

CHAPTER ONE

Dr. Jennifer Taylor pulled back the edge of the skin as she examined the nasty knife wound slashed across the left side of the patient's torso. Despite the local anesthetic, the patient arched the small of his back in response to the increased pain, his wrists restrained by leather straps. She knew from experience that pumped up gang members were volatile and unpredictable. Jennifer darted a glance at the patient's checkered red bandana, then at the two burley police officers standing outside the doors of the surgical area. She brushed her moist forehead with the back of her arm.

After irrigating and cleaning the wound, Jennifer took a needle and suture. Going to take at least twelve stitches. The patient clenched his eyes shut as the tip of the needle repeatedly penetrated his skin. Like a skilled seamstress, she drew the edges of the wound together.

Several minutes later, Jennifer took off her surgical gloves and tossed them into the medical waste container. She watched as the police officers helped the newly-banded patient to his feet and escorted him out of the emergency room.

God! There must be a full moon tonight: a knifing, a mugging, and still half a shift to go.

Jennifer both loved and hated the challenges of late-night emergencies at the district's only public hospital. Her patients were noticeably street-hardened and grittier than the simple ear aches and finger cuts that anxious mothers typically brought in during the daylight hours. Everything just seemed more intense, deliciously unpredictable, and more demanding of her newly-acquired medical skills. But there was a down side. She rubbed her tired eyes and yawned. The two-

week rotation of swing shifts played havoc with her sleep. Jennifer pushed back the privacy curtain of the next bay and stepped in.

“What’s next, Selina?”

Selina Sanchez, an outgoing individual with striking brown eyes and a fondness for athletic young men replied, “This one’s a possible overdose.”

While she listened to the triage nurse’s report, Jennifer snapped on a pair of examination gloves and eyed her latest patient.

“The medics found him next to a dumpster with a syringe next to his body,” Selina continued. “No identification. Unconscious. Vital signs stable. Good color. Airways clear. Multiple bruising. Low blood pressure 90/75. Pulse 105.” She gave him the once over, then added, “Much too nice-looking for a junkie.”

“Looks like he’s been mugged.”

Selina shrugged. “Maybe he can tell us.”

Jennifer bent over the patient. “Sir? Sir? ... I’m Dr. Taylor. Can you hear me?”

No response. Jennifer raised one of the patient’s puffy eyelids and shone a penlight

into his eye. Then she repeated the procedure with the other eye. “Both pupils are equally dilated and responsive.” She pocketed the penlight in her unbuttoned white lab coat. When she ground a knuckle into his sternum, the patient moaned, but his eyes remained closed. “Come on, sir. Wake up.”

Selina popped open the last button on his plaid shirt and pulled his undershirt up to his neck. There were purple bruises on his rib cage and face.

Jennifer studied the bruising. “He’ll need chest X-rays.”

Selina nodded.

Jennifer listened to his heart and lungs with her stethoscope.

The drugged patient suddenly gasped and exploded into an upright seated position, his arms flapping like a puppet springing to life, propelling both Selina and Jennifer backwards. Selina bumped into a mobile table, sending a metallic tray and its medical instruments clattering to the floor. The tray spun round and round on its rim before coming to rest. Jennifer fell the other way, slamming into the edge of the counter, her outstretched arm knocking over a plastic jar of tongue depressors. She moaned as the rounded counter edge sunk deep into her lower back.

Selina regained her balance and stepped forward to grab hold of the stainless steel stretcher.

“They drugged me,” the patient muttered. His head drooped, his eyelids crashed like leaded shades.

“Who drugged you?” she asked, trying to keep the patient talking.

“Don’t know,” he whispered, his lips cut and swollen. “Please help me.” He slowly turned his head and looked at Jennifer. “Please . . .” his voice reduced to a whisper, “Got no one . . . to turn to.” His eyes began closing.

“Sir. Stay awake. We need you to stay awake.”

