



*Medical  
Romance*<sup>TM</sup>

**DIANNE DRAKE**

His Motherless

Little Twins



Mills & Boon Medical

Dianne Drake

**His Motherless Little Twins**

«HarperCollins»

## **Drake D.**

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— (Mills & Boon Medical)

Nurse Dinah Corday has temporarily escaped to the remote calm of White Elk. But a warm welcome is the last thing she receives from the town's paediatric surgeon! Eric Ramsey couldn't be more aloof – or more good-looking! Yet Dinah senses hidden depths beneath the widower's cool exterior, and, together with his adorable twin daughters, he soon gets under her skin...

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**His Motherless Little Twins**  
**Dianne Drake**



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## CHAPTER ONE

“I’ll be there in thirty or forty minutes, and don’t even think about going out on your own. It’s too dangerous.” Dinah Corday had been studying the *Welcome to White Elk* sign for the past ten minutes, creeping inch by inch down the main road into the little village, along with the rest of the jammed-up traffic. Right this very moment, her heavily pregnant sister, Angela, was on the verge of braving the spring storm to go and stay with a pregnant friend, and Dinah wanted to get to her before she did that. But the rising waters weren’t being accommodating. Nothing was. “Just don’t do it, OK? I know you want to be with her, and I’m doing the best I can to get to you, but it’s crazy out here. So just be patient.” Easy to say, not so easy to do under the circumstances.

Glancing up at the three mountain peaks, Dinah sighed impatiently. The mountains looming over the valley, affectionately called the older, middle, and younger Sisters, were said to have magical powers. According to Ute Indian legend, they protected those in their shadow, and while she’d never given much credence to mystical things, she hoped that this one was true. Because Angela would *absolutely* go out in this flood to help a friend as surely as Dinah was stuck in the slow lane, getting more frustrated with each passing second.

Ahead, she saw people on the street running about in a congested knot like ants scattering after the demise of their anthill. Traffic was lined up bumper to bumper. Detour signs were being erected on the streets. Streetlights weren’t working. And the wind was blowing so hard the water pooling in the gutters was flowing in small waves. “Promise me you’re not going anywhere until I get there to take you. You’re too far along...” A smile found its way to Dinah’s lips. She was going to be an aunt in a little while. That was nice. Their family needed something good to happen to them for a change. It was overdue. “Just, please, stay there and take care of yourself. I’m on my way.”

Angela assured her she wouldn’t budge, but that didn’t relieve Dinah’s anxiety. Of course, that anxiety was pelting her from so many different directions these days, she feared turning around lest something else came hurtling at her. Today, though, her mind was on Angela. Nothing else mattered.

Except the traffic. That mattered, and she wanted to honk her horn, pound on her horn actually, but what good would it do? She wasn’t the only one stuck in this mess and, most likely, everyone else had somewhere important they needed to be, too. So as the radio weather forecaster was predicting more rain, she crept forward like the rest of the people were doing, one car length at a time, while the waters outside were getting deeper.

After listening to another ten mind-numbing minutes of dire weather warnings, Dinah finally turned off the news station and dialed into a soft jazz station then leaned her head against the headrest, hoping to relax. She needed to be calm, not agitated, when she got to Angela. “Calm...” she muttered, while she studied the raindrops sliding their own little paths over her windshield. Some hit and trailed down in a straight line, never veering off an imaginary course, while others meandered, winding in and out, joining with other raindrops to make fatter, more interesting trails. Yet some hit, bounced, and seemed to disappear before they had their chance to slide downward to a new, unknown destiny. That was her, she thought. Hitting, bouncing, disappearing from view before her trail carried her to where she wanted to be. Hers had always been a destiny of chance, or one out of her control, like the raindrops that splashed themselves into oblivion even with so many interesting choices ahead.

Raindrops and unknown destinies...

Well, so much for clearing her mind and relaxing, she thought, trying hard to let the mellow wail of the tenor sax coming from the radio lull her into a daze. Dulcet tones, honey notes, all slipping down into her soul. This was a good day to be lulled. But as she willed the easy mood on herself, trying to force calm to her soul for Angela’s sake, a thud on her bumper from the vehicle behind cut off all hope of calmness, sending her car pitching straight into the bumper of the car ahead. Not a hard impact but definitely a jarring one.

Twisting, Dinah looked into her rearview mirror to catch a glimpse of the perpetrator, but all she saw was an up-close image of a truck's shiny silver bumper...and the truck was already backing away from her. Right off, she opened the car door, ready to hop out regardless of the rain and see to the damage, but the man behind her beat her to it by stopping then jumping from his truck and running forward. He was a big, imposing man in a bright yellow slicker, the dress of choice for most of the people she'd seen here so far. Except he didn't come forward to her door like she'd expected he would. Rather, he got as far as the front of his truck, surveyed his bumper then hers, and that was as far as he went.

"Any damage?" she shouted, wishing she had one of those yellow rain slickers.

If he answered, she didn't hear him. But the rain was noisy, so were the road noises. So, after she'd fumbled an umbrella from the back of her car and opened it overhead, she tried calling to him again. "You're not hurt, are you?"

He didn't answer this time, either, so she tried once more. Admittedly, getting a little perturbed. "Did it cause any damage?"

His only response was a wave on his way back to his truck...waving with one hand, clutching a cell phone to his ear in the other. "I can't stay," he yelled, and she did hear that. "Jason, the man in the car ahead of you, said he'll take care of it, and..." The rest of his words were gobbled in a clap of thunder, and by the time it had rumbled on through, he'd jumped back into his truck and pulled around, stopping briefly at the car in front of her.

"You arrogant..." she yelled, slamming shut her car door and marching straight forward to catch him before he sped away altogether. She didn't need this today. Just didn't need this. And now, with this added delay, she was even more worried that Angela would try to get out in this storm on her own.

"You OK, Jason?" the man from the truck called to the man in the car she'd hit, who was beginning to climb out of his front seat. He, too, was dressed in a yellow slicker.

"What about me?" Dinah yelled, catching up to his truck and running to the window on the driver's side. "Don't you want to know how I am?"

The man who'd hit her did turn around in his seat, giving her a long, hard stare. "You're not hurt, are you?"

"No, but—"

"I'm sorry," he said. "But I can't deal with this right now. Like I told you before, Jason will take care of the details because I've got an emergency, and I've got to get back." He paused then smiled. "I'm really sorry about this."

