

Ella Hibbetts snored softly, unaware of her visitors, her face illuminated by the flickering light of the television. Miss Dillard stepped from the shadows and extended her hand toward Alex.

“Here, take this,” she whispered.

Alex hesitated before reaching for the object.

“What is it?” she asked.

“Her medication, the one you were supposed to give earlier this evening.”

Alex shook her head.

“She doesn’t have any I.V. medications ordered. I’ve already reviewed her chart.”

“You know what I’m talking about!” Miss Dillard responded.

“And you know what I’m talking about,” Alex replied. “As her nurse, I’m not giving her anything her doctor hasn’t ordered.”

“You don’t have a choice,” Miss Dillard growled.

“That’s where you’re wrong,” Alex insisted. “I’ll always have a choice.”

Miss Dillard snatched the cap from the needle and crimped the I.V. tubing.

“Gerald will hear about this,” she hissed. “And trust me, he won’t be pleased.”

Miss Dillard inserted the needle into the I.V. but before she could press the plunger, Alex grabbed her wrist. The needle pulled out of the tubing.

“Get your hand off of me!” Miss Dillard whispered angrily. “You’ve got no right interfering with our plans.”

“And you’ve got no right to take her life!” Alex replied. “You can’t play God!”

“I’m not playing God. I’m just doing what’s necessary to save my job and this hospital.”

She grabbed the I.V. tubing and tried again to insert the needle. Alex reflexively reached for her arm.

“This is wrong! You can’t kill her,” Alex whispered.

As Miss Dillard jerked her arm away the needle embedded in her left thigh. The plunger depressed partially, injecting the poison into her thigh. Terror filled her eyes. She could still hear Tim’s words. “It only takes a small amount. Death is quick.”

Miss Dillard pulled the needle from her thigh and gazed at the syringe. Only half of a milliliter had been injected.

“Damn you, Alex Lowe. Damn you!” she shouted.

Before Alex could move, Miss Dillard bolted from the room, still clutching the syringe tightly in her hand.

“Thank you, honey,” a kind voice whispered.

“Ma’am?” Alex asked, startled.

“I said, thank you,” replied Miss Hibbetts. “I saw what you did for me.”

“What did you see?” Alex asked, clearly shaken.

“Everything, dear. I saw and heard everything.”

Alex stopped at the door.

“I’ve got to go help her,” she said, hurriedly. “Please don’t talk to anyone before I get back.”

Miss Dillard was slumped over a chair when Alex reached the nursing station. The syringe had fallen to the floor and rolled beneath the counter. Alex took her foot and pushed the syringe behind a trashcan.

“Call a code,” she yelled as she pulled Miss Dillard’s body

from the chair and placed it on the hard, tile floor.

“Already did,” replied the unit clerk. “You didn’t hear it?”

Miss Dillard’s skin was mottled with cyanosis around her mouth and in her fingers. She did not respond when Alex called her name and rubbed a knuckle against her sternum. The charge nurse knelt beside Alex and checked for a pulse while Alex listened for breath sounds.

“No pulse,” she said.

“Nor respirations,” Alex added.

The small workspace at the nurse’s station became a blur of activity as the on call physicians arrived and began barking orders.

“Get her on a monitor and start an I.V. We need some blood work and stat ABG’s. Do we know anything about her?” shouted the resident in charge.

“She’s Lib Dillard, the night nursing supervisor,” answered the unit clerk. “I was sitting at the desk when she came running up the hall screaming that she needed a doctor. She was pounding her chest and gasping for air. She collapsed and fell over the chair before I could get to her. I thought she was having a heart attack. That’s when I called the code.”

“Do we have a rhythm?” the young physician asked, looking up at the heart monitor.

“Looks like V-fib,” a second physician shouted.

“Shock her with two hundred joules.”

Alex watched helplessly as Miss Dillard’s body jerked from the surge of electricity.

“She’s still in V-fib!” yelled the physician. “Push an amp of epi and shock her with three hundred joules.”

