

Unedited excerpt

Scene set up: Mallory Glenn, RN, has been chosen by her fellow nurses to talk to the hospital director of medicine about the current state of patient-to-nurse staffing. She's had a secret crush on him for years. But now that he is an administrator instead of a bedside doctor, he has changed. This scene starts mid chapter one.

I hope you enjoy this excerpt. If you like it and you currently reside in the UK, it is in stores for the month of July and in stores in Australia in August. It is also available via Harlequin UK website and Amazon UK. Unfortunately, this book will not be available in the U.S.

"Come." The baritone voice of J.T. Prescott resonated when Mallory rapped on his office door.

She pushed through the entry and momentarily stood still taking everything in. He sat tall behind a large institution oak desk busily using every spare moment to sign off on yet a few more papers. On a quick and quiet inhale, she remembered just how imposing of a figure he cut.

"Sit," he said without looking up.

Wearing a black silky-looking knit polo shirt without his usual white coat on, she was surprised by his strong and fit arms. He made a jab at his coal black hair with a few silver threads woven through it, as though searching for the perfect

wording to end his report. Damn if she'd forgotten how much she liked his strong, aquiline nose.

"I'll be right with you," he said.

Grateful to sit, so her knees would quit quaking, Mallory did as she was told. Up until a year ago, he'd been out of bounds and her unrequited pining--right, more like lustful wishes--had been just that. Now, however, she had to admit she felt particularly vulnerable to his charm. Except, too bad he hadn't any charm left. All that remained of the man she remembered was his damn good looks. She forced her glance away before he could look up and find her gawking at him.

Gorgeous framed photographs of scenery from around the United States and the world, both in black and white, and color, lined his office walls. She'd heard photography was one of his hobbies. One striking red cliff from the Grand Canyon rim caught her attention. How in the world had anyone managed to snap that shot? Having heard of Dr. Prescott's escapades at the hospital water cooler, she figured he'd probably taken it suspended from an airplane upside down, or while skydiving.

He still hadn't looked up.

Mallory took the opportunity to study him more. She'd always been fascinated with his long fingers and strong hands and wondered if he played the piano. Octaves and arpeggios

would be a cinch for someone with a reach like that.

Chastising herself for not focusing on why she was there, she glanced away and discovered a picture of a dark-haired boy on his desk. He looked pre-teen and full of mischief with wild black hair and an elfin smile. It had to be his son.

While she skipped back and forth between father and son, Dr. Prescott lifted his head and impaled her with an intense blue stare. Her world stopped for an instant. She thought she'd gone into cardiac arrest until she forced herself to breathe.

He plopped his elbows on the desk, fisted one hand inside the other, rested his chin on top, and gave her an all-business look. "We'll have to be brief because I'm leaving tonight for Kenya and still have a million things to do. What brings you here, Mallory?"

Why had she agreed to be the sacrificial lamb for all of the nurses again? Oh, right, because they asked her to be their spokesperson.

Frantically chasing after every thought rushing out of her brain, Mallory bit her lower lip and forced herself to focus. "Nurse staffing."

"Hasn't the hospital addressed this issue before?"

"Not to everyone's satisfaction."

He offered a telling look--must we go through this old story again? Being the sole purpose of her appointment, she ignored his expression and forged ahead.

"As a group, we nurses of Five West are deeply concerned about patient safety under the current conditions. They've asked me to speak to you about it."

When had he changed? He used to be the perfect doctor with impeccable bedside manners and a caring heart. Now, he was nothing more than a strikingly good-looking man with a dead stare behind a desk. Mallory missed the doc she used to know on the wards.

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Great. Just what he needed, another headache before he could take off on the long overdue vacation.

This trip would be the first since his divorce, and he intended to enjoy every second of his three-week photography safari in East Africa.

And now, Miss Perky Redhead, Mallory Glenn from Five West, insisted on robbing him of more of his precious time. But as Medical Director of L.A. Mercy Hospital, it went with the territory.

He tossed his pen on the desk and leaned back in his chair. "OK. Shoot, Mallory."