He seemed sincere enough, his smile was...nice. But she didn't trust nice smiles, and sincerity was easy to fake. If anybody knew those two things, she did! Yet as she was about to shut out that nice smile altogether and demand he step out of the truck regardless of what his other obligations were, a gust of wind caught her umbrella, turned it inside out, then ripped it from her hands. Unfortunately, it tumbled end over end across the road, leaving Dinah standing in water up to her ankles, with her long, auburn hair soaked and shaggy, and nothing to protect her. She was barely even noticing the rain, though, because at this point she was too angry. "You can't just leave the scene," she yelled at the man. He was going to leave, though. That's what men did. They left. And she couldn't stop him. Couldn't stop any of them. Father, husband, fiancé, brother-in-law, strangers...all alike.

Before the stranger pulled away, though, he handed an umbrella out the window to her. "I'm sorry, but I can't deal with this right now. So, please, step back. I don't want to splash you..." He took a good look at her waterlogged state and grimaced visibly. "Don't want to get you any wetter than you are."

Well, she could step in front of his truck and stop him, or grab hold of the handle on his door. But there was something in his eyes...a look she knew. Not a malicious one, not even a little mean-spirited. For an instant, something so deep there grabbed hold of her senses, willed her to step back. So she did, immediately regretting that, once again, she'd let herself be taken advantage of by a

goodlooker. In her life, trust amounted to betrayal. She almost counted on it, and that was a huge regret, too.

The proof of her regret was in the blow of black smoke from his tailpipe as he sped away from her, while she remained standing in the downpour, watching him, gripping his umbrella in a stranglehold, getting wetter and wetter.

“I’m glad Gabby has been such a good friend to you, especially since I haven’t been of much use these past months,” Dinah said to her sister.

Angela laid her hand on Dinah’s. “Not your fault. We all have our problems to solve. And I’ve been doing fine here on my own. Good friends, good care. Nothing to worry about.”

Except a cheating ski-bum of a husband who’d run away from Angela the moment he’d heard the word *pregnant*. “I’m your sister and I’m entitled to worry anyway. But like I said, I’m glad you’ve had Gabby here to help you get through.” Dr. Gabrielle Evans. Angela’s friend, and her doctor, who was on the verge of giving birth right this very moment, fully in labor. “So, how are you doing, Gabby?”

Gabby nodded, panted, grasped the edge of the bed while Angela wiped her forehead with a cool, damp cloth and Dinah positioned herself to see how dilated Gabby was. Dinah had been a pediatric nurse, but she’d had good experience in obstetrics. While there was supposed to be a doctor on the way to deliver this baby, and since taking Gabby to the hospital in this weather in her condition would be a crazy thing to do, Gabby was ready to deliver this baby right here, right now, doctor or not. And it was beginning to look like Dinah might have to come out of her self-imposed retirement to bring the baby that Gabby was already calling Bryce into the world.

“Can I do anything else?” Angela asked.

“Just sit down and relax. I don’t want you getting worked up and going into labor yourself,” Dinah said, truly concerned about the effect the strain of all this excitement could have on her sister. Two women on the verge of motherhood. She envied them. Once, a long time ago, she’d thought that’s what she’d wanted most in the world. But the marriage hadn’t worked out, and she’d gone in another direction with her life. Then, years later, along had come Charles, the man she’d hoped would be...well, it didn’t matter what she’d hoped. She’d been wrong about him, too.

Still, with all these babies coming into the world...“Relax, Gabby,” she said, as another contraction gripped the woman. “I think this is going to be over with pretty soon. Bryce is in position and he’s about to make his grand entrance.”

“I hope so,” Gabby forced out as the contraction came to an end. “Because I’m tired of this part of it.”

Dinah laughed. “But you’ll be a much better obstetrician for having gone through it yourself. At least, that sounds good in theory, doesn’t it? And now, when you tell your patients you understand, you really will.” She laid a hand on Gabrielle’s belly, felt the amazing stirring of a new life just under her fingertips. Suddenly, she was glad she was there, being part of it.

“Angela tells me you’ve quit nursing,” Gabby gasped. She was finally relaxing back into her pillows. But not for long, if her progression towards the birth remained this consistent.

“For now. I came here to cook for Angela while she’s off on maternity leave, then I’ll decide what I want to do after that.” Dinah’s sister was the executive chef at the lodge on one of the Three Sisters and, like Angela, Dinah had also gone to culinary school. But she’d quit part way through to go into nursing. Culinary school, like her first marriage, had been a hasty decision, and not the right one. But nursing...she loved it. Missed it already.

Right now, though, with so many unresolved issues, she had to step away. The reasons were complicated, and she didn’t trust herself to make the right decision while she was still feeling the sting.

“I’m glad you can deliver a baby, because I didn’t want to do this by myself,” Gabby said, as another contraction hit. “And I was afraid I might have to.”

The contractions were coming fast. In the hour they'd been there they'd sped up considerably, telling Dinah that Gabby was in an unusually fast labor. It was time to get her in position and hope the doctor arrived in time, that the floodwaters outside wouldn't hold him back. Or do what she had to do if he couldn't get through.

Funny, how she'd quit nursing, not sure she could ever go back to it. Yet here she was, doing what she'd promised herself she wouldn't do again until her life was in better control, if that were even possible now, and wondering if she'd made yet another bad choice by leaving the thing she most loved doing.

Which was the reason she'd had to leave. Because these days she was just...confused.

And sad.

Dr. Neil Ranard arrived in time to deliver Gabby's baby, and the first thing Dinah saw was just how much he loved Gabby. Angela had already told her that the baby wasn't Neil's, but deep down Dinah believed that Neil would raise that baby, because the look she saw in Gabby's eyes the instant Neil ran into the room said everything. It was nice. But what was even nicer was seeing that it was out there...true love did exist. Maybe not for her. But it was nice for others who were luckier than she was. Or smarter.

"Just one more push, Gabrielle," Neil urged. "That's all I need. One more push and you're a mother!"

Dinah propped Gabby up into position, enjoying what she was doing, even if it was a little outside her nursing expertise. It was good to be useful again, good to help. For a while, the ache of missing it was eased a little.

"Bear down, Gabrielle, and push," Neil said.

