

***Lady of the Night* by Emilie Richards**
Excerpt

Chapter One

In the beginning there was nothing. An absence of form and sound. An absence of pain and fear. She created the void, and the void was good.

Then there was the voice.

The voice was life. It was life calling back life. And the voice would not be silenced.

The voice moved through the shattered wreckage that had once been her soul, slowly weaving it back together. I will not be denied, it insisted. Once again, you will exist.

Then, as always, the voice was extinguished.

The young woman opened her eyes and there was light. It beat against her eyeballs with an intensity that sent shivers of pain dancing through her body. Pain. Pain was familiar and to be avoided.

Protecting herself instinctively, she sought the darkness. But this time there was no escape.

When she reopened her eyes, they were wide in confusion. Words formed to summon back emptiness, but words spun it farther away. *Please. Please. Not again.* Each word brought her closer to reality. Each word burned away another layer of the mist that cloaked her vision.

Finally, there was sight. On a stark white backdrop lay a hand. The fingers were long and graceful, with nails cut to the quick. As she watched, the hand moved convulsively, forming a fist, then relaxed. Over and over it practiced until, as if now ready for the long journey, it moved toward her hair.

Suspended in midair, the searching fingers stilled. It's not too late, the woman called into the darkness. But the blessed darkness was gone. She was irrevocably alive.

Her hand found her head. Trembling fingers fluttered through the impossibly short strands that layered it. Slowly, inch by inch, she covered her scalp, coming to rest on a thin scar that zigzagged from her forehead to the middle of her skull. Her whole body twitching,, she dropped her hand and focused her eyes on her lap.

The training of a lifetime stilled her quaking limbs. She had gained a tenuous control when at last her eyelids fluttered up once more. Careful not to touch herself again, the young woman began a slow examination of her surroundings.

The white backdrop was a sheet; the firm support behind her, a bed. The light was from a small window to the side. It was covered with heavy mesh, more than a screen, less than bars. There would be no escape through it.

Her visual range disclosed white walls, a steel door with a small window covered with the same mesh. There was nothing else to distract her. The images were pieces of a puzzle, an old-fashioned cardboard jigsaw with no picture on the box to use as a model.

Then, finally, there was sound. A low keening came from the side of the room the woman had not yet examined. As she turned her head one inch at a time, the source of the noise was revealed.

An old woman sat on a bed like her own, rocking back and forth, her eyes blank, her body rigid. The old woman's arms tensed as they spasmodically gripped her body in a fierce, unloving hug. Back and forth she rocked, her rhythm as certain as anything in the universe.

The young woman snapped her head to the front and squeezed her eyes shut as the familiar panic overwhelmed her. But there was no longer a void to which she could retreat. The sound of her own screams destroyed the darkness forever.

A few minutes earlier, Joshua Martane had quietly closed the door to room 815 behind him as he stepped out into the dimly lit corridor. Closing the door quietly was one of those habitual responses that made no sense upon examination. The two women on the other side of the door would not have cared if he had slammed it loudly enough to be heard in the emergency room on the ground floor. Both of them were so out of touch with reality that the sound would have been completely ignored, if indeed it even registered.

Old Mrs. Tryon wouldn't have stopped rocking. Years of therapy, medication and finally electric shock treatments had failed to make her take notice of the world surrounding her. A loving but resigned daughter had recently admitted Mrs. Tryon to this the psychiatric ward of New Orleans City Hospital as the first step toward permanent hospitalization. There she would probably rock away her days, locked away forever from the world that she hadn't acknowledged in almost a decade.

And then there was the patient in the other bed. Joshua leaned against the wall beside the door and thought about the young woman lying in the room behind him. Jane Doe. The “Doe” part fit. She was delicately boned and sleek. Her hair, cropped brutally short, was the soft, misty brown of a yearling. If she moved, he knew it would be as gracefully as a deer running through the woods. But she didn’t move. She lay quietly in her bed, sometimes opening huge blue eyes to stare straight ahead. The eyes were like a doe’s, too. A doe who has not survived her encounter with the hunter.