With the higher voltage of electricity, her body shook violently, her head banging against the hard tile floor when her muscles finally relaxed.

“Damn it, she’s still in V-fib,” the physician shouted. “Turn it up to three sixty and hit her again. She’s too young to die.”

Everyone in the room watched anxiously as the doctor

placed the paddles on her chest and discharged the electricity. The spontaneous, uncontrollable contraction of her muscles reminded Alex of a grand mal seizure. The smell of her burning flesh was nauseating. The cardiac monitor was flat line.

“How long have we been coding her?” the senior resident asked.

“About twenty minutes,” replied the intern.

“Stop compressions and see if she’s got a rhythm,” he ordered.

“Nothing. She’s flat line,” replied the intern.

The senior resident draped his stethoscope over his shoulder and shook his head.

“It’s no use,” he said. “Let’s call it off. She must’ve had something catastrophic happen for us to be unable to establish any kind of rhythm. Has anyone called her family?”

“They’re on their way,” replied a nurse.

“Let me know when they get here, and I’ll speak to them. I hope they’ll consent to an autopsy. It’d be nice to know what happened to her.”

An autopsy? Alex shuddered at the thought. How long would it take for the poison to break down so that it wasn’t detectable? Would they even check for poisons? Could they check for poisons? Why should they? There was no reason to suspect anything out of the ordinary. People die every day, even people who aren’t supposed to die.

A bright, orange sun was climbing quickly into a cloudless sky when the shift ended. As Alex took her time card from her purse, she remembered Miss Hibbetts. She had to know how much the old lady knew. She punched her time card and then paced impatiently as she waited for the elevator doors to open.

“Miss Lowe,” Mr. Warren called out, “I was hoping I’d catch you before you left the hospital. I left a message on your answering machine earlier this morning. Have you got a minute?”

“I’ve got to run upstairs for a few minutes but then I’ll be free,” she replied.

“Stop by my office before you go home,” he ordered. “There’s something we need to discuss.”

“Yes, sir,” Alex replied, nodding her head.

She knew it was inevitable, but she never imagined it would happen so quickly. How had he found out about Miss Dillard’s death and how much did he know?

~ ~ ~

Miss Hibbetts was eating breakfast when Alex arrived. The smell of bacon and hot biscuits made her stomach growl.

“Miss Hibbetts, is it okay if I come in?” she asked, pushing open the door. “I don’t want to interrupt your breakfast.”

“No, no, honey,” Miss Hibbetts replied. “You come right on in. I thought you’d forgotten about this old lady.”

“No ma’am,” Alex replied, smiling. “Things got kind of hectic last night and it just slipped my mind.”

“Did that other nurse die?” Miss Hibbetts asked, her green eyes twinkling.

Alex lowered her head and stared at the floor.

“Yes, ma’am, she did,” she replied.

“I’m sorry to hear that. I’ve always thought it sad whenever anyone dies. That must have been some powerful medicine she was going to give me.”

“Yes ma’am,” Alex replied. “It’s was.”

“Why’d she want to end my life?” she asked. “I’ve never done anything to hurt her. I just don’t understand it.”

“It’s a long and complicated story, Miss Hibbetts. And if it’s all the same to you, I’d rather not get into the details.”

“That’s up to you, Miss Lowe. That is your name, isn’t it?”

“Yes, ma’am, it is. I’m Alex Lowe. How’d you know?”

“You introduced yourself last night, but then there was a man who came by earlier this morning asking a lot of questions. He called you Alex Lowe and described you perfectly.” Miss Hibbetts paused and stared at Alex. “You’re in some kind of

trouble aren't you?"

"What did this man look like?" Alex asked.

"Middle aged. Gray hair. Nice looking man. Seemed real sweet," she replied.

"What did he ask?" Alex asked.

"Mostly he asked questions about the nurse that died. And some questions about you. He seemed real interested in what I might have seen."

"What'd you tell him?" Alex asked nervously.

