept her expression firm.

Finally, the boy muttered, “Oh, all right.”

She granted him a smile, then instructed, “Give me a minute. I’ll see if I can dig up some coats and an umbrella.”

He slumped to the edge of the bed again as Ronni hurried out to the small front closet, where she got the trench coat and the boots she’d put there just the evening before. She’d thought she’d left her umbrella there, too, but now it was nowhere in sight.

The coat and the boots would have to do. She rushed back to the bedroom with them, half-afraid that Drew might have taken advantage of her absence to make an escape.

But no. He was still there, perched on the side of her bed, looking grim. She went to the small stack of boxes in the corner, found the one with Outerwear scrawled on it and got him her old hooded anorak. “Here. Put this on.”

He rose and trudged to her side. She handed him the anorak. He tugged it over his head as she yanked on her boots and donned her trench coat. “I don’t know what to do about your feet,” she said, shaking her head at his slippers.

“It’s okay. Let’s just go.” He was peering up at her. He had to tip his head way back to see, since the hood of the anorak covered all but the tip of his nose. She had to hide her smile at how cute he looked.

He demanded, “I look ridiculous, don’t I?”

You look adorable, she thought, knowing that if she said that aloud, it would thoroughly insult him. “You look fine.” She marched over and got her flashlight from the bed stand drawer. “Let’s go.”

Outside, the wind had died. The lightning and thunder seemed to have stopped. But the rain was a cold curtain of water, coming down so hard and thick it poured off the branches of the pines and the hawthorns in relentless small streams. From the back porch of the main house, lights showed on either side of the patio, bright enough to light their way.

Tucking her unneeded flashlight beneath her arm, Ronni flipped up her coat collar and hunched her shoulders. “Let’s run for it.”

They bolted across the patio, through the small back gate and down the long driveway that ran between the guest cottage and the gracious two-story brick colonial where Ryan Malone and his

family lived. At the back of the main house, they went through another gate, across a now-soaked stretch of lawn, to the back door. Ronni reached for the door handle.

“Wait,” Drew said. “It’s locked.” He lifted the hem of the anorak, dug in the pocket of his robe and produced a key.

The door opened onto a large service porch. Drew shoved the anorak’s hood back off his head as he closed and locked the door behind them. Ronni flipped her collar down and brushed at her wet hair. Through the darkness, she could see tall pantry doors on one wall and the big, square shapes of a washer and dryer. A small light shone on a panel of buttons right next to the door: the alarm system.

Drew saw where she was looking. “It’s okay,” he whispered. “I turned it off when I went out.”

She whispered back, “You can work that thing yourself?”

He gave a small snort. “Ronni. I’m nine years old.” He seemed to think that explained everything. And maybe it did. For “the oldest” in the family, a bright, too-responsible boy who had lost his mother—when? About two years ago, Ronni thought Marty Heber had said.

Sympathy moved through Ronni, bittersweet and tender. She did understand this boy. She had spent most of her childhood feeling like a miniature adult, herself.

“Okay.” Drew’s whisper had turned bleak. “What are we gonna do now?”

Good question, Ronni thought as they stood there dripping water on the service porch floor. Whatever they did would be awkward at best. She probably should have led Drew around to the front door. Ringing the doorbell and giving the dignified Mr. Malone a chance to throw on a robe and come down to answer would be marginally less awkward than having to seek him out in his bed.

But they were already inside and it was pouring out there. Her hair was drenched and poor Drew’s house shoes were soaked through. Neither of them needed to get any wetter.

“Well?” Drew demanded, his whisper edged with impatience now. Clearly he thought that if she wanted to run things, she ought to know what she planned to do next.

An idea came to her. “Show me to the front door.”

“What for?”

She sent him a put-upon glance as she turned on her flashlight. “Drew. Please. I’m doing the best I can, all right?”

He looked at her sideways for a moment. “Why are we whispering?”

And why did kids always ask so many questions? “I don’t know. We can stop.”

He thought about that. “No. We can whisper, it’s okay. And I guess if we turn on the lights, it will only scare everyone.”

“That’s pretty much what I was thinking.”

“Actually, Ronni, you could just go on back to the little house now, if you wanted, and I could \_\_\_”

She gave him a look similar to the one she’d given him when he’d suggested coming back here alone.

He stared at her stubbornly for a moment, then complained, “But if we have to wake them up, anyway, why can’t we just...” He must have read her expression correctly, because he let the sentence fade away unfinished. He decided to try bargaining. “At least give me the flashlight, since I have to go first.”

Oh, right, she thought. Great idea. Give a flashlight to a nine-year-old. He’d be shining it everywhere but in front of them.

Still, he did have to take the lead. She handed it over.

Drew’s slippers made soft squishing sounds as he led her through a huge kitchen and a dining room with a big cherry table and a gleaming parquet floor, into an expansive living room with Oriental rugs on the floors and artfully draped curtains framing the windows. The whole way, Drew never once sent the flashlight’s beam anywhere it didn’t need to be. Again, Ronni found herself feeling tenderly toward him—so young to be so grown-up.

Finally, they reached the spacious front foyer, where a curving staircase led up to the second floor. The front porch light glowed softly through the beveled glass windows on either side of the big door.

“Okay, we’re here.” Drew turned the flashlight on her, shining it right in her face, proving himself to be a bona fide nine-year-old, after all. “What do we do now?”

“Give me that.” She took the thing from him and turned it off.

“Well? What do we do now?”

“Just wait.”

“For what?”

“Until I can see again. You blinded me.”

“Oh. Sorry.”

“Right.” By then, her eyes had adjusted somewhat. She tiptoed to the door, where she disengaged the dead bolt and pulled the door open.

The bell, tucked into the door frame, had a little light inside it. She pushed it. A melodic, startlingly loud series of chimes rang out. Both Ronni and Drew winced at the sound. When the chimes faded, Ronni rang once more for good measure, then shut and locked the door and went back to stand beside Drew.