"I am," Gabby gasped.

"Breathe," Dinah said. "Come on, Gabby. Take a deep breath, then push that baby out."

"He's waiting for you, Gabrielle," Neil prompted. "Bryce Evans is waiting for you."

Gabby bore down for a final time as Dinah helped her through her final contraction. Then, suddenly, it was over. Bryce was here. But...dear God, he was blue. Dinah saw it immediately, felt her stomach roil, and exchanged a quick look with Dr. Ranard. A look that said everything.

"Let me see him," Gabby said to the deathly quiet room. "My baby..."

Dinah eased Gabby back into a flat position on the bed, propped a pillow under her head then ran to the end of the bed to see what she could do for Dr. Ranard. Or for the limp little newborn in his hands.

"He isn't crying," Gabby gasped, fighting to sit back up. Thrashing wildly, she was trying to toss off the sheets covering her. "Neil, he isn't crying! What's wrong?"

"Take care of Gabrielle," Neil whispered to Dinah. "Don't let her see..."

Even before he'd finished speaking, Dinah positioned herself between Neil and the bed, so Gabby couldn't see Neil's resuscitation attempts and the next minutes went by in a blur as she tried to calm the grief-stricken mother and help the doctor with the baby.

"Did he aspirate?" Dinah whispered to Neil, although she didn't believe so. As a pediatric trauma nurse, her first guess was something cardiac, or related to the lungs, judging from the baby's listlessness and bluish pallor.

Not again! Dear God, not again! *How could she face another newborn dying?* Bryce had a chance to survive, Molly never had. She had to stay focused on that! *This* was the baby who needed her now. This was Bryce Evans, not Molly Collins.

"Is he alive?" Gabby screamed. "Neil, you've got to tell me, is he alive? I've got to get to my baby." She launched herself up, but Dinah stopped her, applying a firm hand into her shoulder.

More minutes ticked by, and Bryce still struggled. Outside, the floods were getting worse. The hospital had promised to send a medic with supplies, but each second seemed like an hour—a frantic, futile hour in which they were losing a battle. All the while, Dinah was forced to physically restrain

Gabby from flying across the room to Neil. Neil didn't need that. Neither did the baby, who was not improving. She hated doing that. Hated it more than anyone could imagine, because she knew how it felt. Knew how Gabby felt, needing desperately to get there and being pulled away against her will.

Then suddenly Bryce quit breathing and Dinah was thrown back to that day when baby Molly had died in her arms. Regret, instant and brutal, assaulted her, causing a feeling of panic to rise up and strangle the breath from her. For a moment she was back there in that hospital room, struggling and crying like Gabby was, begging them not to take Molly away from her.

"Is that CPR?" Gabby cried, snapping Dinah back into the moment. "Is Neil giving him CPR?"

More minutes blurred in the battle as Bryce began showing signs of reviving. Bryce had Neil to fight for him, and Neil loved him. That was so obvious. There'd been no one to care for Molly. No one had loved her. Except her. And in the end, that hadn't been enough.

Now the melancholia threatened to pull her under.

"You!"

The voice from the doorway startled Dinah from her thoughts of Molly, and she jumped. "You!" she snapped right back at him. Of all the people who could have come, it would be *him*, Mr Hit-and-Run himself. And he was standing there, holding out a pediatric oxygen mask.

Dinah yanked the mask from the man's hands, and rushed to put it on Bryce. Then the medic opened the oxygen tank valve once the mask was in place.

"It was a slight tap," he said. "No damage."

"And you didn't stop to see if you'd damaged my car, or injured me," Dinah snarled under her breath to keep her problem with this man quiet, as she pulled a pediatric IV needle from the bag of supplies he'd brought and prepared to insert it into the baby's thread-sized vein. It's what she did, no one had to tell her. No one had to help her. It's simply what she was trained to do, and did instinctively.

As she set about her work, she noticed that Bryce was already pinking up. Not enough to think he was out of danger, but enough to be encouraged.

"You take care of Gabby," the medic whispered to Neil. "She needs you right now, and I'll take care of the baby."

Neil handed off the responsibility without hesitation, and the two men exchanged quiet words for a moment. "Thanks, Eric," Neil finally said, then ran to Gabrielle.

"You're a doctor?" Dinah asked.

"Eric Ramsey, pediatric surgeon, with a secondary in trauma." He pulled a bag of fluid from his supplies and hooked it to the line once Dinah had inserted the IV catheter. Then he adjusted the drip of fluid into the baby's veins, and immediately listened to Bryce's chest.

The next few minutes they worked side by side in total silence, both doing what they knew needed to be done to stabilize their tiny patient.

"He's a fighter," Eric finally pronounced, turning around to Gabby. "We've got him as stabilized as we can, so now I need to get him to the hospital. But I want you to hold him first."

She took her baby, and the way she clung to him nearly broke Dinah's heart. No one had loved little Molly like that...someone should have. She couldn't bear watching, the memories were too painful and she had to turn away.

"I was in a hurry...emergency." Eric stepped up behind her. "Otherwise I wouldn't have driven off like that."

"What?" Dinah asked.

"The accident. I had an emergency. I'm sorry, but—"

"But we all do what we have to do, don't we?" she whispered. "It doesn't matter what we do to the people around us, as long as it's good for us. I get it. You don't need to apologize."

"Yes, I do." Eric took a step back, shook his head. "Look, Neil thinks Bryce's problem might be TGV." Transposition of the great vessels, where the two main arteries leaving the heart were reversed. Normally, blood from the heart's right ventricle was carried by the pulmonary artery to the lungs,

and blood from the left ventricle was taken by the aorta to the body. In the case of TGV, it was just the opposite, leaving the oxygenated blood meant to circulate through the body being pumped back into the lungs. “And at this point, I have no reason to disagree because the symptoms fit. Things may turn out differently once we get the baby—”

“You think it’s TGV, too?” Dinah’s mind raced through the procedures. There would be a first surgery, called a septostomy, to do an immediate, life-saving correction. In that, a hole was literally opened up to allow better flow of the blood. It was a temporary measure to be followed by another surgery to make the permanent repair. She’d treated babies who’d had the surgery, seen good outcomes, seen bad outcomes.

“You’ll drive.”

“Where?” she asked.

“To the hospital. You’ll drive, I’ll take care of the baby.”

