

Continuation of unedited excerpt from *Single Dad, Nurse Bride* by Lynne Marshall. Medical Romance ©

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Rikki rushed into the blood donor center at Mercy Hospital. She'd promised to donate platelets tonight, a two-hour process, and the lab closed at 7:30 p.m. The teenager from next door, who she occasionally used for a babysitter, had arrived late.

She'd donated platelets the first week of her employment when she was going through orientation and they'd mentioned there was always a shortage in pediatric oncology, and having waited the required fifty-six days, she was ready to donate again deciding to make it a routine.

Do unto others ... her favorite foster mother had always said.

After filling out the paperwork and being grilled about her sexual history—which was nil, thank you very much—she scooted back into the large over-stuffed lounger. She prepared to watch a movie on her one birthday splurge, a portable DVD player, while the nurse started the process.

To help pass the time during the long donation that night, she'd chosen her kindest foster mother's favorite movie, *Monty Python's Holy Grail*. A classic. She knew it was silly, but the two of them had always gotten such a kick out of the film when she was a young teenager. And laughing was good for the soul, the sweet Mrs. Greenspaugh had always said. After a long string of not-so great foster homes, she'd finally gotten a break with a terrific older lady. It had come at a perfect time in her life, too. Adele Greenspaugh had taught her to appreciate her individuality, and to love herself the way God had made her.

Unfortunately, she'd died and Rikki had gotten sent to the worst home of her life when she was sixteen. All the confidence Mrs. Greenspaugh had built up, "The Do-Good Witch" she'd been sent to had torn down. Well, she hadn't broken her spirit, just knocked her off balance and made her a little insecure. The room blurred with a wave of nostalgia and misty eyes for "Addy," the name Mrs. Greenspaugh had insisted Rikki call her. She shook her head and searched for a tissue.

Rikki hadn't done nearly enough laughing in her lifetime, and with good memories and her favorite movie in tow, she'd decided to do some catching up tonight.

Just after the nurse had poked her and started the IV, the donation process began. She settled into her chair, and was

about to start the movie.

A familiar voice made her freeze.

Dr. Hendricks? She bent her head forward and looked around the donor equipment just enough to see his athletic frame. Pale blue dress shirt, navy slacks with leather belt on a trim waist ... really terrific rump... Exactly what he'd been wearing that morning when he'd chewed her out.

What was he doing here? Surely he wasn't a donor. She sat back and tried to become invisible.

Unfortunately, even with several other loungers available, he chose the one right next to hers. Her heart did a quick tap dance, and she held her breath. Why did he make her so anxious?

He nodded at her.

She nodded back resisting the urge to play with her hair.

Before she knew it, Dr. Hendricks had loosened his tie, unbuttoned his collar, and started rolling up his sleeves.

Rikki reminded herself to breathe.

He glanced at her, and furrowed his brows.

She squirmed wondering what he was looking at.

"You don't usually wear your hair down at work."

"No. We're not allowed." She ran jittery fingers through near waist-length tendrils. Her thick, naturally wavy hair was the one physical feature she was most proud of, but under his

scrutiny, she doubted even that measured up to his high standards.

"I see," he said, giving no further sign of interest and snuggling back in his chair. "Okay, Sheila, hit me with your best shot."

The blood donor nurse smiled. "With veins like yours, I could do it blindfolded."

"Don't get any ideas."

He'd obviously been through this routine before. The ease with which he spoke to people at Mercy Hospital impressed Rikki. She wished she had half of his confidence.

"We'll I gotta tell you, your hair looks a heck of a lot nicer like that than that floppy knot thing you wear at work."

She'd taken a shower and washed her hair after work, and measured that it was almost long enough to cut off and give to *Care to Share Your Hair*. The organization that made wigs for chemo children required ten inches. Soon, she'd have to make an appointment to get it all cut off, but right now it took every bit of control not to preen over his backhanded compliment.

She shot him a mock offended look and caught a sparkle in his playful green eyes. Playful? Dr. Hendricks? Wasn't that an oxymoron? Time stopped for the briefest of moments, and it rattled her.

"Leave her alone." Sheila broke in and offered a grin to

Rikki. "He's just a big tease," she said as she tightened the tourniquet, flicked his vein with her finger, and rubbed it with topical disinfectant.

"Well, you should see her, Sheila, sometimes she sticks pencils in the bun, like chop sticks."

The nurse jabbed him with a large needle. He grimaced. "OK. I get your point. I'll shut up now."

"You should be ashamed of yourself. And, Rikki? Don't you dare let him do his imitation of Hank Caruthers."

Go Sheila! Why couldn't she have such poise where Dr. Hendricks was concerned? But hey, he'd noticed quite a bit about her at work. She fought off a smile.

Sheila finished her job and gathered her equipment to discard. She stopped briefly, growing serious. "How's your brother doing?"

"Things could be better. He's finishing up more chemo, so I wanted to make sure he had plenty of platelets available."

So handsome doctors who seemed to have it all together had brothers with cancer? Her heart tugged. She'd been focused on her own circumstances too much. No one made it through life without challenges, and Dr. Hendricks was no exception.

"I didn't realize your brother had cancer," Rikki said.

"Yeah, well, he's putting up a good fight."

"What kind?"

"Leukemia."

Her hand fisted on the soft rubber ball the nurse had given her to hold throughout the donation process. She forgot to let up, and her knuckles went white.

A few moments of strained silence followed. What else could she possibly say? I'm sorry? What did it matter how she felt about his brother having a life-threatening disease? She meant nothing to Dr. Hendricks.

"Has he considered a bone marrow transplant?"

"He's adopted and no one in our immediate family is a match for him."

"I'm on the National Marrow Donor Registry. Have our lab check it out. I think there's a one in forty-thousand chance he'll find a match."

Dane gave her a surprised but pleased glance. "That's a good suggestion. Well, we'll see how this next round of chemo goes."

Rikki gathered he didn't want to discuss the topic any further, and pushed play to start the DVD--anything to help distract her and chase away the awkward silence.

He stretched his shoulders and popped his neck before settling down.

"My daughters wear shoes just like that. Aren't they called Mary Janes?"

She glanced at her feet. "Yes." She flexed and pointed her toes. She'd spent one entire afternoon looking for her size of the unique shoes on the online auction network.

"I buy them for my girls because they're sturdy and have good support. Why do you wear them?"

"I like them?"

"Why don't those lacy black tights go all the way to your feet?"

How old was he? Didn't he know that leggings were back in? "They're leggings. They're not supposed to."

"I see."

If I don't look at him, maybe he'll leave me alone? She fidgeted with her hair.

"That's an interesting look with your jean skirt."

No luck. She tried not to sigh.

"I think my grandfather used to own an argyle sweater like the one you're wearing."

Growing more uncomfortable each second with his examination of her style of dress, she tried to divert his attention. "It's the retro look. So, how old are your daughters?"

"Four."

"Both of them?"

"That would make them twins."

"Ah. Right. How nice."

"Nice? It's a nightmare. I mean, what am I supposed to do with two little girls? They want to play house and dress up and have tea parties. What about football? Playing catch?" He scrubbed his face. "Before they grew hair, I'd never tied a bow in my life. Now I'm forced to be a ribbon expert."

Rikki sputtered a laugh. "Can't your wife help?" She glanced at his empty ring finger, but that didn't necessarily mean anything these days. What if she'd said the wrong thing?

His casual expression changed along with the tone of his voice. No longer jovial, he spoke softly. "I'm a single father."

Watch for *Single Dad, Nurse Bride* on sale in stores in the UK January 2008, and via eHarlequin US Medical Romance March 2008.