Jane Doe affected Joshua in a way that no other patient ever had. In all the years of his training, in his experience with hundreds of patients, no one had touched him like the young woman lying in room 815. It wasn’t the huge eyes, or the almost transparent skin stretched tightly over a delicate bone structure that was much too prominent. It was who she was and who she wasn’t. It was the mystery that surrounded her, the secrets that would never be unlocked. It was the waste of potential.

Perhaps if she were to awaken from her long slumber, she would sit up in the bed and destroy his fantasies forever. Certainly, if she was what the police insisted she was, the aristocratic features were inappropriate. If she was truly what everyone assumed, then she was a woman who had already given up on herself long before she was found bleeding and abandoned in a vacant lot.

“What planet are you on?”

Joshua lifted his eyes to those of the African-American woman standing in front of him, hands on her hips and a smile twisting her full, painted lips. “Betty, I didn’t hear you coming,” he said, pulling himself back to the present.

“You looked a million miles away.”

“It’s been a very long day.”

“Come get some coffee.”

Obediently—because everyone obeyed Betty—Joshua followed the woman down the hall. Betty St. Clair ran the eighth floor of N.O.C.H. with an iron hand she didn't bother to encase in a velvet glove. She knew everything, everyone and every nook and cranny of the extensive ward. Nothing escaped her notice, including one Joshua Martane and his interest in the young woman in room 815.

“When are you going to start dressing like a psychologist's supposed to?”

“When I start acting like a psychologist's supposed to.” He watched her face light up in a huge grin that revealed sparkling, uneven teeth.

It was a familiar exchange. Joshua was a tall, broad-shouldered man who wore his faded blue jeans, long-sleeved white shirt and carelessly knotted tie with the flair of a gentleman dressed in formal attire. Betty was one of the few women who encountered him who was not impressed. Her methods of trying to get him to adhere to her standards were always well meant and completely lacking in subtlety.

“Just once I'd like to see you in a dark suit and a tie that matched what you were wearin',” she drawled. “Then we could tell at a glance that you were on the staff.”

“You'll just have to tell by the good work I do.”

“Been doing any good work in room 815 today?”

Joshua lifted one shoulder in half a shrug. The pervasive disappointment he felt at not seeing any changes in Jane Doe settled back over him.

Betty nodded in sympathy, then turned, squeezing past the nurse's desk to the medicine room, where a pot of hot coffee was always in residence. Joshua followed her, nodding to the two psychiatric aides and another R.N. who were leaning against the long counters, sipping cups of the dark New Orleans brew.

“A party and I wasn't invited?” Betty asked with a toss of her black curls.

“Trish and Malcolm are out on the floor,” the blond nurse explained in a voice that conveyed her boredom. “Most of the patients are in occupational therapy.”

“Thank you, Sarah. I know where the patients are,” Betty said.

It was a familiar battle, and Joshua leaned back to watch. Sarah, aloof and elegant, disliked her job and disliked Betty’s authority even more. Betty wouldn’t give an inch. To Joshua they were symbolic of the two kinds of people who worked on the unit. Betty was strong but compassionate. Sarah was strong-willed and judgmental. Luckily the staff had more Bettys than Sarahs.

Before the discussion could intensify, one of the aides turned to Joshua.

“How was your girlfriend?”

All eyes focused on Joshua, and he attempted a smile. “Quiet.”

“He likes ‘em quiet,” Betty confided to everyone. “He likes to do the talking himself.”

“I get my chance in room 815,” Joshua agreed, purposely keeping any lingering sadness from his voice. The hospital staff, trained to pick up on every nuance of a conversation, did not need more fuel for their teasing. His special interest in the young woman in room 815 was already a topic of gossip.

“I was working the emergency room when that girl was brought in,” Sarah said. Sarah rarely teased. Early in her assignment to the eighth floor, she had realized that Joshua would not support her rebellion against Betty. Sarah had worked hard since that day to pay him back. “You were filling in that night, weren’t you, Joshua?”

He nodded, unsmiling now. He rarely refused to help a colleague who needed a break. The long-term interactions, the giving of himself over and over again, made his job worthwhile. The night the young woman had been brought to the hospital in an ambulance, bleeding and unconscious, had been the beginning of just that kind of involvement.