The tension in the cab of the truck was so thick Dinah could have sliced through it with a scalpel. They’d been en route five minutes now, taking a back road that skirted the valley. It was muddy and slick, but it wasn’t washed out. And it was on higher ground, which was what made it a safer bet than taking the road down below the house, where the water was at least as high as the bottom of the truck door. Flash-flood warnings were out now, and all the lower roads were being closed. So she and Eric were driving along what amounted to little more than a fire trail, and Dinah was so nervous that her grip on the steering-wheel hurt. All the while, neither she nor Eric had spoken a word to each other since his initial instruction to her on getting to the hospital.

Yet in his defense, Eric was busy tending to Bryce, holding him in his lap and continually checking his pulse, his respiratory status, being so tender, so caring with him while she was fighting to stay straight and to avoid the bumps and ruts, most of which she couldn’t even see.

It crossed her mind that he was the doctor Molly should have had. He would have cared more than Charles had, even when hope had died. Charles, the man she’d almost married. How could she have been so wrong about him? Even thinking about it made her cringe.

Once or twice, Bryce let out a little cry then settled down again. And once or twice her heart lurched. Under the best of circumstances, this was a difficult situation. These *weren’t* the best of circumstances, and she fretted about the outcome every inch of the way to the hospital.

“Are you competent?” she finally asked, not at all sorry to be so blunt. Truth was, she wanted to hear his voice, feel some reassurance that he could handle this situation and make everything right for the baby.

“Competent at what?”

“Your medical skills. Are you a good doctor?”

“I’ve been told that’s the case.” He twisted slightly in his seat to look at her. “But, then, everyone is entitled to his, *or her*, opinion, I suppose.”

“I suppose,” Dinah muttered. Something about this man put her in a very bad mood. Something about every man had put her in a bad mood lately, but this one in particular made her shiver. Shiver with anger was what it was, which she didn’t like one little bit. Didn’t like any reaction in her caused by any man. And didn’t trust herself enough to know the distinctions.

“Are *you* competent?” he asked in return, the slightest trace of a smile crinkling his lips.

She was going to ignore that smile. Totally ignore it and pretend she hadn’t even seen it. “Competent at what?”

“Being a nurse.”

“I’m not a nurse.” Keeping her voice noncommittal wasn’t easy, but she did it, and did it so well she nearly believed her own words. Still, those words hurt, and the wound still bled. “I’m a cook. Here to take over for my sister when she’s on maternity leave.”

“A cook with good skills in labor and delivery, as well as CPR. And you did a mighty fine job of getting that IV needle into a newborn, which is not easy, especially when the newborn is so sick. So, did they teach you those things in culinary school?”

He was smiling fully now. The man actually had the audacity to sit there and smile at her. But she was still going to ignore it. Had to be impervious... Couldn't get distracted. “Did they teach you your bad manners in medical school?”

“If I apologized for the accident again, would that make things better between us?”

“Why do things have to be better between us?” she asked, then hastily added, “But you do owe me a sincere apology and not one that's meant only to get you away from me as quickly as possible.”

“Look, I told you I was in a hurry. I'm sorry I hit you, sorry I ran off and left you there, but in case you haven't noticed, the town is going crazy. We're flooding, the areas below us are submerging, the hospital is full of people with nowhere to go, some of them have injuries. I had to get to the emergency department, and stopping for something that amounted to nothing was a waste of my time.”

“And I thought White Elk was going to be civil,” she snapped. Gripping the steering-wheel more from anger than nervousness, she kept her eyes fixed straight ahead. “But I was wrong.”

“No, you weren't wrong. Had it been any other time, under any other circumstances, I would have stopped and given you that sincere apology. But you were... not a priority. Getting to the hospital was.”

OK, she understood that. And maybe he was right. No, he *was* right. And she was overreacting. Which she'd been accused of doing a lot of lately. “It's been a bad day,” she conceded. A bad day, a worse week and an even worse month. And everything was still spiraling downward. “I should be the one apologizing to you.”

“No apologies necessary. And you're right, it's been a bad day for everyone.” He glanced down at his tiny patient. “But mostly for him.”

Suddenly, all the anger and frustration drained right out of her. Sick children had a way of putting everything else into proper perspective, had a way of bringing everything else around them to a grinding halt. “How's he doing?”

“Struggling. But fighting. He's one tough little boy. So, are you a friend of Gabby's?”

“No, I only met her today, right before I helped deliver Bryce. But I'm Angela Blanchard's sister. And I'm really here to take over for her in the kitchen.”

“Funny. I would have sworn you were a nurse. A damn good one, if I had to make a bet on it.”

“I was a pediatric nurse and, yes, I like to think I was a damn good one, but that's in the past,” she said. “I burned out.” That wasn't the truth, but it was an easy explanation and people didn't question it.

“Sorry to hear that. Especially since you seem so... passionate about it. That's medicine's loss.”

He sounded genuinely sorry, which surprised her. When she'd tendered her resignation, no one had even tried talking her out of her decision to quit. Then, when she'd closed all those doors on her life and walked away, no one had been sorry to see her go. No one had even blinked. But by then she'd become an awkward moment for the man who was supposed to love her. He was an upwardly mobile doctor, she was a downwardly spiraling nurse he found quite easy to leave. *You're too emotional, Dinah. You overreacted. Got yourself too involved in something you had no business getting involved in. Maybe you should have stayed in cooking school.*

But she believed Eric Ramsey sounded sorry she'd left nursing.

Except she didn't trust herself to believe anything. Not anymore.

## CHAPTER TWO

“YOU didn’t, by any chance, ever assist in a septostomy did you?” Eric asked, handing the baby over to the two nurses who’d run to greet them when they’d pulled up to White Elk Hospital’s front door.

“I’ve seen them done. And taken care of the patient afterwards. Why?”

“We’re short-staffed right now, and I could use you in the operating room if you’ve got the experience.”

“I do have the experience,” she said hesitantly. Her preference would have been helping the volunteer crews who were busy sandbagging the hospital, trying to keep the flood waters back from it. That was something she could do, something that wouldn’t remind her of how much she ached for a career that hurt her so deeply.

“Then I need your experience. Normally, I’d have another doctor in there, but he’s driving Gabby and your sister to the hospital right now, and everybody else is tied up. I can grab our nurse practitioner, Fallon, and she’s competent in surgery, but her skills are more needed in co-ordinating everything else that’s going on. So if you know your way around the operating room...”