She looked taken aback. Her large amber eyes widened and she went pale. Oh hell, that wasn't how he'd meant to come off. He briefly considered searching his drawer for an ammonia ampoule in case she passed out. But she didn't give him a chance. The color returned to her cheeks in record time and blossomed to bright red.

"We on Five West feel understaffed. There is evidence regarding the relationship between nurse staffing and rates of hospital acquired infection, urinary tract infections, and pressure ulcers," she said, leaning forward in the chair, fingers fidgeting.

"And the evidence is not compelling," he added.

Mallory locked eyes with him, and it pleasantly surprised him. She'd always been straightforward and sincere, it had been something he'd particularly liked about her, but why did she seem nothing less than stubborn today?

"We currently have two nurses injured on duty, one indefinitely off the job. And our rate of incident reports for unusual occurrences, patient falls, and medication errors, has increased over the last three months."

"Nurses get injured because of poor body mechanics. Mercy Hospital sends you to annual updates, yet you nurses still manage to throw out your backs."

"When you have a two-hundred pound patient suddenly fall on you, there is no such thing as proper body mechanics. The goal is to keep the patients safe and to get them back in bed. Our backs pay the price."

"Correct me if I'm wrong, but don't we have a hospital lift team?"

She squinted and shot him a contemptuous look--one that said, "You just don't get it since you've left bedside care, do you?"--then quickly worked to cover it up, doing a poor job, he noted.

"It isn't always in the patient's best interest to leave them lying on the floor while we wait for the lift team to materialize. Not to mention how that must look to other patients and their visitors."

Okay, so he was a bit out of touch with patient care these days, but really she was acting as if it were the end of health care as we know it in the twenty-first century.

What had started as a routine meeting had turned into a heated debate. He was a skilled and highly paid professional, and he knew how to de-escalate tension. But he felt particularly wiped out today, maybe because of the candle burning at both ends he'd been doing lately--hospital administration, constant meetings for the new rehab wing, making father son bonding time,

and vacation planning.

He'd especially felt exhausted when he'd made out the huge alimony and child support check earlier. His ex-wife had raked him over the coals in their divorce settlement, and now she was fighting for full custody of their ten-year-old son, Corey, so she could get even more money.

No way would he let that happen. He intended to stay involved in his son's life and that meant having him live at least fifty percent of the time with him. Some day he hoped to have Corey accompany him on his trips. The boy already showed an uncanny eye for photography. But ...

Focus Prescott.

"Let's back up. What is the current patient-to-nurse ratio on Five West?"

"In writing? Or reality?"

"Both."

"As you know, we are considered a general medical-surgical ward, therefore our numbers are supposed to be one nurse to four patients. Yet we seem to be the dump-on-us ward. Frequently we are short staffed, and everyone has to take as many as five patients, and occasionally when we have a late-shift admission, six patients. It's killing us."

"That's a bit extreme, isn't it?"

"Two of my patients are long term ventilator patients, yet I still have to take four patients when it should be three, max. Three of the other nurses have five patients today because our ward is full. Our nursing supervisor couldn't spare an extra nurse. It's a joke to even think about giving patient education. No one has time."

She paused just long enough to make sure he was listening. He made his most studious expression.

"Last week we had a near code blue."

He watched her, digesting what she'd said. She'd pulled her long, thick braid over her shoulder and wrapped and unwrapped the bottom of the red tendrils around her fingers in a nervous yet intriguing manner. He'd always wondered how her shiny, silky hair felt.

"The patient had become short of breath and used the bedside call light. We were all so busy that it was several minutes before anyone went into the room. By that time his lips were blue and his cheeks mottled. His O2 sats were in the high eighties. He could have gone into respiratory arrest. I shiver to think what could have happened if I'd gone in a minute later."

Her cheeks were hot with color, her hands had balled into fists, and an earnest gold glint appeared in her eyes. She

wasn't asking about more money, she was asking for better staffing. Why? Because she cared about the patients. Well, so did he. Hadn't patient care been foremost on his mind when he used to be the attending doctor? But he also had a budget to balance, especially with the drain of the new rehab construction project. And his statistics didn't bear out what she'd claimed.