“You should have seen our Joshua that night,” Sarah recalled smugly. “He was a young lion. He was everywhere, in everybody’s way, trying to make sure that girl got only the best of care.” She paused, minutely adjusting the belt on her crisp white pant suit. “I had to shave the girl’s head. You’d have thought Joshua was going to cry.”

Joshua’s eyes didn’t flicker, nor did his expression change. His rugged features remained under strict control. It was a skill he had developed to perfection in his youth.

The others took up the discussion, turning it away from Sarah’s venom back to good-natured teasing. Joshua sipped his coffee and remembered.

Jane Doe had been brought in five months before. It had been late at night. Joshua had survived that particular evening on black coffee. There had been two dead-on-arrivals already that night. One had been a fatal stabbing in a barroom brawl, another a car accident. He had comforted relatives, held strangers’ hands. He had jounced a colicky baby on his knee and wiped away a little girl’s tears as she was prepared to go to radiology for a broken arm.

When the ambulance came to a halt at the emergency room door once again, its siren still screaming, he had steeled himself for another crisis and waited quietly by the door as the well-trained emergency team did their job. The young woman who had been carried past him on a stretcher was too pale and still to be alive, but the team had refused to give up on her.

It was in the young woman’s favor that she had been brought to this particular hospital. Used to just such emergencies, the staff was prepared. The faint flicker of life had been nurtured. Joshua had watched as a cheap, flashy red nightgown was pulled from her body and life-saving machinery was attached instead. Her waist-length hair, matted with mud and blood, had been cut, and her head shaved to prepare her for the surgery that had to be performed to close a gaping head wound. Her face had been scrubbed of its gaudy makeup. The impersonal touch of the nurses had angered him, and he had protested. They had laughed and continued to treat their patient with rough precision. And they had saved her life.

Later he had retreated to the coffee shop with the police sergeant who had followed the ambulance. The man was a lifelong friend. Joshua Martane and Sam Long had grown up on the

same block in the Irish Channel section of New Orleans. Together they had fought their way from poverty and petty juvenile crime to a different life. Native sons, both were determined, in different ways, to improve the city that was their home.

“What do you know about the girl?” Joshua had asked Sam.

Golden-haired Sam, with male model good looks and a deadly aim that had found its target more than once, shook his head, signaling the sleepy coffee shop waitress for a refill. “Another prostitute murder. Only this time he didn’t quite finish the job. If the girl survives, we may be able to nail the bastard.”

“Tell me what you know.”

“Why?” Sam was curious. Although he and Joshua stayed in touch, it was rare for his friend to ask him about a case.

“I may have to deal with her. I’d like to know what to expect.”

“Your kind doesn’t ‘deal’ with her kind,” Sam said bluntly. “She’s a lost cause.”

“Tell me.”

“We found her facedown in the mud in the vacant lot behind Hootie Barn’s Tavern off Basin Street. One of his ‘patrons’ tipped us off.”

“How long had she been there?”

“Not too long, or she’d be dead. Have you been outside lately?”

Joshua shook his head.

“It’s cold out there, and she wasn’t wearing much. Between the blood loss and the exposure, I’ll be surprised if she makes it.”

“What makes you think she’s a prostitute?”

Sam laughed, his upper lip curling back to reveal strong white teeth. "Hootie Barn's neighborhood isn't for ladies. I don't think the girl was doing social work. You saw how she was dressed, how she was made up. All the details fit with the rest of the prostitute murders we've seen. Only this time the perp got careless."

"Go on."

"Well, usually, he beats them good. And then he strangles them with a scarf he leaves around their necks as his personal calling card. He did everything exactly the same this time, but he forgot to make sure she wasn't breathing when he was done."

"Don't you think that was a pretty big error?"

"I'm sure he'll think so when he reads the story in tomorrow's paper. Of course, she may be dead by then."

"No."

"You know something I don't?"

"She's going to make it."

Sam had searched his friend's face. As always, he wondered how someone who looked so much like a fallen angel could ever have chosen a more unlikely profession. Joshua was obviously tired, his wavy hair in disarray around his haggard features. Only his slate-gray eyes were still snapping with life. "You got a direct pipeline to the Almighty, Josh? Did they give you one when you graduated from your fancy seminary?"

"She's going to live."