He actually wanted her in surgery? She was flattered, but she’d walked away from being a nurse. Not because she didn’t care, but because she cared too much. By rights, she should have turned him down and under most other circumstances she would have. But there was a baby who needed her...*another baby*...

“*Please* assist me. I have a very sick little boy who needs surgery, but if all my qualified staff are busy elsewhere, his surgery may have to be put off until we have the right combination of people free. You know what that could mean.”

Yes, she did know. When he put it that way, what was she supposed to do? How could she walk away from Bryce the way everybody had walked away from little Molly? “OK, I was more than a staff nurse. I was the head pediatric trauma nurse in my hospital. Just in case you want to know, or check my qualifications.”

“You wear your qualifications for everybody to see,” he said. “And I’m a pretty good judge of that.”

Better judge than she was. Once upon a time she wouldn’t have hesitated. Now she wasn’t sure. “Where do I scrub in?” she asked on a disheartened sigh.

Eric pointed her in the direction of the surgery. “What’s your name, by the way?”

“None of your business,” she snapped. If he knew her name, it got personal, and she wasn’t doing personal again. Personal hurt. It devastated. And she was tired of the pain.

Eric laughed. “When you scrub, I’d suggest you use cold water. Might cool you down a little.”

Well, he generally didn’t like his women so feisty. Lord knew, nothing about Patricia had been feisty. She’d been the model of cool, calm composure in everything. Always smiling, always happy, Patricia had been perfect. Maybe too perfect for the likes of him. But this woman...she was spunky, boisterous, argumentative, and in just an hour or so of knowing her, she’d raised her voice to him more than his wife had in all the years they’d been together.

Yet there was something about her that wouldn’t let him look away. Drawn like a moth to the flame...that’s the thought that kept running through his head. But didn’t the moth usually get burned to a crisp?

This woman was all fire. Get too close and you were sure to get burned. But she was on his mind anyway, and it had nothing to do with his expectations of a pediatric trauma nurse, and everything to do with feelings he’d vowed he’d never let happen. He’d had a perfect marriage once. Anything else would fall short.

Besides, he had two little daughters to consider. In his life, they mattered more than anything else and the thought of putting them through a life-changing adjustment scared him. They were good the way they were...all three of them. Very good.

His thoughts were interrupted by the arrival of Neil Ranard, desperate for news about Gabby's son.

"You look bothered," Neil Ranard said, as Eric scrubbed. "Is it about Bryce?"

Eric shook his head, but didn't answer right away, because what bothered him was the disloyalty he was suddenly feeling, thinking about the beautiful nurse the way he was. He had no business looking at another woman, and the wedding band on his left ring finger was a shining testament to that. "No, he's stable right now. Doing pretty well last time I checked. The good news is that once we've done this first procedure he should be stable enough to be transferred to get the help we simply can't provide here."

"Gabby and I have every faith in your abilities, Eric. Neither of us would want anyone else helping Bryce right now."

"I'll do my very best not to let you down."

"I know you will. So if you're not too worried about Bryce right now, what is bugging you? Hold on, this wouldn't be about working with Dinah Corday, would it?"

This time he didn't bother shaking his head, as the guilt was beginning to consume him. Because, yes, it was about Dinah – so that was her name! She intrigued him. And she was sexy as hell. Something he had no right noticing.

"Well, she's a looker," Neil conceded. "And even though we've only worked together once, she's one of the best nurses I've ever dealt with. So, which of those two qualities is distracting you? Because it's got to be one of them, since you don't know anything else about her."

"I'm not distracted," Eric snapped. "I'm concentrating, and you're breaking my concentration."

Neil laughed. "I think your concentration was broken before I came in here, and it's got nothing to do with anything medical."

"It's not what you think," Eric denied. "I don't have time, and you know that. Between my job, and my rescue duties, and especially with the twins..." He shook his head as he backed away from the sink, arms up, water dripping down to his elbows. "I don't have time, no matter how much she... or any other woman...breaks my concentration. So I'm not going to let it happen, simple as that."

"Look, Eric. I know you were totally devoted to Patricia, but she's been gone for five years, and I don't think she would have wanted you putting yourself through this. She would have wanted you to be happy again. To find a new life for yourself...something in addition to your work. And that would include finding someone else to share that life. But you haven't even taken a woman out for a simple dinner, have you?"

"Once or twice." Truth was, after Patricia had died, he'd lost interest. Hadn't found it again, either, because in his heart he was still a married man.

"Look, I know it's not easy. Believe me, if anyone knows how hard it is to pick up the pieces and move on, it's me. After my marriage broke up..." He paused, shrugged, then smiled. "But I'm working it out with Gabrielle now, and I think we're going to get married. Which shows how easily the past becomes just that—the past—when the right future opens up to you. So keep yourself open to the possibilities, because you deserve to find some happiness. If not with Dinah Corday, then with someone else."

"What if I don't want to open myself up to them? I mean, what if I like keeping myself shut off?" Eric spun away from Neil and pushed through the surgical door, stepping directly into the gown the surgical tech was holding up for him. He was back in the moment now, back in the zone. That's what always happened the instant he stepped into surgery and right now, even though the most gorgeous pair of brown eyes he'd ever seen in his life were staring over a surgical mask at him, he was focused on starting the procedure to save Bryce Evans's life.

But as he stepped up to the table, for one fleeting moment the only thing he saw in front of him were those eyes. Beautiful eyes. Distracting. Then he blocked them out, and cleared his throat. “Let’s go over the surgical check list before we start.”

Well, if this hadn’t been quite the day! She’d helped deliver one baby, helped resuscitate that baby, and had then assisted in his surgery. All that, plus dodging a flood. By all rights, she should have been tired, exhausted, ready to find a quiet corner somewhere, put her feet up and take a nap. That’s probably what she’d do in a little while, when she finally wound down. But right now she felt alive. Invigorated. It had been three long, difficult weeks since Molly’s death. Three weeks to doubt herself, three weeks being berated for caring by the man who had claimed to love her. Three weeks of agony and self-doubt.

