

Winds
OF FORTUNE

by

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CHAPTER ONE

Dr. Victoria King dropped a chart on top of the eight inch stack on her desk and checked her watch. Ten minutes to two. God, she was going to be late for her own daughter's first birthday party.

"Why don't you get out of here," a voice said from behind her.

Spinning around, Tory smiled at the trim African-American woman in a white lab coat who stood in her office doorway. Like Tory, her new associate, Dr. Nita Burgoyne, was dressed casually, but in contrast to Tory's pressed jeans and boatneck navy cotton tee, Nita's stylish emerald green blouse, sand colored slacks, and tan sling-back, low-heeled shoes hinted at designer labels. She hadn't quite made the transition from big city ER doctor to small town doc just yet.

"You've been here, what—five weeks," Tory said, "and already you're reading my mind?"

"Didn't take telepathy." When Nita shook her head, the gold clasp she used to restrain her shoulder-length, wavy black hair at her nape glinted in the overhead lights, echoing the amusement that shimmered in her deep brown eyes. "I could hear your thoughts out in the hallway."

"Well, I'm glad I didn't finish what I was thinking, then." Tory grimaced. "How many more do we have?"

"Not enough for you to worry about." Nita lifted a shoulder in the direction of the hallway behind her. "Now go while the coast is relatively clear."

Tory hesitated, torn between wanting to be with her family and knowing she was needed at the clinic. During tourist season, the East End Health Clinic was open seven days a week, and patient hours often stretched well beyond the scheduled times. Here emergencies were the norm, rather than the exception. Minor accidents, fender benders, forgotten medication, common colds, and more serious events ranging from heart attacks to strokes were daily fare. It might be quiet right this minute, but chances were it wouldn't be for long—not on Sunday

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afternoon of Fourth of July weekend in Provincetown—and Nita hadn't worked a holiday alone yet.

"I'm not some green intern," Nita chided good-naturedly, obviously continuing to read Tory's mind despite her earlier denial. "Sally is the best nurse I've ever worked with and better than a lot of the doctors I've known. We'll be fine."

Tory considered arguing, but she could tell by the set of Nita's slender shoulders that her mind was made up. She had learned very quickly that in Nita's case, looks were very definitely deceiving. Although Nita's dark almond eyes, sculpted features, and smooth coffee-and-cream complexion gave her a look of exotic, nearly delicate beauty, she was neither delicate nor insubstantial in any way. Ten years Tory's junior, she was a self-assured, highly capable professional, and wonderful with the patients. Even though she was personally reserved and rarely talked about her private life, her genuine warmth and compassion were obvious, and Tory liked her.

"You'll call me if things get busy?" Tory asked.

Nita folded her arms beneath her breasts and pursed her lips.

"Okay. Okay." Tory held up both hands in surrender. "Will you at least stop by the party later? We'll have plenty of food and the adults will out-number the kids, I promise."

When Nita looked uncertain, Tory felt a surge of guilt. As far as she knew, Nita had yet to really meet anyone in the community outside of patients and the office staff. Part of that was Tory's fault. She should have had a welcoming reception for her when she joined the practice, and what she'd greeted her with instead was a crisis. Nita had only been with her a few days before Reese had been reported missing in action in Iraq. With her lover probably wounded or possibly dead, Tory had barely managed to keep her sanity and had foisted all but the major responsibilities of the clinic onto Nita. Everything else had fallen by the wayside. Even now, though she tried not to let it show, Tory still felt as if her life was on shaky ground.

"It'll just be some good friends and family," Tory urged.

Finally, Nita nodded, hiding her reluctance behind a smile. A child's birthday would be harmless, and she only needed to make a brief appearance. "Thank you. That would be nice."

"Good. Then I'll just finish up these chart—"

"Tory! Get!"

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Laughing, Tory shrugged out of her lab coat and tossed it onto the high backed leather chair behind her overflowing desk. “I’m gone.”