"After what she's been through, that may not be a blessing."

She had lived. Although sometimes Joshua wondered if Sam had been right. What sort of celestial joke was it that the beautiful young woman had hovered near death for three months, finally to come out of her coma unable to respond to the world around her?

At first the doctors thought that she had suffered serious brain damage from the head wound she'd sustained. Now the opinion was that the shock of her near encounter with death and the traumatic circumstances leading up to it had thrown her mind into a place it would never find its way back from. Five months from the day of the tragedy, she was catatonic. Alive and completely unaware, she was one of the living dead.

"Martane here just won't give up, will you?" Betty was addressing her question to Joshua, giving him an elbow in the ribs. "If sheer willpower could cure anyone, he'd have that girl walking and talking in no time."

"I thought I saw a flicker of response today," Joshua said, finishing the last of his coffee. "When I was talking to her, her head turned slightly, as if to follow the sound, and her eyes seemed less dull."

"And old Mrs. Tryon walked on water," Sarah scoffed. "We have a miracle worker among us."

Joshua allowed his eyes to drift to the coolly elegant Sarah. She stood defiantly, but her arms were clasped across her breasts in an instinctive effort to protect herself. Joshua's scathing tongue was a well-documented fact. It was just one more way that he had never fitted the stereotype of the kind, forbearing pastor he had trained to become. This time, however, he let Sarah's sarcasm pass.

"Did you know," Betty asked seriously, "that Dr. Bartram has started the procedure to send Jane Doe to Mandeville along with Mrs. Tryon?"

Joshua hadn't known, but it came as no surprise. The young woman had shown no real signs of progress. Medically she had improved enough not to need any special attention. She could not be allowed to continue to take up a bed needed for other patients. At Mandeville, she would receive custodial care. She would be kept alive.

"It's been coming," he said, running his long fingers through his springy dark hair. "I'm surprised Bartram hasn't done it before—"

A piercing scream interrupted the rest of his sentence. It was followed by another and then another. Joshua slammed his coffee cup on the counter, turning to run out of the room, around the desk and down the hall in the direction of the screams. Patients were gathering in the corridor, some talking excitedly, some crying like lost children. A small group trailed out of the door of the cafeteria where voluntary occupational therapy was held. One old man clutched a green-and-red pot holder with the reverence of a child snuggling a favorite blanket.

Trailing behind Joshua, the rest of the staff stopped to organize the milling patients, leaving Joshua and Sarah to confront the source of the screams. Six paces ahead of the blond nurse, Joshua stopped at the door of room 815. The wails were coming from behind it.

"Let me handle this," Joshua told Sarah quickly. "If we both go in, it will scare her even more." He pushed the door open and strode to the screaming young woman's bedside.

The change in Jane Doe was so vast that for a moment Joshua could only stare. She was sitting up, although when he had left her she had been supine. Her hands were covering her face. As he watched, her screams quieted to whimpered pleas of "No, no," that seemed to be wrenched from the deepest part of her being.

Joshua searched his memory for the best way to deal with a patient emerging from a catatonic state. He'd researched just such a topic in the journals and textbooks that he had studied. Nothing he could remember began to address the present situation. Throwing the part of him that was a careful, objective psychologist out the window, he assumed the role of comforter.

“You’re all right,” he said quietly. “You’re in a safe place. You’re all right.” Since Jane Doe never had any visitors, there was no chair by her bedside. Joshua pulled one from the side of Mrs. Tryon’s bed and sat on its edge. “You’re all right,” he reassured the young woman.

Flinging her hands from her face, the young woman turned her head and stared as if she recognized him. Joshua was flooded with feeling. He couldn’t begin to count the hours that he had sat by her bed, talking to her, asking her to begin the return to life. Now she had. Successes were few. He had not expected one from his work with Jane Doe.

Her hand lay stiffly on the bed, and Joshua reached for it. Immediately he knew he was making a mistake. He could frighten her back into herself by moving too fast. Her return must be gradual and non-threatening. But the young woman did not pull away. Her hand felt fragile and surprisingly cool. He clasped it firmly but without force, letting her know that she could pull away at any time.

“You’re going to be all right,” he repeated. “You’re safe here. Nothing is going to hurt you.”