He opened his eyes again and looked directly into Jennifer’s. His hand squeezed hers with what little strength his weakened body permitted. “Promise me you’ll help. Promise.”

“I promise,” Jennifer said, hoping to get him to continue cooperating. She immediately sensed something else – something intangible – in his eyes, his voice, and his touch.

Do I know this guy from somewhere?

His eyes rolled upward. His body went limp. Selina made a grab to keep him upright, but he fell backwards, hitting the stretcher with a solid thump.

Selina checked his eyes, then his pulse. “He’s out again.”

Jennifer looked down at the patient while rubbing her injured back. “Jesus that hurt.”

“Santa Maria! What a mess!” Selina said, shaking her head. She knelt to pick up the tray and its scattered instruments.

Jennifer examined his arms and noticed ligature marks around his wrists.

How can a junkie shoot up with his wrists tied? “There’s something really strange about this one.”

“On night shift, they’re all a bit strange,” said the nurse from below the examination table.

“Yes, but look at this.”

Selina stood up and leaned close. She raised her nose to see through the smaller section of her bifocals. “What?”

“Manicured finger nails.” She flipped his arm over. “And no needle tracks. Just this one puncture wound on his forearm.”

“Maybe he’s a first-time user.”

She turned his head to the side. “Fresh haircut, too. Not the typical profile for an OD victim from the streets.” Jennifer noticed two small red circles along with discoloring on the side of his neck. She poked at the circles with a gloved finger. “These look like puncture wounds, but much too large for a syringe.”

Selina turned to face Jennifer. “Doctor, what do you want done?”

“I’ll need complete blood work. Draw me a rainbow and get a tox screen. Let’s see what junk he’s got running through his arteries.”

“Probably just heroin,” Selina said.

Jennifer gestured with her hands. “God only knows!”

CHAPTER TWO

At the nurses' counter Jennifer asked the medical clerk to check for room availability. She picked up a clipboard and checked off the boxes for blood chemical analysis, chest X-rays, and scribbled her name at the bottom of the sheet.

After taking the blood samples, Selina gave them to the medical clerk. Then she pulled up and locked the steel framed sides of the gurney to keep the patient safe. With the momentary lull in the ER, she joined Jennifer at the counter.

“So only two days left, huh?” There was a hint of both teasing and envy in Selina’s voice.

Jennifer looked up from her clipboard. “Yup. Two weeks off at the end of tomorrow’s shift.”

“So, what have you got planned for vacation this year?”

She shrugged her shoulders. “Haven’t decided yet.”

“You know what you really need?” Selina paused until Jennifer looked at her. “A really good-looking hunk to carry you off to some deserted island, where he’ll keep a perpetual smile on your face.”

Jennifer blushed and looked away. Her quiet, romantic heart didn’t share Selina’s flare for the dramatic, or her predilection for lustful physical relationships. “This year I’m hoping for a relaxing vacation. Sun tanning by a pool, some ice cold margaritas and a stack of mystery novels.”

“Uh huh,” said Selina. “I’ll believe that when I see it.”

“It will be a nice relaxing two weeks. Besides, aren’t you projecting your own vacation fantasies on me?”

Selina sighed audibly, and then said, “A girl can dream.”

Jennifer placed the clipboard on the counter and stared out towards the waiting room. How long has it been - a year? At least eighteen months had passed since she’d a man’s arms around her. She closed her eyes for a moment. Her former fiancée had cheated on her with a blonde lab technician named Cindy. The unexpected and heart-numbing infidelity had made her overly cautious. Since then, she hadn’t dated a single man, not even a brief meeting over coffee.

Taking a washroom break, Jennifer splashed some water on her face. She studied her image in the mirror, while patting her face dry with a paper towel. Except for some lip balm, she never wore makeup to work. With her high cheekbones and youthful skin, she really didn’t need to. She leaned forward to focus on her blue-green eyes. They seemed a little bloodshot. Jennifer gave a tired sigh. The long hours as a third-year resident in ER were taking their toll. She turned her head from side to side, looking for signs of unwanted grey strands hidden among the shaped layers of her reddish-brown hair. Thankfully, she didn’t find any.