Yet in the span of only a few hours now, it was like she’d been sustained again. Sustained, validated. Made to feel normal. Of course, it would all be over with once she stepped outside the confines of this hospital. So she wanted to bask a while longer in a place where she felt like she belonged, to linger in the good feelings. Besides, she felt safe here. She’d never, ever in her life set foot into such a tiny, crazy hospital as this one, where trauma doctors had second careers as surgeons and third careers as heads of search and rescue, and where doctors still made house calls and invited total strangers into the surgery. As mixed up as it all seemed, she liked it so much she could almost picture herself belonging here, and that was a nice feeling she wanted to last for a while longer because, to be honest, she doubted she’d ever get it back.

Creeping into the intensive care nursery, where the lights were dimmed for the sleeping hours, and the green, glowing trace of baby Bryce’s heartbeat on the cardiac monitor next to his bed illuminated the area like an eerie beacon, Dinah stopped halfway to the crib to admire the miracle baby lying there, breathing easily and sleeping peacefully. All was right in his world and he had no idea how people had scrambled to save his life today, how they’d put their own lives at risk to save him. Neither had he any idea how many people had already crept in to see how he was doing, or hovered outside the door, worrying about him. He had no idea that things weren’t perfect, and that’s the way it should always be in a child’s world. Molly should have had a chance at that, if even for a moment.

Dinah loved children, loved taking care of them, loved the innocence of the smiles and giggles. She’d fallen in love with Molly. Abandoned at birth because of overwhelming disabilities, her birth mother had simply walked away. Never looked back. And had left a precious child to die alone in an impersonal hospital nursery where the duty nurses took good care, but didn’t truly care. No child should ever be alone that way, and she’d made sure Molly had never been alone.

It had reawakened something in her. A longing. And watching Bryce now reminded her of the all things he would have ahead of him, things Molly wouldn’t have. She wouldn’t have gone home from the hospital, wouldn’t have slept in a crib, wouldn’t have had toys to play with. All those weeks sitting with Molly in the hospital, holding her, singing to her, she’d wanted to pretend things could be normal for the child, but she’d known...as a nurse, she’d known. All those weeks with Charles calling her crazy for getting involved. Hopeless was what he’d called Molly. But Dinah had never seen hopeless. All she’d seen had been a sick child who’d had no one but her.

How could she have been so wrong about Charles? He was a pediatrician. He was supposed to love children, no matter what their condition. Through Molly, what she’d come to know had been a man who could barely tolerate them.

How could she have been so blind?

Now, watching Bryce, and feeling so connected to him, the longing to be part of something so good was stirring again. It would be nice to sit and cradle him in her arms the way she had Molly, to whisper motherly things in his tiny ear. It was a feeling that scared her, though, because she knew the pain of loss when it ended. It was unbearable. So deep and profound nothing could touch it or make it better.

Not ever.

With her marriage to Damien, shortly after she'd graduated from nursing school, she'd wanted all the right things—the nice little house with a white picket fence. Wanted to bake pies for her husband and cool them on the windowsill in the afternoon so their sweet aromas would waft down to him as he came home from work. Wanted children playing in the yard. Wanted to snuggle with him in the evening after the children were in bed, and talk about the things that were interesting to no one but themselves—how their days had been, who they'd met on the street, what they were going to do tomorrow, and next week and next year. But that was a dream life that hadn't come true as Damien had been bored with their daydreams by the end of their first year together and already working on a way to find his life with someone else. And here she was now, at thirty-four, fresh from the last daydream fiasco with Charles, older but, apparently, not much wiser.

Well, experience was the best teacher. Maybe she had a tendency to let her heart rule her head, but this time her head was fastened on better. Avoid relationships and the problems didn't happen.

“He looks so peaceful, you wouldn't know what he's just gone through, would you?” Eric asked.

“Eric!” she gasped, startled that he'd been able to sneak up on her like that. She'd been too lost in the daydream she didn't want to have, too caught up in something she couldn't allow herself, and this lapse in judgment had everything to do with him. Not that he would be interested in her that way. Yet he was practically hanging over her shoulder now. Standing much too close. So close, in fact, that the scent of soap on his skin threatened to tip her right back into her daydream.

As a preventative to the thoughts trying to creep in, Dinah moved round to the other side of the baby's crib, laid her hands on the raised rails and relaxed a little. She was safe here, keeping so many physical obstacles between her and Eric, even if Eric didn't know what she was doing, or how she was feeling, being so close to him. “Babies are resilient. Much more than we are, I think.”

“Is that why you chose pediatrics?” he asked.

“Actually, my most recent choice was a kitchen in a ski lodge.” It was a blatant dodge, but she didn't want to talk about it, didn't want to look up at him for fear he could find the answers he was seeking in her eyes. And they were there, she was sure of it.

“Before that.”

“In my life, *before that* doesn't matter,” she said, her voice now a whisper. “I've had a few of those and now I am what I am in the moment. Don't expect anything else.” He was going to respond to that. In fact, she was so sure of it she practically held her breath waiting for it, but when he didn't, Dinah finally did look up. “No response?” she asked. “No pithy little comeback?”

“Something I learned a long time ago is that when people drop those kinds of explosive statements, it's best to back away. If they want to explain it, they will. If they don't, you're at a safe distance.” He grinned. “Right now, I like the safety in this distance.”

“I appreciate that,” she said. And truly she did. There was no point starting a new life and blurting out all the unhappy parts of the old one every time the opportunity arose. While she wasn't really here to make new friends, or find a new start, she did want to make the most of the next few weeks, especially with the people she might see occasionally. And Eric Ramsey...she had a hunch she'd be seeing him again. Nothing social, nothing even very friendly. But there was something about saving a life together that pulled people closer, at least for a little while. Besides, Eric might be here when she came to check on little Bryce. So why beat him over the head with all her baggage for what would amount to a few casual moments here and there? “People don't know when to observe boundaries. They step over the line, assume they have rights where they really have none, and the next thing you know...” They're cheating on you, or walking out of your life. “Thank you, Eric.”

“Thank you, Dinah.” He spoke the words, but even in the dim light his eyes said more. So much more it startled her.