“He’s not gonna like this,” Drew warned, still whispering. “He works really hard and he needs his sleep.”

“You should have thought of that a little earlier.”

Drew was silent for a moment. Then he muttered, “Well, you weren’t supposed to wake up.”

She muttered right back, “That’s no excuse for sneaking into a person’s house in the middle of the night—and I think you know it, too.”

“I said I was sorry.” Now he actually did sound contrite. “And I meant what I said, Ronni. I’ll never do it again.”

“I’m glad to hear that. And I’m sure your father will be, too.”

Right then, a light burst on at the top of the stairs. Ronni and Drew gasped in unison and looked up.

Ryan Malone stood on the landing above, his hand on the light switch, wearing a robe very similar to his son’s. His thick dark hair was mussed and his eyes drooped a little, still heavy with sleep. But even startled from his bed in the middle of the night, he looked terribly commanding. A man who took charge, a man to be reckoned with, even in his pajamas.

He started down the stairs.

## Chapter Two

At the foot of the stairs, Ryan Malone paused.

He had no idea yet what was going on here, but he could see it had something to do with Andrew—who, it appeared, had been out wandering around in a rainstorm after midnight.

The little redheaded pediatrician, who was using his guest house for the next month or so, smiled at Ryan gamely. “Drew decided to come over and check me out.”

The woman clutched a flashlight in her left hand. Her trench coat was rain-dark on the shoulders. Flowered pajama bottoms showed beneath the coat, tucked into a pair of calf-high rain boots. Beads of water gleamed in her hair—that hard-to-tame Raggedy Ann kind of hair. She had it tied into a single braid down her back, but little bits of it had burst free, to curl in a damp halo of corkscrews around a face that belonged on a pixie—or maybe an elf.

She was too cute. Too cute by half. It hardly seemed possible that a woman who looked like that could have made it through the grueling grind of medical school, internship and residency.

But then again, there were her eyes. Wise eyes, with humor in them and faint blue smudges marring the tender skin beneath.

Ryan turned his gaze to his son. Andrew wore some kind of light pull-on jacket, obviously borrowed from the woman. The jacket was wet and Andrew’s head was down. He stared at his water-logged slippers and chewed his upper lip.

“Ryan, what is it?” Lily, his mother-in-law, had appeared at the top of the stairs. Ryan felt a degree of relief. Lily would deal with this. “Oh, my!” Lily’s hand flew to her throat. “Andrew, you are drenched.”

Ryan stepped aside as Lily rushed down the stairs, headed straight for his son. “Oh, just look at you. What have you been up to?”

Ryan said, “Evidently, he paid Dr. Powers a visit.”

“A visit? To Dr. Powers? In the middle of the night in this weather? That’s not like Andrew, it’s not like him at all.” Lily glanced from Ryan to the redhead and back again, her mouth pursed in disbelief. Then she turned to her grandson and accused in an injured tone, “Andrew. I just cannot believe that you would do such a thing.”

Andrew said nothing. He went on staring down at his soaked bedroom slippers and continued to gnaw away at his poor lip.

Even Ryan, who knew less about children than he probably should, given that he had three of them, could see that his son wasn’t about to explain himself now. He suggested, “Lily, it really is late. How about putting him back to bed now? Let him sleep on this tonight. And we’ll discuss it tomorrow.”

“Well, of course.” She held out her hand, and wiggled her fingers impatiently. “Come with me, young man.” Andrew’s jaw had that mulish set it sometimes got. Still, he pushed back the sleeve of the too-big jacket and put his hand into his grandmother’s. Lily sent the doctor an embarrassed smile. “I am so sorry about this.”

Ronni smiled back. “There’s no harm done.”

Clucking and sighing, Lily led Andrew back upstairs.

Once the two had disappeared on the upper floor, Ryan turned to the little doctor. She looked at him as if she wasn’t sure what to do next.

He felt the same. He should probably thank her and tell her good-night. But then again, maybe he ought to see if she could provide a few details about what his son had just done. He cleared his throat. “I know it’s late. But do you think you could give me a few minutes before you go back to the guest house?”

“Sure.”

“Do you...want to take off your coat?”

She blinked and put her hand protectively against her chest. “Oh, no. It’s fine. I’ll need it again in a few minutes, anyway.”

“Right.” He probably shouldn’t have asked. He could see the collar of a robe beneath the coat, but still, taking it off might have felt too much like undressing.

Undressing.

What had made him think of that, for pity’s sake?

Damn, this was awkward—the two of them standing here by the front door in their pajamas, at two in the morning.

Maybe if they got more comfortable...

“Come on,” he said. “Let’s go into my study. We can sit down in there.”

She looked at him for a moment, her head tipped to the side. He was absolutely certain she was going to say no. But then she said quietly, “That would be fine.”

He gestured toward a door a few feet from the bottom of the stairs. “Right through there.” He led the way at first, but then stopped to open the door for her and flick on the light. “Have a seat.” She went on ahead. He smelled the cool dampness of rain as she passed. Rain and something else, a faint perfume, as inviting as it was subtle and fresh.

She took one of the two leather wing chairs opposite the desk.

He went around the desk and dropped into the big, deeply tufted swivel chair behind it.

Once he’d sat down he said, “So...” And then he wasn’t quite sure how to go on.

She pulled herself straighter and cast a glance around—at the leather-bound books that lined the bookcases, at the arrangement of family photos that stood in contrasting frames on the credenza a few feet away. At the broad expanse of desk between them, which was empty except for a leather blotter and a marble pen stand.

He knew what she was thinking. “I don’t use this room too much,” he said. “I have my office at Memorial.”

She made a small sound of understanding. “It’s a good room for work. Attractive, masculine... and comfortable. Or it would be comfortable, with a little more clutter.”

“It’s hard to clutter up a room you’re never in.”

“Yes, I suppose you’re right.” She shifted a little in the chair. And then she waited, giving him a chance, he knew, to take the lead. As a general rule, he was a man who had no problem taking the lead.