"I told him I knew you by his description, but I'd never seen the other lady he described. He kept asking me if I was sure I hadn't seen her and I just kept telling him no." The old lady smiled and chuckled softly. "I told the old buzzard he insulted my integrity, doubting my word like that. I told him that when someone my age tells you something, you can believe it. My generation was different from his. We weren't raised to tell lies."

Alex looked puzzled and tilted her head to the side.

"But you told me you saw everything," she said.

"And I did," Miss Hibbetts replied, nodding her head.

"Then you lied to him?" Alex asked.

"That's right, honey. I lied to him. I wasn't raised that way. It's just a little something I developed on my own through the years. Mama taught me that you don't lie, but Papa taught me that you take care of those who take care of you. For some reason you felt obligated to spare my life last night and until I could talk to you and hear your side of the story, I felt obligated to protect you."

Alex breathed a sigh of relief.

"What'd you see last night?" she asked.

"Which time?" the old lady replied.

"What do you mean which time?" Alex asked.

"I mean the time when you gave Miss Davis the medicine or the time when the other nurse tried to give me the medicine?"

“Both times,” Alex replied.

“Well, I really couldn’t see what happened when you gave Miss Davis the medication, but I knew you were giving her something from what you’d said to me. Whatever you gave her killed her, didn’t it?”

“Why do you say that?” Alex asked. “She did die last night, but she was old.”

Miss Hibbetts smiled.

“Honey,” she said, “it wasn’t five minutes after you left the room that she started making these crying noises, sort of like a cat with its tail caught in the screen door. I could hear her gasping for air and thrashing about in the bed. Then everything was quiet. I knew she was dead, but there was nothing I could do about it. And then I saw you come in and check on her. There wasn’t much commotion after she died so I assumed you had expected to find her dead.”

“But you were asleep when I came in the room,” Alex said.

“I was faking it,” she replied. “I was too frightened to sleep, afraid that I might be next. I saw you when you checked on me.”

“What about when the other nurse and I were in your room?” Alex asked.

“She came in about five minutes before you did. She shined a flashlight in my face and then just sat in the dark, waiting for you. I heard everything. I think that’s when I realized that whatever you gave Miss Davis had been intended for me. Who ordered the medication?”

“It wasn’t a physician,” Alex replied.

“Was it Gerald?”

“Gerald?” Alex asked.

“Yes, I distinctly remember her telling you that Gerald would hear about what you’d done, or what you’d refused to do.”

“Do you know Gerald Warren?” Alex asked.

“Gerry Warren?” the elderly lady asked, smiling. “You might say I know him, seeing how I changed his dirty diapers when he was a little boy. His mama and I were friends, God

rest her soul. My sister, Ruth, and I lived next door to the Warrens when Gerry was little. Gerry's mother worked so he spent about as much time at our house as he did at his own house. As I got older and it became apparent that I couldn't care for myself, he helped make the arrangements to get me in a nursing home. He used to bring his mama by to visit me, but after she died, he quite visiting. I bet I haven't heard from him in at least five years."

Alex took several deep breaths and glanced at her watch.

"Miss Hibbetts, I need to talk some more with you about what happened last night, but I've got to meet Mr. Warren in his office in just a few minutes. I'll be back later, if that's okay with you."

"That's fine with me." Miss Hibbetts paused momentarily. "Miss, I don't know what you're involved in, and it's really none of my business, but I think you should be careful. The man that was here earlier scared me. He didn't seem too pleased about what happened last night."

"I appreciate your concern," Alex replied, "but I'll be fine. I'll be back later."

As Alex rushed from the room, Miss Hibbetts' mind drifted back to the many times she had taken care of Gerald Warren as a child. She couldn't help but smile when she remembered how he had fondly called her Aunt Ella. But the nostalgia quickly faded as she considered the dangerous situation facing her. Surely Gerald remembered her! He had to. They had been so close. But if he remembered her, then why did he want her dead?