

Misconceptions

by Colleen Scott

Copyright 2016 by Colleen Scott

Chapter One

Dominique Sherwood had her instructions: get the story, then get out. She stared at the solid oak door. Did she have the guts to open it and start living a lie?

Her boss's words still rang fresh in her mind, but Stew hadn't pulled any punches when he gave her the assignment. *This is the opportunity you've been waiting for, Dominique. But you only have one chance. Your angle on the story is to find out why southern Ohio has a higher birth rate. Why are these women able to conceive when others around the country can't? If you can't handle it, I'll find someone who can.*

She hated lying, always had. Maybe the life of an undercover TV news reporter wasn't for her. No. This was the career she chose, and it included undercover work. She had to do this. She *would* do this. She grasped the brass doorknob, opened the door, and walked into the consultation room of Valley Memorial Hospital.

A dusty fake plant sat in the corner, and the small room smelled of burnt coffee. Two people sat at a brown Formica table. A bulky woman with a head of thin, dull, brown hair wore an expression that reminded Dominique of a withered grape. The attractive man across from her wore a knee-length, bleached white coat and possessed an incredible smile.

"You must be Dominique Sherwood," the caustic woman said.

"Yes, I am."

"You're late."

"Please accept my apology." No sense arguing with a bitter woman. Dominique settled in a chair and took a deep breath to organize her thoughts. She tucked a stray hair behind her ear. "Well, we all know who I am. Would it be too much trouble if you two introduced yourselves?"

The harsh woman cleared her throat. "I'm Penelope Nordstrom, Clinical Manager, and your acting supervisor. We spoke briefly on the phone after your interview."

"Of course." The polite smile she offered Penelope was met with a disapproving glare.

“I’m Dr. Joseph Armstrong. My friends call me Dr. Joe. It’s nice to meet you, Dominique. Welcome to Valley Hospital.” He flashed her a million dollar smile that sent a tingle all the way to her toes.

Her lips curved in response to Dr. Joe’s gentle tone. From the kind expression radiating from his dark brown eyes to the appealing dimples that appeared on either side of his mouth when he smiled, his presence had a calming effect on her. Her shoulders relaxed, and she settled back into her seat.

“Thank you, Dr. Armstrong ... Dr. Joe.” She pulled a thin blue file from her attaché case. “If you don’t mind, I’d like to spend a few minutes reading over this case file.”

“First you’re late, and now you’re not prepared,” Penelope said. “The administrator was impressed with your credentials, but you weren’t my first choice. I hope the hospital doesn’t come to regret hiring you.”

Dominique bit down on her tongue. “Rest assured, that won’t happen. I’m more than qualified.”

“There’s plenty of time for her to get acclimated.” Dr. Joe pushed his chair away from the table and crossed the room to the coffee maker on the countertop. “Can I get anyone a cup of coffee or refill?”

Dominique sighed. She needed an ally, and Dr. Joe fit the bill. The fact he was attractive and kind only sweetened the deal. She opened the file with the name Emily Sanderson printed at the top of the first page. Scanning the document only added to her confusion. So much had changed in the years since she’d received her degree. Her social work minor combined with her communications major was pivotal in earning this assignment. Plus she had limited on-camera exposure and was less likely to be recognized.

After studying the file more thoroughly, a few concerns became apparent. First of all, how did a twenty-eight-year-old woman end up in a coma? Secondly, what in the world was EOT?

As if reading her mind, Dr. Joe leaned in toward her and asked, “Do you have any questions?”

He smelled so inviting—like warm sunshine after a long week of cloudy, rainy days. His deep voice held an engaging tone. She glanced at his left hand. *No ring*. But it didn’t matter.

Regardless of how attractive the man, it was never a good idea to pursue a relationship while undercover.

Penelope slammed her hand on the table. “Dr. Armstrong. As per the hospital and healthcare regulations, you’re not permitted to unduly influence any member of the EOT committee.”

He took in a deep breath and let it out slowly. “We wouldn’t want to break procedure, now, would we?”

Dominique tore her eyes away from the file, but only for a moment. “Please bear with me. This is my first day on the job.” She searched the file for the patient’s name. “I’m aware of all regulations, and I know I’m permitted to ask questions. Can someone please explain how Emily came to be in a coma? I didn’t see this information mentioned.”