"I can only tell you, Ms. Glenn, that there is no hard and fast evidence for the number of staff RN's to hospital mortality, or the rates of hospital acquired pneumonia, or for that matter, the number of RN's and hours worked adding to or subtracting from hospital length of stay."

"We work in the real world, Dr. Prescott. When you used to work at the bedside, you understood. Now, your statistics can't possibly explain why more nurses are getting burned out on our ward. But if you must quote statistics, I've got a few of my own." She made an agitated scratch at her pert nose.

Being in vacation mode, it occurred to him that he enjoyed watching her. If he were honest with himself, he'd admit he'd always enjoyed looking at Mallory Glenn.

"Studies show that increasing the number of RN's on any given ward doesn't appear to increase hospital costs. In fact, it may even decrease costs when you factor in the extreme expense of adverse patient outcomes with lower nurse-to-patient

ratios requiring more extensive treatments."

So his latest debate opponent had come prepared. He liked a good sparring partner; they made for good lovers. And he'd always had a soft spot for redheads; his very first girlfriend had been one. There was something fragile and alluring about Mallory he couldn't quite put his finger on, though when it came to nursing she was a diligent and competent nurse, anything but fragile. He'd always seen her give expert patient care on the wards. And he'd also always enjoyed watching her walk from behind. Great hips.

If his mind was wandering to her face and figure, he must be losing the debate. Or it had been too long since he'd had a woman in his arms. His lips almost twitched into a smile. Maybe he was losing ground--he'd use his best defense. "OK. We'll do a study on your ward. I'll get on it the minute I return from my vacation."

"But we need extra help now, not next month."

"I'll approve overtime. If anyone wants to work extra shifts they may."

He felt the need to shake out his feet. He'd been sitting in his chair for so many hours having meetings and doing last minute paper work that they'd gone to sleep. He tried to stretch out his legs, but his feet moved like dead weights.

"Well, when you do your study," she said with clear frustration in her voice, "I suggest you consider both nurse and patient satisfaction survey's. We're slipping in patient satisfaction, and we're losing perfectly good nurses to our competitors because of better staffing." She swept a long, milky white arm through the air, making an exasperated gesture. "And in case you haven't noticed, there is a nursing shortage in California. Quality of patient care is an issue that can't be ignored."

With fire kindling in her eyes, Mallory wouldn't leave without being invited. He'd have to use the old stand-up-to-announce-this-meeting-is-over trick. He rolled back his chair and pushed off to stand. His feet and lower legs felt like dead tree stumps. He eased himself back into his chair, attempting to hide his concern.

"Is something wrong, Dr. Prescott?"

"I'm fine. Just getting antsy to leave for vacation." He'd try his male charm to lure her out of his office. "May we pick this meeting back up in say," he looked at his watch, " ... three weeks and one day?" He cocked his head, raised his brows, and smiled.

She disguised her disappointment with grace. Her glance swept downward toward her lap, as though she were weighing the

proposition. Thick brown lashes almost touched her cheeks. She pursed pink gloss-covered lips while she thought.

He felt compelled to offer a crumb of hope.

"Mallory, I promise to give the staffing issue my undivided attention as soon as I get back. I'll be rested and raring to go. In the meantime, you have an opportunity to make some extra money."

Priding himself on knowing his staff, he knew that once upon a time Mallory Glenn had been a teenaged single mother. And now, barely looking over thirty, but having to be several years older than that, she had a child ready for college and no husband to help defray the costs. Surely she could use the extra hours and overtime pay.

She'd caught his drift and prepared to stand. She nodded at him and stretched her mouth into a satisfying smile--the nicest thing he'd seen all day. "I'm going to hold you to it, Dr. Prescott. For old time's sake."

He grinned as she nervously played with her braid. "It's a deal. For old time's sake. If my feet hadn't gone to sleep on me, I'd see you out, but ..."

"That's fine." She turned to leave, and he watched slender legs walk toward the door, legs that could be downright striking given sexier shoes than those dowdy crepe soled nurses' clogs.

A narrow waist and shapely hips filled out the uniform skirt in a most intriguing manner. At least something he'd always considered pleasant on the job hadn't changed.

Get a life, Prescott. Better yet, find a date.