But for some reason, right now, he didn’t seem to know quite where to start. He cleared his throat. “I guess I’m hoping that you know something I don’t—about what my son just did.”

She looked down at her flashlight—and then leaned forward a little to set it on the edge of the desk. “There honestly isn’t much to tell. He came over to check me out—in the middle of the night. It was a case of iffy judgment and bad timing, that’s all.”

“Wait a minute. The way I see it, he broke in to the guest house.”

She shook her head sharply. “No, he didn’t. Not exactly, anyway. To him, the guest house is part of his home. He didn’t really think of it as someone else’s house. He even knew where the key was—where his mother had left it, under a flowerpot outside.”

“Fine. He didn’t break in. He had a key. But I think the real question is, why did he let himself in at all?”

“He said he wanted to make sure about me. He wanted to be certain I was no threat to him or his family.”

“Where would he get the idea that you were a threat?”

She sat back again then and smoothed her coat a little more neatly over her knees. “My guess? He didn’t think I was a threat, not really. But he still had to be sure.”

“But you said that he said—”

“Mr. Malone, your son is a very mature, very responsible little boy. I really do think he was only doing what he said he was doing—making certain that I was okay, that I wouldn’t do harm to him or his family. He’s realized now that, at least while I’m staying there, the guest house isn’t part of his house. He sees that letting himself into my bedroom in the middle of the night is not acceptable. And he’s promised me he’ll never do such a thing again.”

“He promised you.”

“Yes. He did.”

“You sound as though you believe him.”

“I do believe him. And since we’re on the subject, there’s another thing…” He wasn’t sure he wanted to know what, but she told him, anyway. “It would mean a lot to him if you would call him Drew.”

“He said that?”

“Not in so many words. He asked me to call him Drew—and he said he keeps telling you and his grandmother that his name is Drew now.”

Ryan caught her implication. It didn’t particularly please him. “But we don’t listen, right?”

She shrugged. “Often, children of Drew’s age feel a need to improve on their names. Maybe it’s the urge to take more control of their lives as they mature. Or maybe just part of the natural process of self-definition. Whatever. All of a sudden, Arlenes become Leenas. Jasons insist that you have to call them Jake.” She had a dimple on the right side of her mouth. He watched it deepen as she grinned. “I modified my own name at about Drew’s age, to tell you the truth. I remember constantly telling people, ‘Not Veronica. Ronni. Ronni with an i.’ The change has stuck, too.”

She looked so pleased with herself. He couldn’t resist prodding her a little. “It made that much difference to you, to be called Ronni instead of your real name?”

She came right back. “Ronni is my real name.”

He shrugged. “I’m only saying, what’s wrong with Veronica?”

“Nothing. I just wanted to be called Ronni.”

“With an i.”

“Right.”

“But why?”

She let out a slightly irritated little grunt. “I thought I just told you. I needed…to redefine myself. On my own terms.”

“When you were Drew’s age, you thought of that? That you needed to redefine yourself?”

“Not consciously, no. But in retrospect, I know that’s what I was doing.”

“And that’s what Drew’s doing?”

“I think so, yes.”

Ryan let a moment pass before remarking, “You got a lot out of my son tonight, about how he feels and why he did what he did—which you really seem certain he won’t do again.”

“Is that an accusation?” She laughed then, a laugh with a purpose he easily recognized: to soften the challenge in her question. She definitely knew how to handle herself, this red-haired elf with the knowing eyes.

“No.” He looked at her levelly. “It was not an accusation. It was merely an observation. And a compliment.”

She thought that over, then said softly, “A compliment. Well, all right. Thank you, then.”

“You’re welcome.” He wanted to smile, but he didn’t. To smile right then would have felt like an admission of something—an admission he wasn’t quite ready to make. “You’re good with children. But then, I suppose it goes with the territory.”

She frowned—and then caught his meaning. “You mean, being a pediatrician?”

“Yes.”

“You know what? You’re right. I’m an expert on kids.” She flashed that dimple at him again. “So listen to the expert. I really think Drew just feels responsible. He wants to look out for the people he loves. And I don’t think that’s a bad thing at all.”

“He’s nine years old.” Ryan spoke more gruffly than he meant to. “It’s not his job to be responsible.”

Ryan himself had felt responsible from the age of four. He didn’t want that kind of crushing emotional burden laid on his children. Perhaps he wasn’t as involved with them as he should have been. But he provided well for them. There was no reason they shouldn’t feel safe and well cared for.

“Drew might only be nine,” she said gently. “But his age doesn’t change the way he feels. And as I keep telling you, I don’t think what happened tonight is anything to get too concerned about—unless it’s a part of a pattern.”

“No. I’m sure it’s not. My mother-in-law said it—tonight was completely unlike him.”

“Well, good then. As long as it doesn’t happen again, my advice is...” She paused. “Wait a minute. Do you even want my advice?”

“That’s why I asked you in here.” Or at least, a voice in the back of his mind whispered, it was the reason I gave myself for asking you in here....

She leaned toward him once more. “All right, then. My expert advice is to talk it over with him—and then let it go.”

He couldn’t hold back any longer. He let himself smile. “All right. I’ll do that.” She smiled in return. He looked at her wide mouth, at that dimple. She had a true redhead’s skin—pale, creamy pink, with light freckles dusting her brow and the bridge of her nose. She really did look so young, especially right now with her face bare of makeup, still damp from the rain.

He was staring again. And he shouldn’t be.

Just as he shouldn’t be thinking how cute she was. Shouldn’t be thinking that maybe he’d had more than goodwill on his mind when he’d offered her the guest house for a month.

At the time, right after Marty Heber had introduced them, when she’d mentioned her housing problems, he’d told himself that it never hurt to do favors for other professionals in the medical community. A lot of his job was about raising funds—and funds were always easier to come by when a man had the sense to hold out a helping hand at every opportunity.

Besides, he had reasoned, she would present no inconvenience to himself or his family. The guest house had its own separate access and its own small yard. Other than the occasional polite wave when they met in passing, he’d foreseen no other contact between them.

