

## Chapter 1

Two-thirty in the morning. Jenny Campbell stared at the brightly lit, quiet ER entrance. Slipping by the guard during the chaos of last night's emergency had been easy; tonight would be trickier. Maybe... She went to the hospital's side door and tugged. Nope. Not just stuck, the heavy steel door firmly resisted her attempts to open it. *Not getting in that way.* She'd have to take her chances going through the ER. As Jenny eased through the dark night toward the sliding doors, she studied the waiting room occupants.

A pregnant lady sat in a wheelchair at the admissions desk. Her eyebrows banded tightly together as she massaged her beach ball stomach in a circular motion. The clerk assisting her alternately poked at the computer screen with a silver wand and glanced at the closed doorway a nurse had disappeared through as if worried the expectant mother would throw herself on the floor, spread her legs wide, and demand he deliver her baby.

Ignoring the half dozen sleepy people waiting for treatment, the security guard puffed out his chest as he hitched his pants under his protruding stomach and flirted with the blushing night secretary.

A young man carrying an overnight case and a bright, fluffy duck brushed past Jenny through the sliding doors. *Yes.* Jenny dashed behind and followed him to the admissions desk, hoping it would look like they were together. When the guard dismissed them with a cursory glance, Jenny broke away from the husband and headed for the stairway, like a nervous mouse seeking the safety of her tunnel.

She eased the door closed and had almost reached the bend in the stairs, when the door creaked open behind her. Fighting the urge to either freeze or bolt up the remaining steps, Jenny lightened her tread and continued climbing. It could be night personnel using the stairs to get some exercise.

"Miss, can I help you?" The guard called out.

She considered pretending she hadn't heard him, but his voice echoed loudly in the empty stairwell. Jenny stopped and curved her lips into a friendly smile, before turning to face him. "No thanks. I'm fine."

Below her, he took a step toward the bottom stair and cocked his head. "Visiting hours

are over.”

“I had to work late tonight and couldn’t visit my son earlier. The nurse said I could come by when I got off.” The lie rolled off Jenny’s tongue as she pasted a worried expression on her face. “That’s okay, isn’t it?”

He propped a foot on the first step and pursed his lips. “Son? You hardly look old enough to have a kid.”

“Trust me.” She forced a chuckle. “I feel old enough.”

“I’ll have to call up to get permission. Got to follow protocol.”

*Of course you do.* For an instant, Jenny calculated her chances of sprinting up the stairs to lose the overweight guard. The hospital had dozens of rooms, closets, and alcoves where she could hide. But she eased to the other foot, deciding to play it cool.

“Sure, no problem.” Jenny retraced her steps and breezed past him.

Standing next to the guard at the front desk, she projected a look of bored indifference while observing the other occupants to see if they noticed her detention. What would he do when he discovered her lie?

When nobody seemed interested in her predicament, she focused her attention on the telephone, willing the nurse to allow her up to see Michael.

“Helen? This is Bob Cullen in security. You got a patient...” He looked expectantly at her.

“Michael Campbell.”

“Michael Campbell. His mom’s down here wantin’ to come up. Said someone told her she could visit when she got off work.” With one beefy hand planted on his hip, his dark, large eyes watched her. He hung up the phone with a loud click and faced her. “Go on up.”

Smiling to cover her relief, Jenny thanked the guard. She returned to the stairwell and slowly climbed the steps, praying the night nurse had never met her mother.

Jenny snuck onto the darkened floor and hurried down the carpeted hall to room 496. Guided by the muted light from the slightly open bathroom door, she crossed to the window side of the bed, away from the I.V. pole and the quietly whooshing suction machine.

Her gaze swept the sleeping boy—from the crown of his honey blonde head down the length of him—noting the tube protruding from one nostril, the long I.V. tubing taped to his arm, and the fresh fiberglass cast encircling his left wrist. She brushed damp bangs from his forehead. Her caress traveled down his good arm, past the white gauze and tape holding the I.V. needle in place on his uninjured hand.

Michael’s dark brown eyes, heavy from pain medication, blinked at her. The corners of his mouth lifted in a slight smile as he took her hand and his eyelids fluttered shut. With a contented sigh, Michael drifted back to sleep. Jenny hooked an ankle around the chair leg and dragged it near so she could perch on the edge without relinquishing her hold.

The night nurse whisked into the room, making no more noise than the gentle rustling of leaves on a windy night. A tentative smile hovered on Jenny’s lips, as she tried to look friendly and harmless while preparing to beg she be allowed to stay. To her relief, the nurse said nothing, seeming to barely register her presence. But she knew those sharp, dark eyes that surveyed the occupants and machines in one sweeping glance had noticed her.

With an economy of motions, the nurse replaced the depleted I.V. bag and noted the level of stomach fluids intermittently plopping into the plastic collection jar, before running a light hand around Michael’s face, checking for fever as a mother would—a competent specter tending her patient without disturbing his peace.

The nurse nodded toward the door and drew Jenny into the hall. She crossed her arms over her animal print scrub top and under generous breasts, then shook her dark head. “Mother, huh?” She cocked her head. “And I’m Aretha Franklin.”

“Sister, actually.” Jenny shrugged. “I didn’t think the guard would let me up if I wasn’t closer related.”

“He does have eyes, you know.”

“He didn’t know how old Michael was. Besides, I couldn’t take the chance he’d turn me away.”

“And sneakin’ in here every night isn’t taking chances?”