Just as Tory stepped out into the hall, their receptionist rushed in from the waiting area and skidded to a halt beside her. Lithe and handsome, Randy’s blond hair was uncharacteristically mussed and his big blue eyes were overly bright.

“Sorry,” he said breathlessly, looking from Tory to Nita and back again, “but Deo Camara just brought Joey Torres in, and he’s bleeding all over the waiting room. Sally’s putting them in the procedure room.”

“What happened?” Tory inquired sharply, turning back into her office for her lab coat. If Randy was ruffled it must be serious, because he could simultaneously handle five emergency calls, three hysterical mothers, and a recalcitrant insurance rep without breaking a sweat.

“Deo said something about a saw.”

“Thanks, Randy,” Nita said calmly. “Why don’t you get the waiting room cleaned up and let the other patients know there might be a little bit of a wait.”

“Okay, right.” As quickly as he had appeared, Randy was gone.

“I’ve got this, Tory,” Nita said.

Tory drew up short, one arm in and one out of her lab coat. Nita was a board-certified emergency room physician. She was trained to handle anything that might come through the door. Rationally, Tory knew that. Still, it was hard to leave. She had hired on temporary help before, but Nita was the first physician she had contracted for a possible long-term association. The only partner she had ever considered had been KT O’Bannon, the woman she had once considered the love of her life. But KT had left her with a broken heart and broken dreams. Then Reese Conlon had come along and mended her heart, but until now she’d never really considered sharing her professional life with anyone else.

“You might need an assistant,” Tory pointed out.

“If it’s that bad, the repair will need to be done in the OR and we’ll transport him to Hyannis. Otherwise, Sally can help me. Now I’d better get in there—and you have a party to go to.”

Nita disappeared down the hallway. Tory could either follow her, making a clear statement that she didn’t trust her to handle the problem alone, or she could go home where the people who loved her were waiting.

She hung her lab coat on a hook behind her door, and with one last glance down the hall toward the patient rooms, she left.



Nita pushed through the door into the procedure room and stopped short at the incongruous sound of laughter. Their clinic nurse, Sally, stood at the counter on the far side of the room setting up an instrument tray. Two young men in khaki work clothes and dusty boots, one seated on the stretcher and the other leaning against it, faced away from the door toward the petite blond nurse. Apparently no one heard her enter because the revelry continued.

“We need to make sure this gets fixed up right,” remarked the deeply tanned, curly haired Adonis who nudged the shoulder of a similarly handsome man whose right hand was wrapped in a bloody towel. “Otherwise, Joey’s sex life is going straight down the toi—”

“Oh I don’t know,” Sally laughed as she laid out gloves and irrigation solution, “it doesn’t look like any of Joey’s critical equipment is in danger.”

“That’s just the problem, he needs that hand to take care of his *main* business,” the Adonis smirked.

“Come on, Deo,” Joey said, “I’m in pain here.” He glanced over his buddy’s shoulder and, spying Nita, instantly looked chagrined. “Besides, there’s a lady present.”

“Oh, well, excuse me,” Sally said archly, rolling the metal instrument stand up to the table. “*Now* you two decide to get some manners?” She waved to Nita. “We’re all ready for you.”

“Thanks.” Nita crossed the room briskly. “I’m Dr. Burgoyne. What happened?”

“Joey here picked a fight with a table saw and lost,” the uninjured member of the pair replied, turning in Nita’s direction. Deep-set eyes so dark they verged on black did a slow survey of Nita’s face, flickered lower for an instant, then returned to lock on Nita’s. “Well, hello.”

