

Chapter One

An ambulance wails through dark streets and turns, screaming, into the drive of a small, rural hospital south of Brownsville, Texas. It passes the patch of green opposite the main entrance where two empty flagpoles stand sentry, and a towering green ash shades a wrought-iron bench. The tree's branches thrash and lash in a fierce Texas gale. Stars sprinkle the sky; a full moon beams from behind a smattering of clouds.

The ambulance veers right and stops at the emergency room entrance. The wailing siren sputters to chirps and whoops. Red lights flash across a granite-colored three-year-old sedan that drives past and continues to the employee lot.

In the car, Josie Donahue glances at the dashboard clock: 10:30. She parks and steps out to battle nature's tempest. At 30, she is a slender five-seven, with shapely hips and melon-sized breasts. Roots show in the dirty blonde hair twisted into a French braid and resting mid-back. She has wispy bangs and brows carefully plucked into low arches.

Josie wears olive scrubs. Small camo-patterned disks pierce her lobes. Crystal blue contacts enhance her cerulean eyes, aided by navy mascara and smoky blue liner. A tinge of rose colors her chiseled cheeks; her heart-shaped lips shine with mauve gloss. Only a thin nose keeps her from being stunning.

Two sparrows squabble on a light pole above her, and her white nurse's shoes slap against the concrete as she hurries around the car, opens the trunk, and grabs her gym bag. She grimaces at a perfectly manicured and painted nail that snags on the latch and picks at the chipped, mauve polish as she crosses the lot.

A bumblebee buzzes amid the colorful pansies in two five-foot, earth-toned ceramic vases by the hospital entrance. Josie plucks a purple posy and sniffs it as she strides inside.

With births dropping off in recent years, the larger, better-equipped medical centers in the city handle most deliveries. There isn't even an obstetrician or gynecologist at this facility. Josie's certification as a birth doula is the closest they have to a specialist, although Dr. James has minimal training in obstetrics.

Occasionally, however, a woman prefers to deliver her baby here because of her long-standing association and trust in Dr. James. To accommodate these births, the hospital opens the

maternity unit as needed, staffing each shift with a nurse from the main floor. There's one baby this week, and Josie is alone on graveyard duty.

She doesn't see Helen, the afternoon nurse, so she stows her bag behind the nurses' station and hurries to the nursery, thinking: *Thank goodness Georgia delivered here. Babies over bedpans any day!* She hums a lullaby and sighs a contented sigh as she savors the sweet newborn scent of the one occupant: a tiny girl with a tuft of black hair.

Picking up the infant, she settles into an old wooden rocker she donated to the ward. Gaze fixed on the child, she rocks, singing "Rock-a-bye Baby" against the backdrop of the chair's creaks and groans. She caresses the fat cheeks and tiny hands, inhaling the scent of talcum powder and spit-up turning sour. Her face softens as she traces a gentle finger down the baby's cheek and the child nuzzles against her.

When Helen's off-brand, musk-scented cologne overpowers the baby smells, Josie glances at the open doorway. Her bulky black co-worker leans against the frame.

"Georgia won't like you spoiling her Sophie," Helen teases. Her plump lips, puckered with laugh lines, flash a toothy, gummy smile. She is an imposing woman in her late 40s.

A black halo braid, streaked with gray, wraps her head. Ebony eyes disappear behind puffy lids and fluid pockets. Her nose is bulbous; round cheeks sag to fleshy jowls. Helen wears no makeup, even to hide the scar that dissects her double chin, a souvenir of an auto accident that left her with a limp but never dampened her attitude.

Navy scrubs stretch across her ample chest. A giant red plastic purse hangs off her broad shoulder. Gaudy gold earrings dangle against the deep folds of her neck. One scuffed shoe has a fading blood stain.

Josie's gaze stays on the baby as she speaks. "Aren't they the most precious things? Babies?" Her thumb strokes each miniature finger and talks to the child: "Yes, you are. You're the cutest, dearest creatures in the whole wide world."

"Too bad they grow up. How old is Venus? Ten? You wait. I didn't have a single gray hair before Nicole turned thirteen."

"That's why this is the best job in the world. I wish we had enough babies to be in here all the time. I mean, getting paid to rock and pamper them while it's still possible—there's *nothing* better."

"Especially since we give them back to their parents to deal with the growing pains," Helen

says. "The way you spoil them, they'll be brats for sure."

"Babies *should* be spoiled, and life sure don't do it. At least that's been my experience." She shudders, remembering her childhood. "In one foster home, we had a baby with colic. The lady said crying built character, so she refused to let me comfort that pathetic infant. It cried for hours. I can still hear the tiny thing wailing itself hoarse . . . awful woman."

"That's shameful. I've always said we need more supervision of our foster system."

"Or better at least. I reported the neglect to the social worker during a home visit, but they didn't do a damn thing about it." Coos at the baby: "But we're not letting anything bad happen to you, are we? No, we're not."

The chair squeaks as Josie continues rocking.

"Okay, then, I'm out of here," Helen says. "Should be a quiet night. Georgia's got bad postpartum depression. I've had to wake her up to feed Sophie."

"I don't get that," Josie says, doting on the baby. "How can you be sad when you have such a beautiful bundle of joy?"

"I think it's a chemical thing."

Josie hmphs; tickles Sophie's chin. "Dr. Moore on call?"

"Yeah."

"Nice. He stays out of our hair. Ever wonder where he disappears to on his shifts?"

"Don't know. Don't care. Needed him once, and he was there in a flash. That's all that matters. See you tomorrow."

Helen leaves Josie rocking and cooing and caressing.