

Chapter One

"Incoming," China Seabury announced while hanging up the mobile field-unit phone at the workstation. After five years on the job, she still felt a burst of adrenaline each time someone's life depended on the emergency room.

She shook old memories out of her head, hoping she could remain objective and useful for the patient's sake.

Knowing the ambulance was on its way, and that her window of opportunity to corner Eric Morell would be over in another few seconds, she jogged across the nurses' station to catch up with him. Matching his long-legged strides, she accompanied him down the hallway.

"Hey, Eric," she said, trying not to sound breathless.

Normally she went out of her way to avoid the overconfident, totally full of himself, Physician's Assistant. He looked surprised to find her tagging along.

"What's up, China?"

"You know that fundraiser I've organized next month?"

He lifted a dark brow. "The one you never quit talking about?"

A student nurse appeared out of the nowhere, blushing and practically gushing when she handed him a chart. "Can you sign off your orders, please?"

"Sure." After making his scribble, he looked up and smiled at the young nurse. The big blue eyes staring back at him practically melted.

Oh, come on.

The student nurse walked away as if floating on a cloud. Why was it that women threw themselves at his feet? China was hard pressed to figure it out.

He turned his attention back to her, looking expectant.

"Yeah," China said, dryly. "The charity event I never quit talking about, because it's for a good cause."

His masculine gait shifted into a swagger, as he got closer to the ambulance entrance. A siren could be heard in the vicinity. He grabbed a bag of normal saline and some IV tubing from the supply cart and, not missing a step, tossed them to her before she could tell him exactly what was on her mind. She caught them deftly.

He cocked his head. "The fundraiser for the teen drivers?"

"Yes. You know exactly what I'm talking about, so quit playing dense."

She juggled the items and stopped abruptly. The thin ER scrubs showcased his broad shoulders and powerful chest. Crap, he'd caught her checking him out. She wished she

hadn't noticed, and was damned if she would let him intimidate her. But why couldn't he wear his white coat like all the other P.A.'s?

"I need a master of ceremonies for the dinner portion."

His usual confidence changed to downright cocky, a trait she particularly despised, and it almost made her wish she hadn't brought up the subject. How was she going to manage to pull this off without throwing up?

A pleased smile spread across his rugged face. "And I'm your first choice, I presume?"

Oh, yeah, she was definitely going to gag, but she needed his help, and the charity was more important than her pride. She grit her teeth and smiled back. "Would you be interested?"

He rubbed his jaw. "A high profile at the charity auction next month would be great PR."

He kept walking.

She stopped mid-step. So the rumors she'd heard were true. He planned on applying for the ER supervisor job, again.

Vintage Eric with the "what's in it for me" factor, everything she'd come to know and loathe about him. Why didn't anyone else see him for what he was?

"I'd be glad to, Honey." He glanced over his shoulder with a smug grin.

"Eric?"

"Hmm?"

"Don't ever call me 'Honey' again."

The emergency room doors blasted open. Two EMTs rolled in a gurney with the motor vehicle accident patient strapped on a backboard, and a cervical neck collar in place. They started their report while China and Eric met them.

"Found her car wrapped around a pole on Sunset Boulevard," the first EMT said, pushing through the hall.

"No airway obstruction," said the other, following along. "She's got multiple lacerations and contusions of the face."

China quelled the urge to run screaming out of the ER. It had been ten years, would her post trauma terrors ever subside?

The patient wailed, and Eric restrained her wrists, lightly wrestling them to her sides.

"We'll take good care of you, miss. You're in good hands." The patient settled at his quiet voice and calm demeanor. Eric helped the men roll the gurney into room three. "The worst is over. Just hang in."

Oddly, his words helped China control her anxiety. The one positive point about Eric that she'd concede was his great bedside manner.

The EMT's transferred the patient to the ER bed, board and all. The patient whimpered with the movement.

"Easy does it. Take a deep breath," Eric said.

China assisted by applying the blood pressure cuff and monitor leads. She hung the IV bag--which had already been started en route--to the hook above the bed, and noted it wasn't infiltrated at the site of insertion. She threaded it into the intravenous infusion machine and set it at 150 cc per hour.

Blood caked in the patient's blond, tri-color highlighted hair. Her face was a bloody mess, and her nose was obviously broken. China winced at the thought of the pain she must have experienced, flashing back to her own indescribable agony many years before.

"Get STAT protocol labs and a portable cross-table lateral cervical spine x-ray," Eric said, stopping abruptly. "Are you okay, China?"

She nodded and swallowed the dry lump in her throat. His gaze lingered, and concern crossed his brow, but not for long. Focusing back on his patient and her needs, he flashed his pen light into her eyes. The patient moaned

and blinked. "It's okay," he said. "I'm just looking for glass. You've got a deep cut above your left eyebrow, and another good gash along your right cheek."

He examined her closely and picked a tiny sliver from one of her brows with a tender touch. She looked appreciatively at him.

Back on track, China switched the oxygen cannula from the portable tank to the connection on the wall O2 and did a quick assessment of the patient's body. No obvious sign of broken bones; her chest lifted and dropped evenly with each breath with no evidence of flail chest. But who knew what internal damage a steering wheel or an air bag may have caused? Only x-rays would tell for sure.

Once a cervical fracture got ruled out, they'd stabilize her in the ER, remove the protective collar, and send her to radiology for a full spinal series along with chest and abdominal x-rays.

The monitor above the bed, besides showing a normal sinus heart rhythm, reported good oxygen saturation from the pulse oximeter she'd slipped on the patient's finger. Maybe the internal damage would be minimal, and she'd be okay, after all.

Taking a deep breath, China rushed out of the room to the phone to order the stat labs, and paged the x-ray

technician. She grabbed the paperwork to enter the patient's identity into the computer and, for the first time, noticed her name. Brianna Cummings.

The teenage actress?

China glanced through the glass wall of the patient's room. She looked so tiny on the ER gurney, nothing like a big television super star. At her bedside, Eric hovered and listened to her lungs through a stethoscope. A few seconds later, he stuck his head out the door. "Draw up a hundred of Demerol."

She nodded. "Who's got the narcotics keys?"

The charge nurse flung them at her. She caught the keys and hustled to the medicine room.

After China had given the intramuscular shot, Eric caught her on the way out the door. "Do you realize who she is?" he whispered.

China nodded. He followed her back to the medicine room where she double-checked that she'd signed out for the narcotics. He towered over her.

"I'm paging the on-call plastic surgeon to stitch up her face, but I think it's going to take more than skill and a bottomless pit of cash to get her ready for her close ups again," he said. "Hollywood's a fickle place when it

comes to beauty.”

She gathered what she'd need to clean the patient's facial wounds, somberly shaking her head at the prospect of a young career potentially finished before it had ever peaked.

“What a waste of a pretty face,” he said, and tossed his gloves into the trash.

His impeccable bedside manner had almost fooled her. The man was completely superficial. China came to a halt. “You know, Eric, life isn't all about good looks.”

Without missing a beat, as though shooting a basketball, he tossed her a package of sterile four by fours. Slam dunk. The slick ER P.A. only appeared to care about the plight of the young actress.

He started to walk away. “No, China, you're right. Life isn't just about good looks. It's all about appearances.”