

FRIDAY, NOVEMBER 28



“*F*orgive me for asking, Nurse Edwards, but of all places, why here? Why Garland Grove?”

*What?* Had she just been addressed as *Nurse Edwards*? Was it 1960 again?

The woman’s name was Joanne Sayer, but everyone Amy Edwards had met, from the volunteer at the hospital’s front desk to the secretary guarding her office called her Mrs. Sayer. She’d even introduced herself that way, and the nameplate on her desk referred to her as *Mrs. Sayer, Administrator*. Pretty formal for a small-town hospital.

Now, five minutes into the interview, *Mrs. Sayer* pushed Amy’s file to a far corner of her desk. Her message was clear. The interview was over.

Well, *Mrs. Sayer* might be done, but she had another thing coming. Because Amy was not done. Amy flashed her a smile. “Why not Garland Grove?”

*Mrs. Sayer* blinked several times, a tell that she wasn’t used to being addressed so directly. She reached for Amy’s file again, then stopped. “Over the past two years, Nurse Edwards, you’ve taken assignments in Miami, San Diego,

and Maui. Garland Grove is none of those places. Our community is small, our winters are harsh, and you'll be spending Christmas away from family. You'll be miserable here. Wouldn't you rather be closer to home?"

"I'm a traveling nurse. Home is where my next assignment is. The agency said you needed a good labor and delivery nurse on short notice. Here I am. How can you be so sure that I'll be miserable?"

Mrs. Sayer leaned in and placed her arms on her desk, preparing, it appeared, to reassert herself as the person in charge of the interview. "Allow me to lay my cards on the table, Nurse Edwards. Our OB/GYN department chair was behind the decision to consider a traveling nurse. I should have put my foot down from the start." She took a deep breath then added, "We've seen your kind before. Three years ago we brought in a traveling nurse to cover an opening in surgery. She spent the entire six weeks complaining to our staff about how our hospital was behind the times. I won't have that again, and I should have told the agency that when they called to arrange your interview."

"Are there other applicants who can come to Garland Grove at the last minute?"

"Not that it's any of your concern, but we can move our staff around to cover until we find a permanent replacement. It's only a few weeks. Now if you don't mind, I have more pressing matters to—"

"You would ask your staff to work overtime during the holidays when a qualified nurse is seated right in front of you? Mrs. Sayer, how can you do that?"

Mrs. Sayer's eyes grew dark.

Oh boy. The woman was about to toss her out the door.

The desk phone rang. Mrs. Sayer frowned, picked up the

receiver, and snapped, “Marilyn, I told you I’m not to be disturbed.”

Marilyn said something that caused Mrs. Sayer’s expression to soften. A little.

“Tell him it’s unnecessary. She’s not the one.” She paused, the conversation continuing. “Marilyn,” she snapped, “I said not to—”

The office door opened, and a man rushed in, taking Amy back fifteen years to high school. She did a double take before exclaiming, “Sam Griffin?”

Sam made a beeline for her, and Amy barely pushed to her feet before he pulled her into a hug. “I saw the name on Joanne’s calendar, but I can’t believe it’s really you,” he said.

“The last I heard, Sam, you were partying your way through Princeton.” She laughed as she stepped back to get a good look at him. The years had been kind. He had filled out a bit since his days as their high school’s rail-thin track star, but the extra pounds looked good on him. His suit fit right and felt expensive, the shoes were polished, and the watch was Hermes. He was doing okay.

Sam laughed. “I darn near flunked out. Mama laid down the law— work harder and get with the program or come back to Garland Grove and take over the chicken farm.”

“Well, you must’ve gotten the message. Do you work here now?”

“Four years.”

“I always saw you as the business type. Are you in accounting?”

Sam shook his head. “Guess again.”

“Recruitment?” It wasn’t a stretch. Sam had been one of the most extroverted kids in their high school.

“Nope.”

“You’d better tell me then.”

“Babies.”

“Babies?”

“I deliver them. I’m the chair of the obstetrics department.”

“Oh my goodness, Sam, I had no idea. When we were lab partners in biology, you passed out the minute we cut into the frog.”

Sam doubled over in laughter. “That poor little froggy. He didn’t deserve to die.”

“You always made me do the cutting, yet here you are.” Amy grabbed his hand. “I’m impressed, Sam. There was never any doubt you would be a success, but to see you here is—”

Mrs. Sayer cleared her throat. She was watching their interaction with a look of astonishment.

Sam grinned at her. “Why isn’t Amy the one, Joanne?”

Mrs. Sayer looked at Sam, then back at Amy’s file. When she spoke, her tone was less certain. “For one, Nurse Edwards neglected to mention that she was from Garland Grove. Then there is her background. It’s large hospitals in tourist destinations. She’s not a suitable match for us, Dr. Griffin. I didn’t know that you . . . and she . . .”

“Amy grew up here, just like me. We graduated the same year. She was valedictorian. I was salutatorian.”

“He got a B in biology,” Amy said, punching Sam’s arm. “Otherwise, we would’ve tied for valedictorian.”

“Did not,” Sam blurted. “The B was in Latin. I spent the entire semester complaining to Mr. Barstow about how useless Latin was. Then I got to med school and had to learn it all over again.”

“So, Mrs. Sayer,” Amy asked, “who better to fill in for you than someone born right here at Memorial?”

Still Mrs. Sayer appeared unmoved.

“C’mon, Joanne,” Sam said, turning on the charm Amy remembered. “I want to work with my old buddy. Make it happen? It can be your Christmas present to me. Pretty please?”

“Dr. Griffin, do I need to remind you who does the hiring?”

“Joanne, Joanne, Joanne. Sweet, talented, wonderful Joanne.” Sam lowered himself to a knee as if proposing marriage. “Say yes, and I’ll bring you a caramel cream frappe from the cafeteria.”