Jenny shrugged but relaxed, as it seemed the nurse wouldn’t kick her out. “I promised.”

Black brows arched over the nurse’s wide eyes, as if preparing to lecture her. Jenny glanced at her index finger, expecting it to wag in her face any minute for emphasis. “Only reason I’m lettin’ you stay is ’cause you don’t cause any trouble and he sleeps a whole lot better with you here.”

Jenny looked through the door, checking on Michael. “He worries about me.”

“Whatever.” The nurse waved a dismissing hand. “He’s a sweet kid. Don’t have a mouth on him like most his age.”

“Don’t let him fool you. He can be a pain.” Jenny smiled, removing the sting from the insult. “Do you know what time his doctor will be in this morning?”

“Dr. Harrison?”

Jenny nodded. That was the name stitched in navy on the lab coat of the doctor she’d run into—literally—yesterday morning. Jenny’s stomach quivered at the memory of his strong, warm hands on her arms as he’d steadied her after the collision. He had kind, pewter gray eyes that crinkled at the edges when he smiled and a deep rich voice capable of soothing a Tasmanian devil.

“He usually makes rounds about seven.” The nurse looked at her out of the corner of her eye with sudden interest, as if sizing her up. “Why? You need to talk to him?”

Seven? She might still be here then. Jenny shook her head. “Nothing important.”

The bleeping phone at the nurses’ station called the woman back to work. Grateful for the distraction, Jenny quietly reentered the room. Michael shifted in his sleep and frowned. She pulled the chair close to the bed and gently smoothed the hair away from his forehead until his expression relaxed.

As a baby, Michael had been remarkably touch-sensitive. He’d loved to be cuddled, have his back patted or rubbed, his head scratched... But lately, she didn’t dare show him much affection—especially in front of his friends. Not cool now that he was in middle school. However, when he was sick Michael still enjoyed a back rub.

Jenny rested her chin on her folded arms and willed him to get well.

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Gabe Harrison felt every one of the twenty-four hours he’d been awake. A short two-hour nap didn’t cut it anymore. He pressed his fingers over stinging eyes and then finished typing in the post-op orders. His long night on call had ended with an emergency appendectomy. He’d catch up on sleep today, but before heading home he needed to check on a patient’s latest lab results.

Michael Campbell worried him. Two days ago he’d removed the boy’s ruptured spleen. Healthy before his accident, the twelve-year-old should have bounced back faster, yet his hemoglobin remained low and he just didn’t look right.

Gabe yawned, scraped a hand over bristly cheeks, and scrolled through Michael’s latest blood work. Not bad, but not good. He glanced at the wall clock. Six. He’d examine the incision and see if Michael was better. His partner would check the boy during morning rounds, but Gabe would sleep better having checked on Michael himself.

Might as well. Gabe had no plans today other than picking up his laundry from the

cleaners on the way to Wednesday afternoon tennis. He pushed the tablet back in the charging rack and blew out a deep breath before heaving to his feet and crossing the hall to room 496. He paused in the open doorway.

A young woman slept half-sitting in a chair, half-draped across the bed next to Michael. Her slim hand held the boy's, as she pillowed her head in the crook of her folded arms. Beautiful brown hair the color of a rich, warm dark ale cascaded down her back to a shapely buttocks, perched on one bent leg.

*Wonder if her hair's as silky and heavy as it looks. Probably smells great too. All fresh and sexy.* Gabe jammed his hands deep in his lab coat pocket. She'd pulled it back in a ponytail yesterday morning, but he was pretty sure she was the same woman who ran into him.

Gabe cocked his head and frowned. *How can she sleep that way? That can't be comfortable.* This must be the mystery lady claiming to be Michael's mother, and he knew for a fact she was not. Mary Campbell was a slight woman with short auburn hair, probably in her late forties, early fifties. Careful not to wake them, Gabe stepped closer, moving to the foot of Michael's bed.

The pair shared a similarity in their delicate features and heart-shaped faces, but whereas Michael's came from youth, the woman's came from femininity. Disregarding hair colors, he detected a strong likeness. She was too old to be his sister and Mary Campbell looked too young to have a daughter this age. An aunt? Why visit in the middle of the night?

The pair looked so innocent and defenseless in sleep, Gabe had the strange urge to fold both of them in his arms and hold on tight. The scene reminded him of the many nights he'd come home from a late night call and wandered in to check on his children. Standing by their beds watching them sleep had reassured him. Now he came home to an empty house.

*Examine the patient, Harrison.* Gabe cleared his throat then slapped his feet down loudly as he approached the bed.

The young woman's eyes popped open, revealing pale irises ringed in deep blue.

*What stunning eyes.*

They stared at each other several long seconds before she eased away from the boy and pushed mussed hair away from her face. Tugging her sweater down in the back where it rode up, she continued to watch him through wide eyes, as if trying to gauge his mood.

Gabe flashed her a brief smile, then turned to Michael, who rubbed his face. "Hey buddy, how're you feeling?"

The door pushed wide open, circulating fresh air into the stuffy room. Michael's sleepy gaze settled beyond Gabe to where Mary Campbell breezed into the room. Guilt flashed across the boy's face but was instantly replaced by wide-eyed anxiety as he looked at the young woman at his side. He clutched her hand in a white-knuckled grasp.

His mother came to an abrupt halt. Her soft welcoming smile evaporated the second she spotted the young woman. Stiffening, she scowled at Michael's visitor.

"What're you doing here, Jenny?"