Nita blinked, bombarded by a series of quicksilver images—wide, sensuous mouth; midnight curls tumbling onto a broad forehead; thick, almost straight black brows; and skin, she realized—not tanned—but a rich natural bronze. An Adonis, no doubt. But very much not a man. For one second Nita completely lost focus and everything else

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in the room receded from her consciousness except her awareness of this woman. How she hadn't realized immediately that Adonis was a woman, despite the nondescript work clothes, she couldn't imagine. Even partially turned away, her sharply-carved profile was just a little bit too exquisite to be male, despite its strength. And not even the well-developed shoulders and thighs could diminish the undeniably feminine nature of her body. The subtle swell of her breasts, the narrow waist, the slight curve of hip all screamed woman. Beautiful woman.

Nita felt her skin warming as the woman continued to stare at her with a mixture of amusement and frank appreciation. Nita knew the look. Not just beautiful, beautiful and arrogant. This one knew she was gorgeous and no doubt knew the effect she had on women. Women and men, probably. She was looking at Nita as if she expected Nita to melt. Nita mentally shook herself—that wasn't going to happen. Not now, not ever again.

"Perhaps the *patient* would like to fill me in," Nita said, dragging her gaze away from the dark hypnotic eyes. She knew she sounded irritated. She *was* irritated. And disturbed. Irritated at herself for even *noticing* how striking the woman was, and definitely disturbed for being intrigued—if only for an instant—by the admiring look in the woman's eyes. Being stirred by *any* woman's attraction was something she had thought she'd expunged from her mind and body, but apparently she'd been wrong.

"If you could step back, please," Nita said, "I need to see to your friend."

"By all means," Deo said with a slightly mocking tone and a sweep of her arm, "be my guest."

Deo Camara wasn't surprised by the doctor's initial consternation. She was used to that. Strangers often took her for a guy, especially in her work clothes, or confused her with one of her many cousins. The anger that had quickly surged in the piercing, raw umber eyes was unexpected, though. What was even more unanticipated was that the doctor's antagonism bothered her. She didn't know the woman, so why should it matter what she thought? Annoyed at being off-balance, she shrugged and shifted a few inches, folding her arms across her chest and rocking back on her heels.

"Thank you," Nita said dryly, edging around the stranger when she failed to make room. Apparently she was as rude as she was good-

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looking. She smiled at the patient. “Hi. Joey is it?”

“Yeah. Uh, yes ma’am.” He dropped his eyes and blushed.

“I’m going to need to examine your hand. Why don’t you lie down.” She looked to Sally. “Gloves?”

“Here you go.” Sally handed Nita a package of sterile gloves and then pulled on her own pair. “I’ve got a basin and sterile saline when you’re ready.”

Nita glanced over her shoulder at Deo, who still stood so close Nita could smell a faint mixture of salt air and sawdust clinging to her. For some reason that struck her as more alluring than a fine perfume. Nonplussed at the thought, she said edgily, “This will probably take awhile. You might want to have a seat out front.”

“I’m staying.”

“As you wish.”

Once Joey was settled comfortably with his arm extended on a narrow arm board canted out from the table, Nita removed the bloody towel from his right hand. As she worked, she was disconcertingly aware of Deo’s presence just behind her. She could almost feel the heat coming off her body.

“Would you step back just a little,” Nita said without turning, frustrated that her concentration was affected by a stranger this way.

“Sure thing.”

Nita didn’t hear her move, and she could *still* sense her nearness. *This is ridiculous.* Determined to banish the exasperating distraction from her consciousness, Nita focused on Joey and immediately her discomfort abated.

“This might be just a bit uncomfortable,” she said, gently supporting his wrist in her palm.

“It’s okay, Doc,” Joey said, his eyes fixed trustingly on her face.

The bleeding had slowed to a trickle, but his small finger drooped and angled unnaturally. Nita noted an irregular laceration through the layer of caked-on blood. *Saw blade.* Another laceration slashed across the mid-portion of his ring finger. She carefully repositioned his hand on a sterile towel.