She was trembling. The delicately boned hand was alive in his. Her whole body was reacting to the ordeal. But she seemed to be trying to relax, to gain control. The whimpering was less frequent, interspersed with short periods of silence. As he soothed her, Joshua studied the frightened blue eyes. No longer blank, they were sparkling with tears that caught in the heavy fringe of charcoal lashes surrounding them.

“You’re going to be all right,” he said again as he smiled at her.

The door opened with a bang, and Sarah stalked into the room. “This’ll calm her down,” she stated. “Fifty milligrams of Thorazine. It should put her out for a while.”

“Get out,” Joshua said calmly, not taking his eyes off Jane Doe.

“It’s a standing order Dr. Bartram left on her chart. Move out of the way.”

“Sarah, get out of this room right now.” Joshua’s voice rang with calm authority, but the tension between the psychologist and the nurse was affecting the young woman in the bed

between them. She began to whimper again. Snatching her hand from Joshua's, she thrashed helplessly in her bed.

With a sigh, Joshua stood and strode to the side of the irate nurse. "If you don't get out of here right now," he said with perfect control, "I'll carry you out and toss you in the hall. Savvy?"

Joshua was a six-foot-three tower of authority. Sarah turned and stomped out, muttering threats and slamming the door behind her. Joshua ran his fingers through his hair before he moved once again to the bedside chair.

"They're trying to help," he said to reassure the thrashing young woman. "But I think you need something else, don't you? I know you're frightened, but you can get through this without a shot. I know you can."

She stopped her restless movements, calming at the sound of Joshua's voice. He saw her take a deep breath and let it out slowly. With fascination, he watched her do it again. It was a healthy response to fear, a search for control that was encouraging. She whimpered twice, taking deep breaths in between until finally, she was silent. Her eyes were focused on her hands, but slowly, inch by inch, she raised her eyes to his.

Joshua fought down the urge to reach for her hand again. Instead he put all the comfort he wanted to give her in his own eyes and voice. "Are you feeling better now?"

She nodded. Joshua drew in a harsh breath. He had not expected an answer. "You look as though you are," he said carefully.

"Where am I?"

Her voice was sweet, filled with long-suppressed music. Joshua wanted to dance or sing to its notes.

He tried not to show his excitement. "You're in the New Orleans City Hospital."

“New Orleans?” She lowered her eyes to her hands again, twisting her fingers relentlessly in her lap as she tried to absorb his meaning. Joshua watched as a single tear trailed a path to her chin to fall unnoticed on the sheet below. “I don’t understand.”

“I’m sure you must feel very confused.”

“Who am I?” She lifted her eyes to his as though she might find the answer to her most crucial question in them. “Who am I?” she repeated. “Please tell me.”

He had not considered the possibility that she would remember nothing. Joshua would have given the young woman anything he could, but her identity was something he could not help her with. She was Jane Doe, brutalized prostitute. Beyond that, no one knew anything.

The police had made a detailed investigation into the facts surrounding the attempted murder. They had circulated pictures, talked to everyone who might know, searched for information among their informants. When the trail had ended with no clues, they had stopped trying. Had she been something other than what they knew her to be, they might have continued trying to learn her identity. But in the scheme of things, what was the identity of one comatose hooker worth?

“Can you remember anything at all?” Joshua asked.

Her eyes were the deep velvety blue of a forest wild flower. They were also clouded with fear, and she shook her head. “Who am I?” she repeated with a trace of desperation.

“I’m sorry. I don’t know.”

She drew in her breath in a low wail, tears rushing down her cheeks to fall on the sheet tucked over her breasts. “Oh, my God,” she moaned.

Joshua sat on the bed. Instinctively he reached for her and pillowed her head against his shoulder. Across the room, Mrs. Tryon was rocking back and forth, unaware of the drama unfolding beside her. Joshua took up the old woman’s motion, soothing the shattered patient crying helplessly against his shoulder.

The door opened suddenly, and a short, ruddy-faced man marched in. "What's going on in here?" he demanded, his voice a heavily accented intrusion in the quiet room.

