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# Just A Normal Marriage

## by Leigh Michaels

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### CHAPTER ONE

IT WAS probably nothing, Shauna told herself. Children, and especially twelve-year-old girls, often had stomachaches, and Mandy had eaten an awful lot of pizza. It was really no surprise that, by the time she'd been put to bed in the cream and blue guest room of Shauna's high-rise condo, she was uncomfortable. She had asked for it, that was for sure—ordering pizza with anchovies, red peppers, and onion, and then topping it off with a double-chocolate milkshake!

Nevertheless, Shauna was a little uneasy. Mandy was her responsibility until their mother came home the next day. *I should have told the child to order something a little more sensible*, she thought. *And if Mandy really is sick—what am I going to do about that? And how will I explain it to Mother?*

She wouldn't be very happy if she came home tomorrow to a sick daughter, Shauna reflected, and that was stating it mildly. Nobody actually *liked* to deal with illness, but it certainly wasn't Jessica Peters's strong point. Jessica had never been the kind who sat at a bedside and bathed a fevered brow. She was more apt to turn the whole problem over to one of the maids and go out to lunch.

Being entirely responsible for an almost-adolescent girl for a week was an eye-opener, Shauna decided with a yawn as she got ready for bed herself. And yet, she had really enjoyed spending this time with her little sister. It had taken days to break down the wall of Mandy's reserve and begin to find out what the girl thought, but once she had started acting like a child, there hadn't been a dull moment. Shauna felt a tinge of regret that the week was over, and tomorrow Mandy had to go home.

She turned out the lights in her bedroom, pulled the curtains back, and looked out on the never-dark city that bustled twenty stories below her bedroom window. Against the dark current of the Mississippi River gleamed the brilliant lights of the riverboat restaurants that were permanently moored at the foot of the huge stainless-steel Gateway Arch. It was scarcely eleven o'clock, and down there on the riverfront, gaiety spilled from the boats in waves, just as the dark river water beat gently against the levees.

"You're becoming an old fuddy-duddy," Shauna accused herself. Under other circumstances, she might be down there tonight, dancing and enjoying herself, with Greg.

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“Don’t even think about Greg,” she told herself sternly.

But it was a futile order; it was hard not to think of Greg, when—if things had been just a little different— next Saturday would have been their wedding day.

*Mandy*, she reminded herself. *Think of Mandy instead.*

She wrapped herself in a silk kimono and tiptoed into the guest room. Mandy was sleeping restlessly, the blankets twisted as if she had been fighting a battle. But at least she was asleep, and that was the best treatment for the stomachache, Shauna thought. With any luck, tomorrow it would all be gone.

In the morning, Mandy was quieter than usual. Her eyes were vaguely shadowed behind the dark rims of her glasses; the strong lenses made her look just a little like an owl. She was eating her breakfast cereal with a notable lack of enthusiasm, and the book beside her placemat lay untouched.

Shauna dropped a casual kiss on the girl’s dark hair and pulled out the chair at the head of the table. “It looks to me as if you’re doing more stirring than eating,” she commented.

The housekeeper pushed open the swing door from the kitchen just in time to hear the comment. “You can say that again, Miss McCoy,” she muttered as she poured Shauna’s coffee. “The little bird hasn’t eaten more than a couple of bites.”

Mandy sent a disgusted look up at the woman, and then stared down at her bowl again.

“Is your stomach still hurting?” Shauna asked.

Mandy shook her head without looking up.

“Then would you rather have something else to eat?” Shauna asked gently. “I’m sure Louise would be happy to fix you an egg, or some fruit.”

Mandy shook her head. “Oatmeal’s fine. I’m just not hungry.”

“After all that pizza last night, I should think not.” Shauna kept her voice light, but she was concerned. She spooned up a section of grapefruit and said, “I’ll drop you off at school before I go to the office, and George will pick you up this afternoon and take you out to the house. He’ll stop here and get your suitcase first. Mother should be there by the time you get home.”