“Sally, go ahead and soak his whole hand in quarter strength Betadiene for ten minutes and then irrigate the lacerations. In the meantime, give him a tetanus shot, a gram of Zinacef, and set up for an X-ray.” She patted Joey’s shoulder. “You’ve cut a tendon or two and

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nicked a nerve. Nothing we can't fix. I'll be back in a few minutes and we'll get started."

Pushing back from the table, Nita stripped off her gloves. She tossed them aside and quickly left the room, still strangely disquieted by her reaction to her patient's friend. She didn't get derailed by the attention of a beautiful woman. Not anymore.

"Hey!"

Nita turned and saw that the woman was following her down the hall. Her long strides were forceful, more power than grace, and her physical presence combined with her natural beauty made an eye-catching package. Despite her appreciation, Nita carefully kept her expression flat. "Can I help you?"

"He's got insurance. Workman's comp. Whatever he needs—"

"You can give all that information to our receptionist out front."

Nita hoped the woman wasn't suggesting Nita might not do everything necessary for the patient. "My only concern is taking care of his injury."

"Look. If he needs to go to a hospital or something—"

"My decisions regarding his course of treatment are not based upon his ability to pay." Nita regarded Deo with annoyance. "I didn't get your name."

"Deo Camara. I'm his boss. And his cousin." Deo thought about extending her hand, but for some reason she didn't. She had the uneasy feeling she was acting like an ass chasing after the doctor, but she couldn't seem to stop herself. This woman was so cool and detached and *dismissive*. Maybe that was it. She wasn't used to women just brushing her off. Usually she was the one that had to do the kissing off.

Nita took a breath and struggled to regain her professional composure. Deo could hardly help the way she looked. Her manners could stand some polish, but she was probably worried. "As soon as I complete my evaluation I'll let you both know what needs to be done."

"He works with his hands."

"I understand." Nita glanced at Deo's hands, curled at her sides. They were the same dark bronze as her face, broad and strong, capable looking hands. An irregular white ribbon of damaged tissue slashed across the top of her left hand from the base of her thumb to the opposite side of her wrist. An old scar from what must have been a painful injury.

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Sympathetically, she said, "I can see you've had some experience with this kind of thing."

Following her gaze, Deo stiffened and tightened her fist until the skin turned pale and the scar disappeared. "No."

Nita's immediate impulse was to apologize, because she heard not anger, but pain in Deo's voice. Then a sudden realization turned her cold inside. She knew nothing of this woman except that she was beautiful and at the moment, in pain. A dangerous combination that she found all too compelling, and exactly the kind of woman she wanted nothing to do with.

"I'll be in to see your cousin in just a few moments," Nita said, then pulled a chair off the nearest door and quickly stepped inside.

Deo stared at the closed door, feeling the sudden silence in the hall like a weight on her chest. She had let a stranger stir her up, and worse, rouse banished memories. No one did that. She never let anyone close enough to risk awakening those unforgiven sins.



"Is Reese home yet?" Tory asked breathlessly as she hurried through the door into the sunny living room. She petted the concrete block-sized head of the Mastiff that ambled to greet her. "Hi Jedi."

"Not yet." Kate, a blond version of her dark-haired, blue-eyed daughter Reese, held out a squirming toddler to Tory. "And the birthday girl has been asking."

"Hey, honey," Tory said, taking her daughter. Reggie replied with a string of excited words, the bulk of which sounded like *ma ma ma ma ma*. Tory laughed. "That's me. Well, one of them anyways."

When she kissed Reggie's forehead, the wind coming in from the open door to the deck off the living area blew her hair into Reggie's face. Reggie promptly grabbed a handful and held it to her mouth. Reggie's red gold locks were lighter than Tory's own auburn hair and her eyes more blue than green, but everyone said they could see Tory in Reggie. Sometimes when Tory looked at her daughter, she was struck with helpless wonder at what a miracle she was. At the sound of the screen door closing, Tory lifted her eyes from her daughter to the other miracle in her life.