The young woman stiffened, throwing her hands to her face as Joshua rose to stand beside her. Dr. Bartram moved to the bedside, grabbing her chin. "So, there's been a change." He jerked her head up, pushing her hands away in irritation. "Do you know where you are?"

Wide-eyed, she tried to shake her head.

"Still can't talk," the psychiatrist noted.

"She can talk," Joshua said between clenched teeth. "Give her a chance."

"Do you know where you are?" the psychiatrist repeated.

The young woman began to shake her head, which was now free from Dr. Bartram's grasp. She stopped and then nodded slowly. "Yes, I'm in the New Orleans City Hospital."

"Good." He lifted her wrist as if to feel her pulse. "Tell me your name."

"I... I don't know." She began to cry again.

"She's disoriented," Dr. Bartram pronounced. "Confused, probably hallucinating. I've ordered Thorazine for her. Don't interfere again, Martane, or I'll have you thrown off this ward forever."

"If you load her full of tranquilizers she'll never remember anything."

"Are you questioning my authority?" The two men moved to stand beside the door.

"Yes."

"How dare you!"

"If you don't rescind that order, I'll take you to the hospital ethics committee, Bartram."

“And what will they say about your involvement with one of the patients? You were sitting on her bed, hugging her.”

“I was comforting her. Touch is an important part of healing. I’m sure you learned that in medical school, Bartram.”

“Don’t interfere where you know nothing,” the psychiatrist said with disdain. “On paper, you may be a member of the therapy team, but in my book you’re an untalented do…” His English slang failed him.

“Do-gooder?”

“Yes.”

“Bartram, I’m warning you. If you do anything to this patient that sets her back, I won’t close my eyes. I won’t be satisfied until I have you before the committee.”

Both knew it was an empty threat. Psychiatrists willing to work in hospitals like N.O.C.H. were few and far between. Unless he murdered a patient, Dr. Bartram was assured of a job until he retired. But even though the psychiatrist would not be fired, Joshua could make his job more difficult for him. And there was nothing that Dr. Bartram liked less than difficulties.

“I’m warning you,” the psychiatrist said, opening the door to storm out into the hallway, “either you stop interfering with my patients or I’ll have you working on the housekeeping staff.”

Joshua stood quietly by the door, waiting for Sarah to reenter with her medication and her orders. No one came. Satisfied that the psychiatrist had backed down, at least temporarily, Joshua returned to the young woman’s bedside.

If possible, she was whiter than before, her dark lashes the only relief against the paleness of her skin. As if she sensed his return, she opened her eyes and tried to smile. “Thank you,” she whispered.

Joshua was sorry that she had been subjected to his exchange with her psychiatrist. It couldn't possibly have increased her feeling of security. "Dr. Bartram is a good doctor," he said carefully. "He's just a bit overzealous. We keep each other in line." Joshua sensed that she knew he was lying, and he tried to smile reassuringly.

"You were trying to help me. I appreciate it."

The words and the careful, cultured speech were at odds with what he knew about her. Joshua studied the sculpted, feminine lines of her face. The young woman's speech fitted them exactly. She sounded like a finishing school graduate, not a prostitute. There was a graceful tinge of the South in her words, but they lacked the abrasive twang of New Orleans. The mystery was compounded.

"You're here to be helped. I'm doing my job."

"Tell me how I came to be... here." She gestured to the four walls. Joshua watched her glance fall on Mrs. Tryon and move quickly away.

"The police found you." Joshua turned the chair, straddling it. "You were badly injured and they brought you here to recover."

"Injured?" She raised her hand to her hair, touching the long thin scar. "My head?"

"You sustained a serious blow to the head. You were very ill from it."

"My hair is so short."

He smiled at the completely feminine response. "Not as short as the new styles dictate." She frowned and he smiled again. "I'd say it was about two or three inches all over. It's beginning to curl."

"It feels ugly."

"It suits you." Standing he walked to the door. "I'll be right back."

In the hallway he waved down Betty, who had just helped a patient back to his room. “Do you have a mirror?” he called to her. In a minute he was holding a plastic compact.

“Bartram is out for your blood,” Betty said casually, as she watched him open the door. “You’ve done it this time.”

Joshua shrugged, taking the compact as he strolled back into room 815. “Here, see for yourself,” he told the young woman.

