

Unedited Excerpt from *Assignment: Baby* by Lynne Marshall©

Chapter One

Amanda Dunlap prayed this wasn't fate's idea of a practical joke. She'd expected twenty people for a six-week statistical study on preventive cardiac care, which would comprise her first medical journal article. And there they were the carefully selected patients, each with three or four of the risk factors contributing to future heart disease--ticking time bombs as her mentor had put it.

The participants sat quietly conversing amongst themselves, thumbing through the Mending Hearts Club syllabus and class outline, waiting for the evening to begin.

She glanced at her watch, and a flutter of panic winged through her chest. After three months preparing every aspect of the curriculum for the pilot project, her bank account and career were both on the line. If she achieved her patient goals, Los Angeles Mercy Hospital would use her health modification model for all three California hospitals, and her next goal of a PhD in Nursing

would be waiting over the horizon. If she failed, she'd be back doing employee physicals and walk-in visits at the Serena Vista Clinic, and proving her parents right about her trying to reach beyond her capabilities.

Yesterday, as luck would have it, all her plans had come to a screeching halt when her mentor had to drop out for personal health reasons. Without a doctor to lend their name to the already-promised medical journal article, her proverbial nurse practitioner butt was in a sling.

Thank heavens the Mercy Hospital medical director had found a replacement for their satellite clinic. Only one problem remained.

Where was her hero?

While destiny snickered, Amanda checked her watch again—7:10. Perhaps the replacement had gotten lost on the drive in or was wandering around trying to find the patient education classrooms. Whatever the reason for the tardiness, she'd be forgiving, but she couldn't wait a second longer. Having every minute of the two-hour introductory class mapped out, she owed it to the participants to keep her promise of starting and ending the sessions on time.

"Good evening, I'm Amanda Dunlap," she said, and waited for everyone to face forward and quiet down. "I'm

so happy to see all of you here tonight." She went on to explain the purpose of the class.

A scuffle at the back of the room drew her attention from the faces in the front row. She glanced up in time to see the door swing open. An empty infant car seat got wedged between to hold it open. Next a diaper bag was tossed into the back of the room, soon followed by a masculine thigh and shoulder pushing through.

A gurgling baby faced outward in a special carrier strapped across a man's chest, drawing Amanda's immediate attention. The child wore bright pink overalls and a patterned top with super white mock sports shoes made especially for feet that didn't yet walk.

Amanda automatically grinned and sweet warmth trickled throughout her body at the sight. Her substitute mentor was not only a hero but also a family man.

During her brief marriage, after never having a maternal thought in her life, she'd missed a period, suspected she'd been pregnant, and discovered a secret even she'd never known. She wanted a baby. Her husband had been thrown into a tailspin when she'd brought up the possibility. When it turned out she wasn't pregnant, her heart had already changed forever.

Now, she didn't know if she'd be able to have a baby

of her own. She glanced at the bittersweet surprise popping through the door and gave a wan smile.

Her eyes drifted upward to the bearer of the bright pink baby package, and her breath stuck in her throat. She froze and grappled to maintain her composure, as a chill ran up her spine.

Hunter.

She hadn't seen him in three years.