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When she returned from Iraq, Reese had been thinner than Tory had ever seen her, as if the desert winds and searing heat and senseless, relentless death had carved away everything except what she needed to survive. But she had survived. And she had come home. Wounded, disillusioned, weary in body and soul. But alive. She had come home where she was loved and needed.

With her coal black hair trimmed neatly at her collar, her intense deep-blue eyes, and her imposing body in a crisp khaki uniform, Sheriff Reese Conlon radiated strength. But Tory saw what others didn't. Though Reese insisted she was recovered, she was still too thin, and there were still too many shadows under her eyes and *in* her eyes. Tory knew Reese tried to hide them, just as she knew that she tried to hide the fact that she rarely slept an entire night—or even more than an hour at a time. She didn't know if Reese would ever talk about what haunted her. Not all pain could be purged. Until the time came, if it ever came, when Reese asked her to share that pain, Tory would give her the only thing she had to give—herself, in every way she could.

Tory smiled at her lover. “Hello, darling.”

“Hi, baby. I'm sorry I'm late.” Reese tossed her uniform hat and car keys onto the counter that separated the kitchen from the living area, smiled at her mother, and strode across the room to Tory. She put her arms around her and the baby, kissed Tory gently, and nuzzled Reggie's neck, making her laugh. “Hi, Champ.”

“You're not late. I just got here myself.” Handing the baby off to Kate, Tory rested her head on Reese's shoulder, still unable to forget what it had been like being without her. She had gotten up in the morning, had cared for Reggie, and had gone to the clinic and looked after her patients while all the time sensing that some essential part of herself was missing. She had never experienced anything as frightening as the hollow ache inside that she had known without doubt would never be filled if Reese did not come home. “I love you.”

“Me too,” Reese whispered. Reluctantly, she let Tory go and glanced around the house. “So where's the party?”

“Jean is picking up some last minute things at the store,” Kate said, referring to her lover. “Pia called a little while ago and said she and KT were on their way. I assume you know where Bri and Nelson are?”

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“Oh hell,” Tory muttered. “I wonder if anyone called Pia and told her Joey was hurt.”

“What’s the matter with Joey?” Reese asked, stopping near the closet where she stored her gun belt.

“I’m not sure, exactly. Deo brought him into the clinic just as I was leaving.” Tory unclipped her cell phone from her waistband. “I’d better track Pia down and let her know.”

“Let me know what?” Pia Torres said as she came through the door holding hands with her lover, Dr. KT O’Bannon. She hefted the bottle of wine she carried in her other hand. “Let me dump this in the kitchen.”

KT, tall, dark-haired, and roguishly good-looking, kissed Tory on the cheek. “Hi, Vic.”

Tory smiled at the old nickname and felt KT studying her. KT could read her face better than anyone in the world except Reese. There had been a time when KT had *been* her world, before the wild and wildly attractive surgeon had strayed one too many times and finally crushed Tory’s innocence. Now, KT had found Pia, a woman who gave her the freedom she needed never to leave. Pia embraced the dangerous parts of KT that Tory hadn’t been able to, and in recognizing that, Tory had finally been able to accept how much goodness there was in her ex-lover and how much love they still shared.

“Deo brought Joey into the clinic just as I was leaving,” Tory said as Pia walked over. “He had some kind of accident with a saw at work. Nita’s evaluating him.”

“Oh my God.” Pia grabbed KT’s arm. “I have to go over there. I don’t want my mother to hear anything until I know what’s going on.”

“It’s okay, babe. Nita’s good.” KT slid an arm around Pia’s waist, “Come on, we’ll go right now. I’ll drive.”

“I’ve got the cruiser,” Reese said. “I’ll take you, Pia.”

“You’ll take us both,” KT corrected.

“Actually, you’ll take all of us,” Tory said, hurrying to join the group. She called over her shoulder to Kate, “I’ll update you as soon as I can. Keep the ice cream cold.”