Yet here they were, on her first night in the little house, sitting across from each other in their pajamas, discussing the uncharacteristic actions of his older son.

And here he was, staring too much. Thinking that he could sit here for a long, long time, just looking at her, just watching her smile.

Dr. Powers must have decided he’d gaped at her long enough. She started to reach for her flashlight.

And he realized he wasn’t going to let her go. Not yet. He said, “You’re finding everything in order, then? Over at the little house.”

She left the flashlight where it was. “Yes. It’s lovely. Thank you for offering it to me.”

“No problem. No problem at all.”

“Good. Well then, I—”

“Tell me more.”

“Excuse me?”

“About Ronni. About how she’s different from Veronica.”

She laughed, a slightly nervous sound. “Oh, come on. It’s very late and I should—”

“I’m interested. I really am. And besides, it’s raining hard out there. Too hard. You can’t leave yet.”

“I can’t?”

“No. You have to wait till it eases up.”

She was watching him doubtfully. “What if it doesn’t ease up?”

“It will. Eventually. And I honestly do want to know all about why you changed your name.”

“You’re serious?”

“I am.” He leaned forward a little. “Come on. The difference between Ronni and Veronica.”

She hesitated—and then she confessed, “Veronica is... a little shy.”

“Shy?” He made the word an encouragement.

And she volunteered a little more. “Veronica lacks confidence. She... worries too much.”

“You were like that? As a young child?”

She tipped her chin at a defiant angle. “Yes. But I got over it.”

“By changing your name?”

“No, the name was just the outward manifestation of the change.”

“Sounds very deep.”

“You asked.”

They laughed together then. And she challenged, “What about you? Didn’t you ever want to change your name, or change something about yourself?”

“Now you’ve got me thinking about it, I believe at one point I really wished my name was Bud.” He pretended to glower at her. “Don’t laugh. When you’re in fifth grade, Bud can sound like the name of a really manly kind of dude.”

“So Ryan wasn’t manly enough?”

“I’ve learned to live with it.”

“Good. I like it a lot better than Bud.”

“Then I think I’ll go ahead and keep it... as long as you like it.”

She blinked—and her expression turned wary. Her hand started edging toward the flashlight again.

Before she could touch it, he commanded, “Forget it. Stay here. It’s still raining hard.”

“But I—”

“Uh-uh. Stay here.” He glanced around at all the gold-tooled leather volumes that lined the walls. “This is a comfortable room. You said so yourself. We might even get a little reading done.”

“Great idea. Two strangers. Reading in your study in their pajamas. In the middle of the night.”

“We’re not strangers. We’re neighbors, remember?”

“Oh, that’s right. Neighbors.”

“And I’ve just shared with you my deepest personal secret.”

“You have?”

“Yes. That once I wished my name was Bud—and now you should reveal something about yourself.”

“I already did, remember? Ronni and Veronica? Why I changed my name?”

“I remember. And what I meant was, you should reveal something more.”

“Like what?”

“How about telling me why you went into pediatrics?”

She didn’t have to stop and think about that. “The usual reason. I like kids.”

“As opposed to adults?”

“Not as opposed to. It’s a preference. Children are so... naturally optimistic. I like their sense of wonder, and their simplicity. And they are incredibly resilient.”

“Which means fewer of them die on you.”

It was a hard way of putting it, but she didn’t argue with his assessment. “That’s right—and now it’s your turn. What made you choose hospital administration, of all things?”

“I like being in control.”

She made a face at that. “And that’s all?”

“I like working with people. I enjoy organizing projects, seeing things through from conception to completion.”

“You mean you like running things.”

“That’s right. Is there something wrong with that?”

“Not a thing.” She grinned.

A moment passed where the only sound was the rain outside.

He saw her glance at that flashlight, so he asked her another question about her work.

She sat back, getting more comfortable. And for a while, they talked about their jobs, the challenges and the rewards.

Eventually, she got up. He didn’t try to stop her, since she didn’t reach for the flashlight first. She went over to the credenza to look at the family photos there. One by one, she picked up the pictures, studied them, then set them down.

When she came to a studio shot of Patricia, she asked, “Your wife?”

He nodded. “It’s been a little over two years since she died. Acute myelogenous leukemia.”

In her eyes, he saw a doctor’s understanding of the words: cancer of the white blood cells, starting in the bone marrow, multiplying swiftly until they disrupted the production of normal blood cells. And then moving out, into the bloodstream, invading organs and tissues, especially the spleen and the liver.

“We thought she had a bad case of the flu. Not four months later, she was dead. It was...hard on all of us. And on Andrew—I mean, Drew—particularly, I think. He was seven, old enough to understand what was going on a little better than Lisbeth and Griffin could, old enough to have some idea that he was actually losing his mother, to know that when she died, she really wasn’t coming back.”

Ronni made a low, musing sound in her throat. There was a world of understanding in that sound. And sadness. Very carefully, she set the picture of Patricia in its place with the others. She returned to her chair, but then didn’t sit down in it.

“I should—”

He put up a hand. “Hear that? Still raining...”

“It may never stop.”

“It’ll stop. Eventually.”

They shared a long look, at the end of which she dropped into the chair again. “So what now? Should I choose a book to read?”

He considered, then replied, “No. You should tell me what movies you like.”

And she did. She liked comedies.

He preferred action-adventure, and said so.

They moved on to favorite foods and dream vacation spots. To the schools they’d each attended, to the professors they each remembered.

She talked about med school, and how she didn’t believe she’d ever slept more than two hours at a stretch through the whole of her residency.

Finally, they got onto the subject of the things that really bugged them.

“Price stickers that won’t come off,” she said.

He opted for “Voice mail. I really hate voice mail. It’s just another excuse for people not to answer their phones.”

“But I bet you have voice mail.”

He had no defense against that. “Guilty as charged.”

The rain was still drumming away when she glanced at the clock on the bookcase near the window. “Omigod. It’s 4:00 a.m.”