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Mandy didn't seem to hear. It was as if all her aloofness had come back overnight.

*Really*, Shauna thought. The child could be more difficult than any two adults. She looked at her little sister with puzzlement and tried to remember if she herself had been so perverse at twelve. *Probably I was*, she decided. "I've really enjoyed having you stay here with me this week," she went on. "I'm glad Mother decided to give all the staff a vacation while she and Rudy went to Mexico, aren't you?"

Mandy nodded jerkily.

"I'll call her this afternoon and tell her what a good time we've had."

Mandy's eyes lifted from the cereal bowl. "Why bother?" she said coldly.

It was like a slap in the face. "What on earth do you mean by that, Amanda Abrams?" Shauna's tone was sharp, and she made an effort to soften it. "I honestly have had a good time, Mandy; I wouldn't lie to you about a thing like that."

Mandy's face seemed to crumple, and a tear splashed into her bowl. "I didn't mean that I thought you lied, Shauna," she said with a quiver in her voice. "I meant that you shouldn't bother to tell Mother about it. She doesn't care what I do, as long as I stay out of her way."

"Darling, Mother loves you very much. She just has an odd way of showing it sometimes." She looked at the child and wondered how on earth to explain it. Now that she stopped to think about it, she remembered all too well what it had been like to be twelve years old and Jessica's daughter—half-child, half-woman, needing her mother the most at the very time that Jessica had pulled away. Shauna had almost forgotten, but now it seemed that the pattern was repeating itself with Mandy. Perhaps, Shauna thought, having this coltish, unpredictable youngster around frightened Jessica.

"I think sometimes Mother hates to be reminded that she's old enough to have a child your age, Mandy," she said, with a twinge of humor.

Mandy pulled a twisted handkerchief from the pocket of her dark blue school uniform and blew her nose defiantly. "I don't know why that should bother her," she said sullenly. "She has a child *your* age."

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Shauna smiled. "I think she has completely wiped from her memory the fact that I'm her daughter," she murmured.

"Until it's handy for her to remember it," Mandy said, "so she can dump me off on you while she goes to Mexico with Rudy."

"Darling, in the first place, you weren't dumped; I invited you. And in the second place, I've loved having you. I'd like to have you stay all the time."

"Really?" Mandy's face lit up. "Can I, Shauna?"

*Now what do I say, Shauna thought. When will I learn to think before I speak?*

"I said I'd like it," she said carefully, "not that we could make it work." She watched Mandy's face fall, and felt like a criminal. "Mandy, dear, you may feel sometimes that Mother doesn't care about you. Every girl your age feels that way now and then. I did, I know. But it doesn't mean that she doesn't love you."

Mandy was staring straight at her. "And besides all that," she said, very precisely, "you've got Greg. And as soon as you marry him, you won't have time for me any more."

Shauna felt as if she had been struck across an open wound. She bit her lip, and then said as calmly as she could, "Mandy, you know perfectly well I'm not going to marry Greg."

"Mother says you'll change your mind." Mandy gave her a sideways look, as if she was gauging her sister's reaction. "She says you still love him, and you're just being incredibly stubborn. What did he do, anyway?"

"Mother is..." Shauna swallowed the rest of the sentence. There was no point in going on; the fact that Jessica didn't comprehend Shauna's reasons for breaking her engagement was certainly none of Mandy's business. "What he did is something I do not care to discuss with you, Mandy. At the moment, I am not planning to marry anyone at all, but whether I change my mind or not, there will always be room in my home for you."

"I know you say that," Mandy said. It was lifeless. "But you'll probably be too busy. Can we go now? I don't want to be late for school." She pushed her chair back, picked up her book bag, and went to stand by the front door of the flat.

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*Sometimes*, Shauna thought, *I would really like to murder this child*. Mandy was precocious, far too intelligent for her own good, and not grown up enough to deal with all the emotional garbage that every child had to face these days—especially a child who had lost her father when she was so young. The combination made her very difficult sometimes.