“I...um...I'm glad we were able to work together.” His intense stare on her was unsettling. It was making her nervous. Causing her hands to shake. Yet she couldn't look away. Wanted to, but could not. “And I'm even more glad that things are going to work out for Bryce and Gabby.” The

conversation was turning just plain awkward now. There was nothing more to say except goodbye. Yet she didn't want to. Not yet. "Anyway...I, um...I guess this is goodbye. I need to get back to Angela, and um..." Was it hot in here? Because she was suddenly burning up. "I'm sure we'll see each other again while I'm in White Elk. So..." She needed a fan, her cheeks were blazing so furiously. "So, I'll see you around."

"See you around, Dinah Corday." He winked.

Eric's voice so sexy she went weak in the knees. Maybe she was tired. Everything was catching up to her and a few hours' sleep would take care of whatever this was coming over her. Yes, that had to be it. She was tired. Her body was giving out on her. "Around," she repeated, not making the slightest move to leave.

Suddenly, Eric was around on her side of the crib, and before she realized what was going on... or maybe she did realize what was going on and didn't want to do anything about it, she was in his arms. Locked into a kiss. Deep, urgent. Lips pressed so hard she could scarcely find breath. Her arms snaked up around his neck like they'd done it a thousand times before, and her body willed itself into a tight press to his, until she could almost feel corded muscles, almost find her way deep inside him. But as suddenly as the kiss had started, it stopped. His awareness...her awareness...What they were doing shoved them apart with such a force that it was like a physical punch, one that knocked her back.

Of all the crazy, stupid things to do! How could she have?

And how could her knees still be wobbly from the force of one simple kiss?

Except it hadn't been simple. Nothing about that kiss had been simple, and she was reeling to find an explanation. What had caused it? Had it been about two people caught up in the moment, two people who'd waged the battle together and won? A kiss of celebration?

Yes, that made sense. A kiss of celebration. That sounded feasible, or feasible enough. Plus, she was tired. Exhausted.

Except it was a kiss that shook her to the very core. One that made her knees wobble so hard she had to grab hold of the crib rails. "I...I didn't mean for that to happen," she stammered. "I've been accused of overreacting in emotional situations, and I think you've just seen that." Although she'd never, ever, kissed anyone so impulsively before. "Sorry." Lame excuse, but it was the best she could do. "So, it's been a long day. Like I said, I want to go spend some time with Angela, see if we can get up to the lodge so I can finally get settled in."

If ever there was a perfect time to make her exit, this was it. Eric hadn't said word, not one single word in reaction. So all she had to do was grab up what was left of her strength, forget her dignity, since that was long gone, hold her head high and walk out the door. Except her feet wouldn't move when she tried. Both were planted firmly to the tiled floor and going nowhere soon. Or maybe she simply didn't want to walk around him and risk falling into his arms again.

Eric didn't move either. And his face, even in the dim lights, was painted with sheer panic and perplexity. A sure sign of what he was thinking, which embarrassed her even more. It wasn't like she'd kissed every doctor with whom she'd shared a victory, because she hadn't. Yet one minute she was telling him to keep his boundaries, and the next minute those boundaries had tumbled down—that emotional overreaction Charles had berated her for. Maybe Charles had been right when he'd told her she was more suited, emotionally, to the kitchen. "Look, Eric, I shouldn't have—"

He thrust out his hand to stop her. Still scowling. Still perplexed. "What you did today with Bryce was nothing short of amazing, Dinah. I don't want to take anything away from that."

In the uncomfortable moment between them, she shrugged for the lack of a better response.

"And for the record, I'm sorry about the way I behaved after we had that little collision on the road."

"It doesn't matter," she managed, barely sounding any more steady than she felt.

"But it does. I'd had one hell of a morning, between the floods and the hospital. My twin girls have been sick, and I had to leave to make sure they were safe, then I had to get back to the hospital

right away. But they were frightened. Wanted me to stay home with them. Cried, begged. And nothing pulls at your heart harder than two little girls begging for you to stay. So I stayed longer than I should have, was distracted when I finally did leave, and you...” He chuckled nervously, “Well, you know the rest of the story.”

The rest of the story? Did he mean the part where she’d just kissed a married man? Somehow, with the casual way he acted around her, she wouldn’t have guessed that about him. Who was she kidding, though? Her life was a testament to not guessing the right thing. And the right thing with Eric was that he wasn’t only married, but married with children. A man with huge entanglements.

Well, something in her life was finally simple. One kiss, *and he’d been a willing part of it*, was where it ended. Actually, she was glad about that because her judgment wasn’t going to be tested on this. They’d met their final boundary. Nothing came after it. Period. No doubts, no questions, nothing to wonder about. “How old are they?” she asked, at last finding enough strength to push her toward the door. “Your twins? How old are they?”

“Five, going on twenty-one. Spoiled rotten, and I’m not ashamed to admit it.”

“Their names?” she asked, backing her way around Eric, keeping herself well clear of him as he stood at the end of the crib.

“Pippa. She’s older by nine minutes, and she’s the outgoing one. My little extrovert who can’t stay out of trouble. And Paige, my very serious introvert who tends to be more clingy than anything.”

By the time she got to the door leading to the hall, she half expected Eric to flip a photo wallet out of his pocket, like a kiss followed by a trip through the family archives was all in a day’s work for him. But he didn’t. Rather, he turned around, popped his stethoscope into his ears and had a good look at Bryce. Checked his breath sounds, his heart, his reflexes, probably glad for that whole awkward episode to be over with.

That’s when Dinah escaped.

“Don’t let me keep you from your wife any longer,” she bit out as she fled the ICU. She made it to the hall, got halfway down it and sagged against the wall. What was she doing? How could she have failed to notice the ring on his finger? And how, even now, knowing what she did about Eric Ramsey, was his kiss still lingering on her lips? It burned all the way through her, and as she raised her fingers to her lips, she knew it would linger a while longer. Against her will. Or maybe because of her will.

For a moment, she’d thought Eric was different. But he was like the rest of them, wasn’t he? Her father who’d walked out on this family, her husband who’d cheated on her, her fiancé who’d seen a weakness in her and exploited it. Well, she’d been gullible again. It was her history. Her habit. They spoke, she believed, she got hurt.

The masses of humanity in the hall were cloying, as she regained enough strength to fight her way through them to get to her sister. So many people with no place to go, people reaching out, people in pain. But Dinah was in her own unbelievable pain, and she didn’t see them all through the tears stinging her eyes. She was hurt, angry, but mostly humiliated. Her fault entirely. She had to get away. Had to find Angela and get out of there. But she was almost half the way to the waiting area when Eric caught up to her.