It couldn’t be 4:00 a.m. But it was.

And still, he wanted her to stay. “Listen. Hear that rain? You can’t leave yet. You need to give yourself a little more time, see if it slows down some before you slog back across the yard.”

“I’ve already been here for two hours.”

“And maybe you’ll just have to stay for two more.”

“Right. And then I might as well just stay for breakfast....”

“Why not?”

“Because...”

“Because why?”

Ronni stared at him. There were surely a hundred reasons why she should leave now, why she should have left a long time ago. She just couldn’t think of one.

She cut her eyes away from him. Had two hours really passed since she’d entered this room? It didn’t seem possible. He had started her talking and then...time had just melted away.

“Come on,” he coaxed some more. “Stay. Just a little while.” She looked right at him again. He smiled. He had the kind of smile that seemed unwilling, as if he didn’t do it often—which made it special, made her feel special.

Ronni had heard it said that Ryan Malone could get money out of a stone. He’d spearheaded the plan to raise millions so that Honeygrove Memorial could add on a much-needed new wing. The new wing was under construction, scheduled to open in September, just eight months away.

Everyone marveled at him, wondered how he’d done it. But looking into his eyes right then, Dr. Ronni Powers understood the mystery completely. The man possessed a commanding presence, a natural reserve—and a reluctant knock-’em-dead smile. An unbeatable combination, whether it came to convincing wealthy donors to put their money in his hands—or coaxing a woman to stay up all night talking about everything from the tragic death of his beautiful wife to why she preferred the name Ronni over Veronica.

Say you have to go, and say it now, her wiser self insisted. But when she opened her mouth, what came out was “Well, maybe I could—”

“Oh! Ryan. I never imagined the doctor would still be here.”

The mother-in-law to the rescue, Ronni thought. The woman was standing in the doorway to the entry hall, clutching her robe at the neck and squinting as if she’d just been awakened from a sound sleep—which she probably had.

“I woke up and thought I heard voices, so I came down to check. I...I do hope I’m not interrupting anything.”

Ronni scooped up her flashlight and started toward the door and the woman standing there. “I was just leaving.”

“Well, I’d imagine. It is so late.”

“Wait.” Ryan Malone stood from his swivel chair. “I’ll walk you back across the yard.”

The mother-in-law piped right up. “Ryan. It’s pouring out there.”

“She’s right,” Ronni agreed quickly. “No reason for both of us to get soaked.”

“I’ll walk you back,” he said again, his tone allowing no room for argument. “Let me grab an umbrella.” He came out from behind the desk and walked between the two women, commanding over his shoulder as he went out the door, “Lily, you go on back to bed.”

Five minutes later, Ryan and Ronni stood before the French doors that led to the guest house bedroom. She cast a rueful glance down at his feet. “Now your slippers are ruined, too, just like your son’s.”

“They’ll dry out.” The rain poured off the overhang above them and landed hard on his umbrella, flooding off the back side, splashing the slippers in question, soaking his pajamas to mid-calf.

She looked up at the umbrella, at the rain coming off it in sheets. “Don’t you just love Oregon? If it isn’t raining, it’s getting ready to rain—but why am I complaining? I did my residency in Seattle, did I tell you? It was even worse there.”

“And here,” he reminded her, “we actually get sun in the summer. And then there’s the salmon fishing. And the gorgeous, rugged Pacific shoreline less than two hours’ drive away.”

“And the tulips in the spring, miles and miles of them spread across the valley floor...” She laughed, a breathless little laugh. And then the laugh trailed off. “I...” She didn’t know what to say next, he could see that in her soft green eyes. At last, she continued shyly, “Thank you for...”

He helped her out. “Keeping you up all night?”

“Yes. And not only that. For walking me back here. For being so...gallant.”

“Gallant,” he said, rather idiotically. “That’s me.”

“Well, Mr. Malone, I—”

“Don’t you think we’ve reached the point where you can call me Ryan?”

She hesitated, then surrendered. “All right. Ryan. And you’ll call me Ronni.”

He already had called her Ronni. Repeatedly. In his mind, anyway. But if she wanted to think he’d been waiting for permission, that was just fine with him. “It’s a deal.”

Her hair looked so bright and alive. He wanted to touch it, to rub it between his fingers and feel the wetness of the rain in it. He wanted to bend down and bury his face in it, to let that faint, seductive perfume of hers invade all his senses. Then he wanted to kiss her.

Slowly and thoroughly.

She said, “Well. Good night—Ryan.”

He had to step back so she could open the door. She slipped in with a wave of her flashlight.

“Goodnight, Ronni,” he whispered as she pulled the door closed. It took him a minute to remember to leave. He stood there, the rain thudding on his umbrella, his shoes and pajama legs soaked clean through, looking in at her as she gave another quick wave and began shutting the curtains, first the filmy ones and then the outer drapes, too.

Finally, when it became utterly preposterous for him to stand there one second longer staring at a glass door and drawn curtains, he made himself turn and stride swiftly away toward the gate to the drive.

## Chapter Three

Back in the main house, Ryan reset the alarm that his son had left disengaged. Then he climbed the stairs to his own bedroom, changed into dry pajamas and tried to sleep. But he couldn't. He felt too edgy. Too...energized, in spite of the fact that he'd only slept for a couple of hours before Ronni and his son had disturbed him.

At a little before five, he threw back the covers and got out of bed. He found another pair of slippers and a second robe and then didn't know what to do with himself.

He decided to check on his children.

Both of the younger ones were still sound asleep. Lisbeth was wrapped up tight in her blankets, only her button nose peeking out. Griffin had kicked the covers down and then curled himself into a ball against the nighttime chill.

Looking down at him, Ryan thought of Tanner.

Tanner, his younger brother. Tanner used to kick the covers down on winter nights sometimes. Before Tanner was five, they were separated for the first time. But during that initial year and a half after they lost their parents, they'd slept in narrow beds, side by side, in the state home. And when Tanner would kick his covers down, it was easy for Ryan to slide from his own bed and cover him back up again.