She stared for a long time, her fingers combing through her hair once as if to test its reality. “That’s not me,” she said finally, her voice choked with tears.

Joshua cursed his intuition. He had thought that the sight of her face in the mirror would help jog her memory. He had not meant to cause her pain.

“What’s different?” he prodded.

“I don’t know. But that’s not me.”

“Your hair was very long,” he explained. “Down to here.” He gestured to her waist. “They had to shave your head when they brought you in.”

A sob echoed in her throat.

“Your nose was broken,” he explained, wishing that he didn’t have to. “It’s possible that it looks a little different now that it’s healed.”

“It’s crooked,” she wailed.

“No, it’s not. Well, maybe a tiny bit. It adds character to your face.”

Her huge blue eyes went dark with disapproval. “You’re just trying to make me feel better.”

He almost laughed at her righteous anger. “Exactly,” he agreed.

Surprisingly, she giggled, then followed it with a hiccup and a small sob.

“You are really very lovely,” he said gently. “And that’s the truth. But you’ve lost a lot of weight since you were admitted. With everything combined, it’s no wonder you don’t recognize yourself.”

“It’s too much for me to understand,” she said plaintively. “I don’t understand any of it.”

The strain showed in her face. Carefully Joshua covered her hands with one of his own. “You’ve had a number of shocks in the past half hour. Don’t try to figure it all out. Just rest.” Even as he said the words, her eyelids drifted shut. It was all too much for her to cope with. Joshua watched the tiny lines of tension dissolve as she began to slip into the blessed oblivion of normal sleep. Her voice, when it came, was very far away.

“Will you be here when I wake up?”

He was entranced with the obvious trust in her voice. His feelings were irrational, but he had to admit he wanted to be there for her. He wanted to watch her awaken, to help cushion her shock at the unfamiliar hospital surroundings. He wanted to hear her musical voice with its hint of gracious living and sultry summer nights. He wanted to hold her hand and anchor her firmly in the world she had chosen to be part of once again.

But he couldn’t stay. She shouldn’t become dependent on him. There were others who could play a part in her recovery. “I’ll be here tomorrow morning. If you wake up before then, I’ll have one of my favorite nurses take care of you.”

“Will she hurt me?” Her head inclined toward Mrs. Tryon’s bed.

“She may get noisy occasionally, but she’s absolutely incapable of hurting anyone or anything.”

“Good.” With a small sigh the young woman drifted off to sleep.

Joshua sat beside the bed, watching her even breathing. When it deepened and slowed, he got up quietly and went out into the hallway.

The change from day to evening staff was taking place. Joshua saw Sarah and two of the aides waiting to be let through the locked door by the nurses' station, one of the two exits from the ward. Betty was still at the desk, sharing information with the woman who would take her place on the next shift. When she looked up and saw Joshua coming toward her, she frowned and shook her head slightly, as if in warning.

The sight of the tall man coming out of the medicine room was all the explanation Joshua needed. He had hoped that Dr. Nelson, the chief of psychiatry, would wait until the next day to confront him. Obviously, that was not going to be the case.

"Martane? I want to see you in the staff lounge. Immediately."

With a nod, Joshua followed Dr. Nelson down the hall. As usual, there was no one in the tiny lounge when they entered. Since the room was at the end of the hall, it was seldom used. The nursing staff preferred to have their coffee in the medicine room, where they could escape for brief minutes to gossip.

Joshua seated himself in a chair next to the chief psychiatrist's and waited.

"I suppose you've figured that Dr. Bartram has spoken to me about your interference." Dr. Nelson was a distinguished-looking man whose voice was always calm and well modulated. He managed to convey all the emotion he needed with the lifting of an eyebrow, the tightening of a muscle in his jaw, the flash of a brown eye. Joshua clearly understood the anger that was present behind the carefully chosen words.

"I expected him to speak to you. I was hoping it would be tomorrow."

"Why?"

"Because—" Joshua looked at his watch "—as of this minute, I've been here for twelve hours straight."

"Then we'll make this short and to the point. You have no right to try and countermand any doctor's order."

"I know that." Joshua could barely keep his irritation from echoing in his voice.

“And do you also know that I could have you barred from this floor?”

