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THE BOSS AND NURSE ALBRIGHT by Lynne Marshall
This is an unedited version of the first chapter.

CHAPTER ONE:

Jason looked up from his desk to find big blue eyes staring at him. He'd been sailing all weekend and by Sunday, with nothing else to do for the afternoon, he'd come into the clinic to catch up on patient labs and charts rather than face being alone at home. The pint-sized human stood in his office doorway, unblinking, and watched him as if he were Santa Claus.

"Man," she said. She wore a jacket which had slipped from her shoulders, held in place solely by her arms through the sleeves as she pointed at him. A simple pull-on shirt that didn't quite cover her pudgy tummy, and patterned pants in varying shades, matched the bright green coat. Corkscrew light brown curls surrounded her chubby face.

"And who might you be?" he asked, fighting off a sinking feeling as the memory of his daughter flashed in his mind.

Long slender arms swooped in and scooped up the child, who looked to be no more than two or three. Hanna had been four.

"OK, pipsqueak, I told you to stay by momma." She didn't talk to the child like some parents did with high whining sounds, as if they were the favorite family pet. Her voice had a mellow, husky tone, like an actress from a classic movie. "Oh! I didn't know anyone else was here."

He shouldn't be, but the ocean had turned from glassy smooth to choppy and

restless, and though the sun always soothed his emptiness by heating the cold blood pulsing through his veins, nothing seemed to help today. So he'd decided to work.

"Thought I'd come in to play catch up before another crazy week of overbooking." He stood and held out his hand. "I'm Jason Rogers, the family practice GP of this group."

The young woman accepted his greeting. Her hand was cool and slender like the rest of her. He liked how her height almost brought her eye-to-eye with him, and how she looked at him as steadily as her daughter had.

"And I'm Claire Albright, the new Nurse Practitioner," she said with her child slung easily across her hip, as though second nature. "I think I'm supposed to remedy some, if not most, of that overbooking." She smiled just enough to show bright straight teeth. "You weren't at the meeting when they hired me."

"No." He dropped her hand and scratched the back of his neck. "I leave all that business up to the others." Phil, Hans and Rita had kept him emotionally afloat the last three years. In return his ample wealth had supported the clinic through its growing pains. He didn't know where or what he'd be without his medical partners.

The woman had ash colored blond hair with lighter streaks, like streams of light weaved through it. She had a high forehead and soft-brown brows that showcased her hazel eyes. There was strength to her nose and chin, which he liked. He looked away.

Though definitely attractive, her appearance didn't matter. Beyond his medical practice and patients, nothing much mattered. At all.

"I'm moving in down the hall." She seemed at a loss for what else to say. He wasn't helping a bit by standing like an idiot with his usual blank stare. "I love this

building,” she said. Her eyes shone as she mentioned the three-story cream-colored Victorian house turned medical clinic. “I used to drive by, read the MidCoast Medical Group sign, and say, ‘one day I’m going to work there’, and now I do.”

Her enthusiasm pained him. It smacked of idealism and hope, things he couldn’t remember. Jason couldn’t think of a response, and stared blankly.

He’d purchased the mansion for his partners’ business venture with his wife’s encouragement. She’d loved the building, too. And several years back, the optimism now glimmering in Ms. Albright’s eyes had resided in his heart.

“And this is Gina.” With a mild blush across her peach and olive-tinged skin, her smile widened, pressing dimples into her cheeks, and it almost felt contagious. But he’d given up smiling a long time ago.

The little one ducked her head into her mother’s shoulder, no longer bold. She’d no doubt realized Jason was not someone to trust with her clear eyes and smiles.

“Hello Gina. And Ms. Albright, you should be a good fit for our practice.” He recited the hollow words to keep up the façade of his being human, at least half human, for the child’s sake.

Having completed his duty with a be-grudging greeting, Jason sat down, sending a direct message that their introductory chat had ended. There was nothing more he could say. Not looking the least bit flustered by his blunt move, Claire nodded. The child on her hip squirmed to get down. She obliged, but held the girl by her shoulders and marched her down the hall without another word.

So the medical group had finally hired a fifth practitioner. They didn’t want to bring in another full time doctor, but had decided an RNP would be a big help. Besides

seeing the routine overflow patients, she'd be counseling the diabetics and high cholesterol clients on diet and exercise. Or so Rita had promised. She could also perform physicals on both adults and children, and routine PAP smears on the female clients. The others would think of more to keep her busy as time went on.

Rita had mentioned something about the new employee taking a more holistic approach to patient care, whatever that meant. As long as her medical advice didn't get too woo woo, what did it matter to him?

Jason did have one concern about adding a fifth group member, though – what was he supposed to do with his freed up time? The clinic was as much of an escape from life as it was a means to practice his profession. If he ever caught up with his backlog, he'd be faced with dealing with the world outside. He couldn't afford to let that happen.

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“Not exactly the friendliest guy on the planet,” Claire mumbled to Gina, closing her new office door two doors down from Dr. Rogers. Her daughter scampered across the room, not interested.

Though overall he was good looking, with straight brown windswept hair and strong masculine features, there was deadness in his steel gray eyes as if he'd had the life sucked out of him. It unsettled her. His empty gaze had sent a chill up her back.

Jason Rogers struck Claire as a wounded soul. A fit and sexy man wearing a drab gray polo shirt and windbreaker who looked very much alive, but in his core - his white light force - he seemed damaged and unable to connect.

“It takes one to know one, Dr. Rogers,” she whispered. The thought of reading his aura both intrigued and frightened her.

Her snap assessment of her new employer didn't matter. She'd joined this medical group for the opportunity to practice a more inclusive style of medicine, not to make friends. And after the doozy of a job her ex-husband had done on her, her lagging self-esteem needed a positive boost.

She'd vowed that the new job was about what was best for the patient. The total patient. For all she cared, if Dr. Rogers wanted to weave a standoffish cocoon or hang upside down in his office and spit at people, it didn't matter. She wouldn't give him the power to matter to her - as long as he left her alone to do her job.