Back in the emergency room, Jennifer checked the vitals on her latest patient’s monitor and bent down to take a second look at the circular marks on his neck. What were these from? Tip of a pen with the nib retracted, maybe? That would create a circle. She thought of his multiple

bruises – torture? Medical anomalies had always intrigued her. Her medical school instructors often commented on her strong diagnostic skills. But this had her stumped. She shook her head in bewilderment.

Jennifer straightened up. She studied his facial features. Under all that stubble and dirt, she saw that her patient was a young man, possibly in his early thirties. His arms were strong, his body slim and athletic. There was something else. She tilted her head while looking at him. He looked vaguely familiar. She didn't know from where. But she had that feeling you get when you first meet a person that you haven't seen in years - but a drug-addicted, person? She frowned. It didn't seem possible.

Jennifer leaned over and whispered to the patient, "Who are you?"

No response. Not that she expected any. The patient was clearly comatose. She made a mental note to check on his progress the following day. Maybe she could discover his identity. She massaged the tenderness in the small of her back. "I bet you're a real heart breaker. I've only known you for five minutes and you've already caused me pain."

In the background she heard Selina say, "Doctor, we have a street racing victim with head injuries on the way in."

Jennifer shook her head. Yup! Full moon all right. "Be right there."

CHAPTER THREE

Ryan McCall felt a throbbing pain in his forehead and raised his right arm to massage it. Something tugged at his hand. His eyes focused on an intravenous line and finger monitor. I'm in a hospital. Thank God, I'm alive! The events from the previous day flashed back into his consciousness, his head swimming with frightening recollections of pain and torture. His heart monitor began beeping faster. He jerked his head to look at the end table. No phone.

Damn. Megan! I've got to call Megan and Mrs. Wilson and let them know I'm okay. Then he remembered why he'd traveled to San Antonio . . . to address members of the computer conference. Oh, my God! I'm a no show. The conference organizers must be furious.

Suddenly, the door burst open. A bespectacled woman strode into the room, her arm embracing a metal clipboard and her hair drawn back tightly into a bun. "Ah. I see you're finally awake. I'm Anna Krause, the hospital administrative clerk." She had that officious, bureaucratic, uncaring tone of voice that Ryan hated about institutions.

"We couldn't find your wallet or any identification. Would you mind answering a few questions starting with your full name? Surname first, please."

"Can I use a phone? I need to phone Los Alamos."

"What?" She looked up from her bifocals. "Oh. No. Sorry. There are no phones in critical care wards. And only local calls are permitted. Hospital policy."

“I need to phone Megan and let her know I’m all right.” Ryan tried to prop himself up.

She held her pen over the clipboard. “Is Megan your wife?”

“Wife? No. My wife is dead.”

“Dead? A drug overdose as well?”

“Drug overdose? . . . No! Car crash.”

“Oh. I’m sorry. Can we contact this Megan on your behalf? Do you know if she has hospital insurance?”

“Insurance? Lady, she’s only five, for God’s sake.”

The administrative clerk looked frustrated. “Sir. You’re not being very helpful.”

“Look, lady. I’ve been through pure hell. I’ve been abducted and tortured and left for dead. What I need most right now . . .” he raised his voice in frustration, “. . . is a goddamned phone!”

She held the clipboard to her chest and adjusted her glasses. “Sir! This is a hospital. There’s no call for that kind of language.” She turned to leave. “If you won’t talk to me, I’m quite sure you’ll talk to the detective.”

“Detective? Finally, some honest-to-goodness help.”

“He’s from the San Antonio drug squad,” her smug voice continued. “He interviews all our indigent drug users.” The door closed behind her.

“Indigent drug users?” Ryan’s head flopped back into his pillow, both hands covering his face. I can’t believe this! It’s like something out of the Twilight Zone.