“Yes.”

“Then why did you tangle with Bartram?”

“Because his order was harmful to the health of the patient. I’ve worked extensively with her. To Bartram she’s a name on a chart—no, not even that. She’s a pseudonym on a chart, a body in a bed that he sees probably twice a week for a minute at a time.”

“You know what his caseload’s like.”

“Yes. And I know what he’s like, too.”

“Meaning?”

“Meaning that his answer to everything is a shot of Thorazine. The patient made incredible progress today.” Joshua’s voice softened, and pride shone through. “She’s made no response in five months, Jim. Today she talked to me; she asked questions. For someone who has been totally unaware of her surroundings, she behaved completely appropriately. Bartram didn’t even look at that.”

Dr. Nelson was quiet, assessing Joshua’s words. Both of them knew what was at stake. Joshua understood that Jim Nelson had to protect the doctors on his staff, but he also knew that the chief psychiatrist was a fair man. He had not hired Dr. Bartram; he probably didn’t approve of many of his decisions. An excellent psychiatrist himself, Jim was caught exactly in the middle. It was not a good place to be.

“You’re very involved with this patient, aren’t you?”

Joshua nodded. “I’ll admit I am. But I’m not too involved to know what’s good for her.”

“Tell me what you’ve been doing for her.”

“Talking.”

“Elaborate, please.”

“I’ve been sitting and talking to her. When she was still downstairs in a coma, I’d sit by her bedside every chance I got and talk about anything that I could think of. If she was listening, she knows everything there is to know about me.”

“And when she was transferred up here?”

“More of the same, but I’ve been spending longer hours with her.”

“Do you understand why?”

“That’s a psychiatrist’s question if ever I heard one,” Joshua answered with a frown. “I did it because I care what happens to her.”

Jim Nelson was only twenty years older than Joshua’s thirty-three, but for a moment he seemed much older. “I guess,” he admitted, “that it’s been a long time since I let myself care that much about what happens to one of my patients.”

Joshua sympathized. “I can understand that.”

“That’s a psychologist’s answer,” Jim said, a tiny smile touching his lips.

“Look, Jim, you and I both know that I’m not up here just to perform tests and write up reports. I’m here as a therapist. I’m trained for it, I’m good at it, and as such, I will not sit by and watch Bartram destroy a patient.”

“How did you make it through school, Martane?” The psychiatrist leaned back in his chair, forcing it onto its hind legs. “With that chip on your shoulder, how did you convince any examining board you could humble yourself enough to do anybody any good?”

“I managed it with great difficulty.”

“It’s going to be more difficult if you don’t temper your opinions a little.”

“My judgment in this case is completely sound.” Joshua leaned forward slightly. “And we both know it.”

There was a long silence. Joshua knew that the chief of psychiatry was carefully weighing all the factors. Calmly, he waited.

Jim Nelson was nothing if not fair. “I’ll tell Bartram that he is not to prescribe anything more than mild sedatives for the girl,” he said. “Her treatment plan will have to be cleared with me.”

Joshua let out a slow breath. “I owe you one.”

“Several.” Jim Nelson examined the younger man. “I like you. But your disrespect for authority worries me. The first time I think you’re letting it control you and interfere with your judgment, I’ll have you off this floor.”

Joshua nodded.

Dr. Nelson stood and extended his hand. “Go home and get some sleep.”

They parted company at the nurses’ desk. Joshua explained to the new staff about the changes in the patient in room 815. Taking aside a dark-haired young nurse, he asked her to keep a close eye on Jane Doe.

He added some notes to several charts, made a phone call to a patient’s anxious wife and prepared to leave. But there was one thing he felt compelled to do before he asked to have the front exit door unlocked.

The young woman in 815 was still sleeping soundly when he checked on her one last time. Her hands were tucked under her head and she lay loosely curled on her side like a child who has never experienced anything except love and acceptance. There were no hints of a darker past,

nothing to indicate the life she had led except the intriguing lines of her slender body under the thin white sheet.

“I don’t know who you are, and I don’t know why it matters so much to me,” Joshua said softly. “But whatever your secrets are, I’m going to make sure that you have help unlocking them.”

In her sleep, Jane Doe smiled slightly.