Carefully, so as not to wake him, Ryan pulled the covers close around his four-year-old son. Griffin let out a small sigh, his little body relaxing as the blankets banished the cold.

Ryan peeked in on Andrew—correction: Drew—last. He turned the doorknob slowly and pushed the door open with great care. Once he'd slid inside the room, he closed the door without letting the latch hook, to avoid the small click that might have disturbed a light sleeper.

He was halfway across the floor when Drew sat up in bed. "Dad?"

All he could think to whisper was a rebuke. "You should be asleep."

"Dad, I'm sorry. About what I did."

Ryan sat on the side of the bed and looked at his son through the predawn darkness. He was thinking that he should spend more time with him, and that he really ought to say something meaningful and profound right now. But all he could think of was "It's okay—as long as you don't do it again."

"I won't."

"Well, all right."

"Ronni wasn't mad. She's nice."

Ryan felt a thoroughly witless smile try to pull at the corners of his mouth. "You like her, huh?"

"Yeah."

"I like her, too." A lot.

"Dad?"

"What?"

"You can go back to bed now. Everyone's safe."

Ryan still felt as if he should say something. Perhaps about Patricia. About what his son had lost, what they had all lost. The one who tied everything together, the unifying thread.

"Drew, I..." What? I'm sorry your mom is dead.

Sorry I'm not a better father.

Sorry the right words won't come...

So many damn things to be sorry about.

He stood. "Lie down, now. Go on back to sleep."

Obediently, Drew stretched out again and pulled his covers up under his chin. Ryan started for the door.

“Dad?”

“What?”

“You talked to Ronni about me, didn’t you? She told you to call me Drew.” Ryan hesitated before answering, long enough that Drew said, “It’s okay with me, Dad. If you talked to her.”

“Yes. I talked to her. Now, go to sleep. Pizza Pete’s tomorrow.”

“With Uncle Tanner?”

“That’s right.”

Ryan’s mother-in-law tapped at the French doors to the guest house the next day at noon.

Ronni looked up from the open box of jeans and heavy sweaters she’d just set on the bed. The curtains were drawn back, letting in the thin gray light of a cloudy—but so far rainless—day. The mother-in-law held up two foil-covered plates, one in each hand. She also had Ronni’s anorak slung over her shoulder. Ronni went and opened the door.

“I didn’t see you leave this morning, so I thought that just maybe, since it’s Sunday, you might be taking the day to unpack.”

Stepping back, Ronni gestured her in and closed the door behind her.

“It looks like you’re making headway,” the woman said.

Ronni cast a glance at the box on the bed. “There’s really not that much to deal with. I put most of my things in storage for the month.”

“Ah. Until your own home is ready...”

“Yes.”

“I’ll bet you’re really looking forward to that.”

“Yes. Yes, I am.” They smiled at each other, rather forced smiles, Ronni thought. She reached for the anorak. “Here. Let me take that.”

“Oh. Certainly.” Ronni slid the weatherproof shell off of the other woman’s shoulder, then turned and tossed it on a chair. That accomplished, she turned back to her guest. “Mrs....”

“It’s Underhill. But please. Call me Lily.”

“And I’m just Ronni.”

“Good enough. Ronni.” The woman hefted the plates again. “I was putting my own lunch together and it occurred to me that maybe you might enjoy a little break yourself.”

“That’s thoughtful of you.”

“Oh, it’s nothing.”

They smiled at each other some more. Ronni felt a little like an interviewee at that moment. An interviewee for a job that really didn’t exist—which would make Lily the employer. An employer determined to conduct a pleasant interview, no matter that she had no intention of hiring anyone.

Well. Nothing to do but get the interview over with. “Let’s go on into the kitchen.”

“Good idea.”

In the kitchen, at the cute round pine table with its pedestal base, Lily took the foil off the plates, revealing a pair of sandwiches cut in half diagonally. Matching mounds of pasta salad sat neatly between the halves.

“This looks good,” Ronni said.

“It’s roast beef. With just a touch of horseradish sauce. I hope you’re not a vegetarian.”

“No. Roast beef is great.”

“And horseradish?”

“I love horseradish.”

“Well, then, this should work out fine.”

They used paper towels for napkins. Ronni apologized. “I’m afraid I haven’t had a chance to get to the store yet.”

“Oh, I know you must be busy. A doctor’s schedule is just killing, isn’t it?”

“It could be worse. I do have my Sundays, now I’m in private practice. And today, I’m not even on call. How about coffee? I have that.”

“Just a glass of ice water.”

“Water, I’ve got.”

“And forks, for the pasta salad?”

“No problem. All the kitchen things were here when I got here.”

Lily sighed. “This little house. Always ready for visitors.” She went to a drawer and took out the flatware they needed.

They sat down and started to eat. The sandwich was good, the beef thin-sliced and tender. Ronni told Lily so.

Lily waved a hand. “Oh, it’s just a sandwich. But I must confess, I do love to cook. Patricia... that was my daughter, Ryan’s wife?” Ronni did not miss the slight emphasis on the word wife. “Patricia loved to cook, too.” Lily chuckled. “And she was much more self-disciplined than I am when it came to sampling what she cooked. I’m a size twelve now, myself. Have been for years and years. But my daughter...aside from her pregnancies, never in her life did she go above a size eight.” Lily’s eyes changed, lost their brightness. “And then, at the end, she was so thin.” Lily blinked and spoke flatly. “She died two years ago. Cancer, in case you hadn’t heard. It’s been...such a challenge, without her. For the children. For Ryan. For all of us.”

The usual condolences rose to Ronni’s lips. She held them back. It seemed the wrong moment for a kind cliché.

“You never met my daughter, did you?” It was almost an accusation.

“No. I did my residency up in Washington. And only moved here two and a half years ago. This is my first practice, with Marty, and with Randall Sheppard.”