Dr. Joe turned in his seat, his eyes met Dominique’s. “Emily was attacked when she was eight months pregnant,” he said in a quiet and somber tone. “The perpetrators were only interested in the baby. They performed a barbaric C-section and left her for dead.”

Dominique gasped.

Penelope retrieved the pen lodged behind her ear. “That’s not pertinent to our meeting today. The sole purpose of this meeting is to determine what treatment, if any, will be offered.”

EOT. Their meaning became clear. End of treatment. The purpose of this meeting was to decide Emily’s fate. Dominique hadn’t agreed to this. Her undercover assignment directed her to investigate why this county was not affected by the declining birthrate as much as the vast majority of the country, not make life and death decisions.

She pushed her chair back and stood. “I need to make a phone call.”

“Sit down. We’ve delayed this decision far too long.” Penelope removed her glasses and laid them on the table. “While the hospital sympathizes with the family, we cannot justify the expense of keeping the patient on the ventilator.”

Dr. Joe sat up in his chair and leaned forward. “I acknowledge Emily’s condition hasn’t changed in the past seventy-two hours, but she is stable, and once her body has recovered from the trauma, she has a great chance of making a full recovery.”

“You have no proof to back up your prediction. In the interim, the hospital and national health care programs are losing money. As the clinical manager, I can’t continue to warrant

utilizing the hospital's funds to sustain a comatose patient. The ventilator should be disconnected immediately.”

Silence hung in the room.

The woman had to be kidding! Why had she been included in this meeting? Dominique's stomach clenched, and she swallowed the lump lodged in her throat. “You're talking about ending a woman's life. Shouldn't we at least discuss the situation first?”

“It's in her file. I assumed we would all be familiar with the facts, so all we needed to do was make the decision. I have other work that requires my attention.” Her disapproving gaze drifted from Dominique to Dr. Joe and back.

“As Emily's physician, I recommend we continue the current treatment plan.” Dr. Joe picked up his pen and clicked it several times. “All of Emily's major organs and systems are functioning normally. It's only been five days since the attack, and while we haven't seen any drastic improvements, her condition has remained stable for the last seventy-two hours. If we remove her from the ventilator too soon, she'll die.”

Dominique's opinion would make the final decision. That shouldn't be; she wasn't a doctor. “What about Emily's family? Don't they have a say?”

Penelope glared at her. “I'm going to pretend you didn't ask that question. Health care laws may have changed significantly, but there's no excuse for any licensed social worker not to be aware of the fact that the doctor in charge *is* representing the family. I would think you'd be aware of that.”

Heat rushed to Dominique's cheeks. She wiped away the perspiration on her upper lip. What should she do? If she agreed that the ventilator should be turned off, Penelope would be off her back. The last thing she needed was someone checking into her credentials. But she couldn't be involved with terminating a life ... not a second time.

After several long minutes of uncomfortable silence, Dominique made her decision. “I agree with Dr. Joe. Hospital administrators and government officials shouldn't be making life and death decisions, doctors should. Isn't this clear in the oath doctors take?”

Dr. Joe nodded. “First do no harm. It's the most well-known part of the Hippocratic Oath.”

Penelope stood and glared at Dominique. “Your rejection of the law does not change it. This meeting is over. Ms. Sherwood, I’ll see you in my office. Immediately.” She grabbed her belongings and stormed out of the room.

Dominique released a long, slow breath. She had just made her first enemy. Unfortunately, the woman could annihilate her undercover assignment.

Dr. Joe grabbed his phone from his coat pocket. “I’d love to talk with you further about this case, but I need to check my messages first. I silenced my phone for this meeting. The secretary gets upset if I don’t check my messages regularly.” He punched several buttons, then scrolled down. “That’s strange.”

Dominique leaned forward. “Is everything okay?”

“I’m not sure. My brother Houston left me three messages. They’re all marked urgent.” He paced while he made the phone call, and soon the color drained from his face. He clicked off his cell and started picking up his things from the table, his eyes dark with worry.

“What’s happened?”

He shook his head. “My brother-in-law Travis is at the police station. My nephew’s been kidnapped.”