“Dinah!” he yelled over the crowd.

She heard him, but didn’t stop.

“Dinah!” he yelled again, catching up to her and falling into step. “Did you think I’d leave my wife at home with the girls while I was out hitting on you? Is that why you ran out? Because you thought I was...” He glanced down at the ring on his finger. “That I’d kiss you the way I did if I was...”

She tried to twist away from him and go the other direction, but Eric stepped in front of her then stepped in front of her again when she turned yet another way. “Look, Eric. I’ll give you credit where it’s due. You’re a good doctor. But other than that, you do what you have to do, as long as it doesn’t involve me. OK? I don’t like men like you. No, let me restate that. I *hate* men like you,

and I pity the women who keep falling for them because the result is always the same no matter how much they believe they're the one who will finally change him, finally tame the beast in him. Men like you don't tame. Once you've had a taste of what it's like to step outside the bounds of normal decency, you don't step back in. So, leave me alone. We've done what we had to do, and there's no reason to continue...anything."

*Deep breath*, Dinah, she kept telling herself. *Calm down*. This wasn't Damien Corday, her husband, who'd had the decency to wait six months into their marriage before cheating on her. It wasn't her father, a man who'd left his family because it hadn't been the family he'd wanted. Wasn't even Charles Lansing who'd turned on her in such a profound, hurtful way. This was Eric Ramsey, who was trying to cheat on Mrs. Eric Ramsey. Yes, pity the poor wife. But this time it was truly none of her business.

"Do I get to defend myself?"

"Against what?" Dinah snapped. She wouldn't look up at him, wouldn't take a long, slow journey into those gorgeous brown eyes because if she did she might do something stupid, like believe him. And the last thing she ever intended to do again was believe anything any man had to say. Sure, it was reactionary, but she had good cause to react the way she did.

"Against your accusations. You get to fling them at me, so I should have the opportunity to deflect them. To defend myself."

"I don't care what you have to say, Eric, because I've heard...*everything*. All the excuses, all the explanations. All the lies. There's nothing new under the sun, you know."

He opened his mouth to speak, to compound his lie, to make an even bigger fool of her, but at that very same moment a tiny figure in a pink rain slicker came running through the hall, directly to Eric, followed by an identical little figure in another pink rain slicker.

"Daddy!" Eric spun to see them, then braced himself against the inevitable as both little girls launched themselves into his arms at the very same time.

Galoshes halfway to their knees, rain slickers all the way down to the galoshes, rain hats covering up most of their faces, it was hard to see the little girls, but Dinah's heart did pound a little harder as Eric went down on one knee and scooped them both up into his embrace. They were giggling and laughing and splashing him with water dripping from their slickers, almost knocking him flat on his back in their exuberance.

"OK, girls," their mother said, coming up from behind. "I told you not to overwhelm your father. Remember he's been doing a very difficult surgery, and he's tired."

"But we brought him cookies," one of the girls cried.

"We've been baking," the woman Dinah took to be Eric's wife said. "And baking, and baking. They were bored, and they missed you."

"Well, you know how I love your cookies!" Eric exclaimed, extricating himself from the girls and standing up. Once he was fully upright, both girls immediately latched on to him again, one girl holding on to each of his legs.

"Are you coming home now, Daddy?" one of the girls asked.

"Sorry, but I can't leave here yet. We're too busy. Too many people still coming in and you know Daddy has to stay here and take care of them."

"Then can we stay here and help?" the girls cried in unison. "Please, Daddy, can we stay?"

He looked at the woman, who shrugged. "I'm going to sit with Gabby, and Debbie's coming in shortly to look after the girls. So it's fine with me if they stay for a while," she said. "Maybe you can take a break with them later on?"

"How can I say no to taking a break with my two best girls?" Eric said. He took hold of the brims of both their rain hats and shoved them up. "But first I want you to say hello to Dinah Corday. She's the nurse who helped me in surgery today. The surgery I did on Dr. Evans's baby."

Totally unaware of her presence there, in this cozy family scene, until they spun to face her, they both ran immediately to Dinah and grabbed her like she was their long-lost friend. “Hello,” she said tentatively.

“Hello,” they said in unison. “Do you want to eat some of Daddy’s cookies?” one of the girls continued.

“That’s Pippa,” Eric said. “Without the rain gear, you’ll be able to tell her from Paige because Pippa has brown eyes like me, and Paige has hazel eyes like her mother. Other than that, they’re identical.”

“And I’m taller,” the one Dinah believed was Paige said. “By half an inch.”

“Only when you’re standing on your tiptoes,” Pippa argued.

“Do not,” Paige protested.

“Do, too,” Pippa countered.

“And so goes the Ramsey family,” Eric said, laughing. “Oh, and, Dinah. I’d like you to meet my *sister*, Janice Laughlin. The girls and I live with her, and she watches them when I’m working.”

Eric lived with his sister? Suddenly the heat of embarrassment began its creep from her neck, up her throat, to her cheeks. “Hello,” she said, almost choking over the single word.

“But Daddy’s going to get us a great big house of our own soon, where we can have a dog and...” Paige started.

“A cat,” Pippa finished.

Dinah chanced a glance at Eric, whose expression was an odd one, caught between pain and amusement. He wanted to laugh, or cry. She couldn’t tell which. And she wasn’t sure she wanted to know. “Look, it’s nice to meet all of you...Janice, Paige, Pippa. But I’ve really got to go and find my sister.”

“Can we go see the baby?” Pippa cried. “Please?”

“Pretty please?” Paige joined in.

“Not right now,” Eric said, trying to take a firm hand. “He’s not feeling very well. But maybe in a few days.”

But Eric wasn’t very good at that firm hand, and it showed. Even to a casual observer such as herself, Dinah saw that he was just plain gooey when it came to his little girls. They had him wrapped around their little fingers, and he enjoyed every bit of it. He would be a very indulgent father, Dinah decided. And a very good one. Something also told her that Eric wasn’t a man cheating on his wife. He was a man getting over something painful, for which she felt very bad. So bad, in fact, that she turned away without saying another word, and practically ran into the room where Angela was sitting, waiting for Gabby to return from seeing her baby. “Tell me about Eric,” she whispered to Angela.

“What do you want to know?”

“Is he married?”

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