Lily swept a hand out, indicating the whole of the cheerful, pretty room. “Patricia did all of this. Country French, she called it. She wanted the guest house to be cozy and casual. Blue-checked curtains for the kitchen. Blue willow plates on the plate rails.” Lily looked up at the rows of blue-and-white china plates that lined the narrow shelves above the cabinets. “And she did the main house, too. All of it. She chose everything, all by herself. She had a real sense for what makes a home an inviting place.”

“Yes,” Ronni said, for lack of something better. “The main house is quite beautiful.”

“But comfortable, too,” Lily said sharply. “A place where a family actually lives.” Lily’s eyes looked suspiciously moist.

Though the older woman’s mission here was painfully clear, Ronni couldn’t help but feel compassion for her. “You must miss her terribly.”

Lily drew in a long breath and smoothed the paper towel in her lap. “I...raised her alone, for the most part. Her father died when she was only two.”

“It sounds as if you did an excellent job. Of raising her, I mean.”

“I did my best. We were so close. I wanted so much for her. And she...lived all my dreams for her. For a while, at least, for as long as...she was with us. She was twenty-three when she married Ryan. Oh, you should have seen them on their wedding day. Patricia so fair, slender and tall. And Ryan beside her, dark and handsome, and proud. I knew from the first the kind of husband he would be. True and responsible. A good provider. Everything a woman could want.” She smiled then and leaned toward Ronni. “Good enough even for my precious daughter, if you know what I mean.”

Ronni’s smile didn’t feel forced at all this time. “I do.”

Lily pulled back. She seemed to draw into herself. “Listen to me. Rambling on. You’re—” a flash of bewilderment clouded her eyes “—a very easy person to talk to....”

For a few minutes, they were silent, each concentrating carefully on her meal.

Then Lily spoke again. “Ryan told me that you feel we shouldn’t be too concerned...about Andrew.”

“That’s true. I think your grandson is a great guy. And I really don’t believe he’ll be dropping in on me in the middle of the night again. But just in case, I did put that key away—the one he used to let himself in?”

“Good.” Lily sipped her ice water. “Andrew is a fine boy. A lot like his father, did you notice? So responsible—” she let out a small, self-conscious laugh “—most of the time, anyway.” She picked up her fork, then set it down without using it. “The truth is, Ryan’s the one I worry about. He works such long hours. But then you know how that is, don’t you? I imagine your schedule is pretty grueling, too....”

Oh, Lily, Ronni thought. I get the message. And I know that you’re right. Ryan and I are both way too busy to let anything get started between us.

Lily continued, “He hardly has time for the children at all.” Her smile was indulgent. “But he does try. He’s spending the afternoon with them today, as a matter of fact. It’s a family event. Ryan and the children—and Ryan’s brother, Tanner. They always go to Pizza Pete’s one Sunday a month.”

Ronni had heard of Pizza Pete’s. More than one of her small patients had raved about it. Besides the pizza its name promised, Pizza Pete’s provided carnival games, a video arcade and a number of other tempting amusements.

“Sounds like fun,” Ronni said. Then she heard herself offering, “Are you sure you wouldn’t like a cup of coffee, after all?”

“Oh, I shouldn’t. I know you want to get back to your unpacking....” Lily looked just a bit lost. And a little lonely, too.

Knowing she’d probably regret it, Ronni insisted, “Come on. Just one.”

“Well, all right. It is so nice to have another woman to talk to, for a change.”

Lily stayed for another half an hour, during which time she talked a lot more about Patricia, about what a darling child she’d been, and what a beautiful adolescent. About how she’d worked in an insurance office to help out while Ryan was getting his start.

“But then, of course, as soon as Ryan was on his feet financially, Patricia stayed home. She was just old-fashioned that way. She believed that being a wife and mother was a full-time job in itself, that her children needed her, every day, all day. That making a gracious home and providing tasty, nutritious meals for her family were very important, meaningful ways to spend her time.

“And she was such a tremendous benefit to Ryan in his work. They entertained a lot, especially in that last year or two before she became so ill, when he had become chief administrator at Memorial and he had a certain image to maintain. There were a number of important people he needed to get to know socially, in order to help raise the money for the new wing... you’ve heard about the new wing?”

Ronni made a noise in the affirmative.

Lily chattered on. “And did you know that Ryan’s brother, Tanner, is the general contractor for the entire project? We’re very proud of Tanner. He’s done so well for himself with his construction company. And the wing is moving right along. Maybe you haven’t had a chance to see it. I imagine your patients go to Children’s Hospital?”

Ronni nodded. “But I do drive by Memorial now and then. And every once in a while, I even drop in.”

“Drop in?”

“To do postnatal checkups of new patients. It looks very impressive—the new wing.”

“Yes. The work on the interior is just getting under way now. One hundred million dollars, it’s taking. From the Pembroke Fund. That was Ryan’s doing, of course, the funding. He was a Pembroke scholar in college, and that connection was helpful. And he did play a lot of racquetball with Axel Pembroke, the president of the Pembroke Foundation—still does play racquetball with him, as a matter of fact. Have you ever met Axel Pembroke? What a strange little man.” Lily shrugged. “But the one who controls the purse strings, the one who had to be dealt with. And Ryan did deal with him, and so effectively, too.

“And Patricia did her part, you can be certain. Such lovely dinner parties she gave, preparing everything herself, from the perfect food to the arrangement of the flowers. She just wouldn’t hire a caterer. But that was understandable. No one could put a party together the way Patricia could. And then, when everything was ready, she’d sweep her beautiful blond hair up into a simple twist, put on a little black dress and look as if she’d never lifted a finger to put the whole thing together. What a hostess she was. I actually believe Mr. Pembroke had something of a crush on her...”

When Lily finally ducked out the back door with her two empty plates and a jaunty last wave, Ronni was only too glad to see her go.

I can see it all now, she thought, as she pulled jeans and sweaters from the box on her bed. Every time I wave at Ryan in the driveway, Lily will come flying over armed with a pair of foil-covered lunches and an endless stream of stories about the irreplaceable Patricia, loving wife, doting mother and hostess extraordinaire.