Mrs. Sayer looked down at him for several moments before the slightest of smiles crossed her lips. “Make it a grande from Lula’s, and you have a deal.”

Sam hopped back to his feet, picked her up, and spun her around. “You’re a peach, Joanne. I don’t care how tough you think you are—you’re a kitty cat in my eyes.”

“Put me down, Dr. Griffin.” Her tone was stern, but she couldn’t suppress the giggle that made her seem almost human. He set her down, and she turned to face Amy. “You will start Monday morning, Nurse Edwards. Marilyn will show you where you’ll be staying and provide you with the details of your time here.”

For just a moment Amy wondered if she was jumping in too fast. Would having Mrs. Sayer looking over her shoulder be worth the aggravation?

Yeah, she decided. It would be worth it. Because she was home.

*So, play nice, Amy.*

“Thank you, Mrs. Sayer.”

“I’ll let you guys iron out the details,” Sam cut in as he headed for the door. “I’m late for my next appointment.”

“Have a good afternoon, Dr. Griffin.” She waited until he

was gone before continuing. “Nurse Edwards, there’s one more thing.”

*Oh, boy.*

“Yes, ma’am?”

The bemusement was gone. She was back to business. She leveled Amy with a stare that might scare the daylights out of a rookie nurse. “Don’t assume that your friendship with Dr. Griffin gives you *carte blanche* to do as you please. I run a tight ship here, and I will expect you to work hard. Am I clear?”

Amy didn’t hesitate. “I don’t know any other way.”



Dr. Andrew Bennett woke up covered in sweat. The heat in the doctors’ lounge was working overtime. He squeezed his eyes shut to push away the weariness that came from four hours sleeping in a lumpy recliner. It was a simple act that had gotten him through many late night hours in college and med school and through the marathon shifts as a resident in Manhattan. Back then he’d thought nothing could compare to the grind of being the low man on the OB-physician totem pole but the last week at Garland Grove made him think otherwise.

Why was Hazel allowed to retire before Christmas?

And why had they let the position remain open for two weeks?

Sure, Nurse Hazel Largent was as crusty as an old sailor. Andrew had never seen a smile cross her lips, even during those miraculous moments when they brought new life into the world. Hazel always focused on the job at hand, even when Andrew’s partner, Sam, implored her to enjoy herself. Some staff said Hazel didn’t have it in her to enjoy much of

anything. Behind her back, they called her Drill Sergeant Largent, The Dictator, and worse.

And now she was gone. Retired. To a condo on the Texas coast.

And Garland Grove Memorial hadn't run the same since.

The other nurses were good. Some very good. But none were Hazel. When she was on the unit, Andrew could step away for a quiet dinner at home or for a couple hours of sleep and know that everything would be fine. Hazel knew when to call him and when to let him enjoy his personal time.

The first week after Hazel's departure, he'd tried to break away twice. Once to pick up some Christmas presents for his parents, and another time to catch up on sleep he'd missed while delivering the Wyler twins. Both times the charge nurse called him back. Both times were false alarms. He gave up after that and felt like a zombie as he sat in the physicians' lounge, waiting for Kelsey McNamee's contractions to grow stronger.

Now, to make matters worse, Joanne Sayer had found a traveling nurse to fill in through the holidays.

A traveling nurse. Basically a hired gun who came in when nobody else could be found. A person who had no ties to Garland Grove and little motivation to step up their game when the job demanded. Just a warm body, really.

That wasn't good enough.

Andrew plucked his cellphone from the end table next to the recliner and opened his email. It was time to let Joanne know how he felt about her decision. It was time to let her know how he felt about *a lot* of things. Such as how she treated nurses, the people who do the heavy lifting that kept small hospitals like Garland Grove from slipping into

oblivion. Sam would give him heck for sending the email. Sam always believed that everyone deserved a second chance. And a third chance. But this traveling nurse decision was going too far.

A knock sounded at the door. Julie Pickett stuck her head inside the lounge. “Dr. Bennett, Kelsey McNamee’s water just broke.”

Of course. He pocketed his phone. His email wasn’t even a sentence long. But it was time to go back to work.



As far as temporary lodging went, the house was outstanding. It was an older craftsman style located on a dead-end street with similar homes. Amy’s high school principal had raised his family in the house across the street, but they’d moved to Minneapolis after Amy’s junior year. The preacher at First Baptist used to live a couple doors away. Amy and his daughter had been buddies in elementary school but drifted apart after that.

Mrs. Sayer’s assistant, Marilyn, was a humorless woman who had moved to Garland Grove after marrying an equally humorless local who ran a print shop on the edge of town. She gave Amy a quick tour of the place. “Always turn the lights off when you leave a room and lower the heat to sixty-two when you’re at work,” she said. “This place costs enough to maintain as it is.” She glanced toward the street, ready to leave. “Will you need anything this weekend?”

“No. I’m flying back to my apartment in St. Louis to pick up some things and get my car. I’ll be gone through Sunday afternoon.”

“Fine, then.” Marilyn paused and looked around. “Don’t forget to turn down the heat.”

“Sixty-two. I got it.”

Marilyn remained rooted in place, wanting, it seemed, to say something.

Amy waited.

Marilyn finally spoke. “Dr. Griffin told me you grew up here.”

“That’s right. We lived on a farm south of town.”

“And that you volunteered at the hospital.”

“I was a candy striper for three years. Our group was the last at Memorial. I loved it. It helped me decide to become a nurse.”

Marilyn nodded. “That’s nice, but things are different. You’ll learn that Mrs. Sayer can be . . . It’s not like when you were here in high school. Remember that. And do your best.”

And with that, she was gone.