

Temporary Doctor, Surprise Father by Lynne Marshall 6/09

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Chapter One

An unedited excerpt.

If January Ashworth saw one more couple making out, she'd scream. Was it mating season or something? The young Ortho Tech and his nurse girlfriend were wrapped so close it was hard to figure out where one left off and the other began. On the drive into work she'd seen two teenagers at a bus stop with their hands all over each other--she'd almost beeped her horn to break them up--and now this. And why, at one month shy of thirty, did January feel so old?

Running late, she pulled into a free spot and parked. After grabbing the pile of mail from the front seat, which she'd picked up on her way out of her house, she slammed the car door. Jan turned to see if the racket had faze the lovebirds as they continued to lock lips. It hadn't. Wasn't there a rule about necking in the Los Angeles Mercy Hospital employee parking lot?

Jan shook her head, adjusted her glasses and in hope of getting the vision of lust out of her mind, glanced toward the afternoon sun. It only made her sneeze. Not even that got their attention. When had she last time been kissed so passionately? Refusing to go there, she shook her head again and wiped her itching nose with a tissue.

Five minutes later, after zipping her name badge through the time-clock machine, she headed toward the Emergency Department while sorting through her mail. The newspaper said there'd be a full moon tonight, and it was Friday on top of that. Beyond the old ER tale of the full moon bringing out the medical crazies and the guaranteed Friday-night crowd, she knew it would be extra-busy tonight. And if her continued sneezing and watery eyes meant anything, a common cold was brewing.

Things were not looking good ... until she spied one special letter in the pile of mail. She recognized the address and got a warm, achy feeling in her heart, then promptly slipped it inside her scrub pocket to savor later.

Carmen Estrada, the no-nonsense ER charge nurse, waved her over the second her crepe-soled shoes hit the threshold. "Jan! I wanted to clue you in on a decision Dr. Riordan has made and already implemented." The tall, middle-aged woman gave her a once-over. "Have you been

crying? Your nose is red."

"Sneezing." Jan slipped an oversized nondescript-color OR gown over her loose scrubs as she studied the unnatural black hair of her supervisor. "So what's up?" She nodded and listened distractedly.

"We'll be accomodating a National Guard medic over the next month. He's gearing up for another tour of duty and needs a quickie skills refresher course. He'll be working under the umbrella of Dr. Riordan's license and the agreement the hospital made with the National Guard. Any, stitches, broken bones, chest tubes, intubations, gunshot wounds --you catch my drift--make sure the medic gets first dibs."

Still distracted, rather than tying the straps of the OR gown, Jan stuffed them in her pocket with the letter. "What about the med students and residents? Aren't they going to gripe?"

"Sure they are, but Gavin doesn't give a patootie about that. He wants the medic to get first dibs."

Jan inhaled and held her breath. She and Carmen exchanged knowing looks. No need to protest, the king of ER had spoken. Once Gavin Riordan made up his mind about anything, it became emergency department law.

"Whatever," Jan finally said on exhalation.

Carmen used her high forehead as if it was a beacon light and nodded toward Dr. Riordan's open office. A tall, fit-looking man in a police uniform with naturally sculpted arms and a nearly shaved head was shaking hands with Dr. Riordan. Surprising and unwanted humming vibrated over the nerve endings of her spine. What was it about a man in uniform?

The hair rose on the back of Jan's neck as she went on alert. There was something about that profile, the line of his shoulders, his stance that put her on edge. "I thought you said he's with the National Guard. That guy's a cop."

"He's on the LAPD SWAT team, is a Special Forces trained medic, and also is on the National Guard, so I'm told."

"Impressive. How can he work here and on the force at the same time?"

"He's coming in on his days off and after hours."

Some sixth sense sent a rush of blood from her suddenly pounding heart, making her cheeks get hot. She forced herself to act nonchalant. "Sounds pretty dedicated."

"From what Gavin says, the guy's proved himself through several tours of duty and is gearing up for a another."

At the three-quarter view, a sharp brow line, deep-set, appraising eyes and straight profile began to fill in the blanks on the missing person reports in her head. Though his hair was closely cropped, the stubble looked dark. Almost black. Just like ...

"Hmm. So when does he start?"

"Right now."

With her eyes darting around the ED for places to hide--not that she was sure she knew him or anything, mostly it was an eerie feeling the mysterious cop dragged out of her-- Jan made an about-face, planning to slink away and skulk in the background for the rest of her shift.

"Jan?" Gavin called her name, and any hope of keeping a low profile trickled away.

She adjusted her glasses and attempted to swallow a wad of cotton wedged in her throat as she went on guard, hoping the man wouldn't recognize her, and turned. "Yes?"

Gavin swaggered across the room steering along the newest addition to the ED. "This is Officer Beck Braxton."