Not that Ronni had any intention of trying to supplant such a paragon. No. Ronni had very distinct plans for her life.

Those plans did include a man, of course.

But not for a while yet. Not for a year or two, at least.

Right now, all her attention had to be strictly focused on establishing herself in her practice—and on her condo, her own home at last, to which she would be moving by the end of the month.

Lily could have saved that roast beef sandwich. Ronni wasn’t after Ryan Malone. Yes, he was attractive. Incredibly so. And it had been disconcertingly easy to stay up talking with him all night.

But it wasn’t going to go anywhere. The timing just wasn’t right.

“You’re looking way too serious today, big brother,” Tanner said. They were sitting at one of the picnic-style tables at Pizza Pete’s. Across the crowded room, Griffin and Lisbeth jumped around in a netted pit full of plastic balls as Andrew stood a few feet away, watching them.

Ryan grunted. “Just thinking. About Andrew—I mean, Drew. I’ve been instructed that it’s Drew from now on.”

“Instructed. By who?” With his left hand, Tanner picked up his jumbo-size plastic cup of Dr. Pepper.

Ryan watched his brother knock back a big gulp and then set the cup down. Tanner had the body of a linebacker, while Ryan was leaner and taller by a couple of inches. But they were both southpaws. And they both had the same blue eyes. Malone-blue, people who knew both brothers were always saying. Drew had the Malone eyes, too—and he was left-handed, as well.

“Something about my hand?” Tanner asked.

“What? No.”

“They call you the miracle man,” Tanner razzed. “You can charm dollar bills out of the trees. Real big on social skills, that’s what they say about you. But look at you now. Staring. Oblivious.”

“I said I’m just thinking.”

“Right. Come on. Who’s giving instructions to call Andrew Drew?”

Ryan drank, then set down his glass. “Drew himself. Several times, apparently. But I didn’t listen.”

“I can see we’re headed on a long trip here.”

“Trip?”

“Yeah. A guilt trip.”

“Very funny.”

“So what’s going on?”

Ryan glanced over at his children. The two younger ones were still rolling around in the ball pit and Drew remained on guard. It looked likely that Ryan and Tanner would have a few more minutes undisturbed.

“Did I tell you that there’s a woman staying in the guest house?”

Tanner leaned on the table and raised both eyebrows. “You’ve got my full attention. Go on.”

Ryan told him what had happened last night—a slightly edited version. He didn’t mention the part about how he and Ronni had sat in his study for two full hours talking about nothing in particular, or how he’d walked her back to the little house and then stood there in the driving rain staring at her closed door after she’d gone inside. “So I guess I’m a little worried about Drew,” he concluded. “That he’s...taking too much on himself, that he thinks he has to—”

Tanner didn’t let him finish. “Wait a minute.”

“What?”

“Give yourself a break here. The way it looks to me, his only problem is he’s just like his dad. He wants to take care of his family. There are a lot worse things in this world than that.”

“Well, I know, but—”

“What I want to know more about is the kindhearted, good-looking pediatrician with the red hair.”

Ryan tried not to wince. “Did I say she was a redhead?”

“Yep.”

Ryan shifted on the picnic bench. Pizza Pete ought to think about getting some cushions for the damn things. “There’s nothing more to tell. I liked her. She was very...understanding about the whole episode.”

Tanner wasn’t fooled. “Right. Understanding.”

“Don’t look at me like that.”

“You’re interested.”

“All right. Maybe I am. But where can it go? I work a sixty-hour week, and I’m always thinking I should spend more time with the kids.”

“It doesn’t have to go anywhere. You ask her out, that’s all. If you have a good time, you ask her out again.”

“Right, but—”

“I’ve got it. The Heart Ball.” The Heart Ball was a major annual fund-raiser put on by the Friends of Memorial. “It’s two weeks away. Have you got a date?”

“No, but—”

“You are going, aren’t you?”

“Of course.” He was on the agenda, as a matter of fact, to give a little look-how-far-we’ve-come speech about the new wing.

“So ask her,” Tanner said. “Do it today. I want a commitment, and I want one before our family-size pepperoni pizza arrives.”

Ryan decided he’d better make a joke of this. “Commitment? That’s an interesting word, coming from you.”

Tanner’s eyes went dark as the middle of the night. And Ryan felt like a jerk. Tanner had always played the field. And Ryan had always ribbed him about it, just as Tanner always gave him a hard time for being a one-woman man.

But commitment jokes were in bad taste these days. Tanner had a big problem concerning the issue of commitment. He was dealing with it as best he could, but the whole situation had him tied in knots.

“Tanner, I—”

Tanner shook his head. “Don’t apologize. Sometimes, the truth hurts. That doesn’t mean you can’t tell it.” He drummed up his best give-’em-hell grin. “Besides, I know your tricks. And they’re not gonna work this time. We’re talking about you right now. You and a cute little redheaded M.D. And that date you really do need for the Heart Ball.”

“I’ll think about it.”

“Don’t think, act.”

“Tanner. I’ll think about it.”

“Well then, think fast. Here comes our pizza. And don’t look now, but three hungry kids are headed this way.”

Ryan did think about it. For the rest of the afternoon and into the evening. He thought about how he had no business getting involved with anyone right now. He thought about how, if he did get involved with someone, she ought to be like Patricia, a woman ready, willing and eager to do big-time duty on the home front.

And he thought how he’d met a number of women in the past year or so who would have been happy to try to fill Patricia’s shoes, lovely, graceful women who had good educations and undemanding careers. Women who would have done their best to mother his children and take care of him, too.

He’d had zero interest in the subtle overtures of those women.

He also thought about what Tanner had said.

It doesn’t have to go anywhere. You ask her out. If you have a good time, you ask her out again....

That night, once the kids were finally settled into bed and Lily had retired to her room, Ryan let himself out the back door, sprinted down the driveway and around to the front porch of the little house.

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