And also very vulnerable, Shauna knew. She suspected that Mandy’s prickly attitude was mostly assumed to protect her tender heart, and it made Shauna want to hug her close. This child was a lot like she had been at the same age—more so, sometimes, than she wanted to remember.

She said goodbye at the gate of the private academy that Mandy attended, and when Mandy started to get out of the black Jaguar without answering, Shauna’s hand closed on her little sister’s shoulder. “Remember your manners, young lady,” she reminded succinctly.

Mandy sighed, and then said, mechanically, “Thank you for letting me stay with you this week, Shauna.”

“That’s not what I meant, and you know it. Parroting a thank you doesn’t mean anything to either of us. Is that all this week has meant to you? I thought you had as much fun as I did, but I guess I was mistaken.”

Mandy sniffed once, defiantly. Then she flung herself across the car into Shauna’s arms. Her convulsive hug loosened every pin in Shauna’s upswept auburn hair, and nearly choked the breath out of her.

“We’ll do it again soon,” Shauna promised.

“Next weekend?”

“We’ll have to check with Mother. She may have other plans for you.” Shauna knew it must sound like a feeble excuse to Mandy, but it would be worse to promise something that she couldn’t carry through.

“Okay,” Mandy said reluctantly.

The last view Shauna had of her was a small, rigid spine, clad in the same dark blue as the rest of the girls, marching towards the imposing door of the academy. She sighed and put the Jaguar into gear.

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The only thing that was going to benefit Mandy was time, she thought as she drove back towards town and the new glass and steel building where the accounting firm of McCoy and Associates rented office space. Mandy needed time to grow up, to let her emotions catch up with her intellect and her talent. It would help, Shauna knew from experience, if there was someone who cared enough to listen to her...

*I've been too preoccupied with my own concerns to really notice Mandy, she thought. She's grown from a little girl almost into a young lady while my back was turned.* Shauna had been so busy managing Mandy's trust fund that she'd almost forgotten the child was a person with feelings.

*I'll have her come to stay again next weekend, she decided as she crossed the luxurious waiting-room of her office suite and closed her own mahogany door behind her. I'm sure Mother won't mind.*

And the invitation wasn't just for Mandy's sake, either. It had been pleasant to have her around, because she had helped Shauna to laugh again. She filled the hours, and made her forget for a little while that things weren't going to be the way she had planned them...

*So Mother thinks I'll change my mind and marry Greg after all, she thought idly. Well, Mother is wrong.*

Jessica had told her, when Shauna returned her diamond engagement ring, that she was crazy to give up a man like Greg simply because of a single incident in his past. And the worst of it, Shauna admitted painfully, was that at least once every day she found herself wondering if her mother was right.

Sometimes the pain of being without him was almost too much to bear, and she questioned whether she should have ignored the past, after all, and married him despite it. Sometimes she rose in the middle of a sleepless night and looked at the wedding gown still hanging in the back of her closet and asked herself if she had done the right thing.

"Any man is bound to have a few indiscretions floating about," Jessica had told her. "Greg's only human, and you're being quite unrealistic, Shauna."

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Was she being too harsh on him? she asked herself. Was she expecting too much of marriage? Jessica said she was, but then, Shauna reminded herself, Jessica had been married five times.

“Her standards,” Shauna told herself dryly, “are apparently a little different from mine.”

She straightened her shoulders and looked out across the city, past the gleaming new buildings that had thrust St. Louis’s skyline heavenward. Rigid she might be, she told herself, but there could be no compromise when it came to her feelings about what Greg had done. And if her mother was right in saying that every man she met would have a similar skeleton in his cupboard, then Shauna would do without men altogether. There were worse things in life than being alone.

In any case, she knew she could never again be hurt the way Greg had hurt her, for she would never again give her trust so easily into the keeping of another human being. It was some relief, she told herself, to know that she would never have to feel this kind of pain again.

She was still standing at her office window, looking east towards the Mississippi and trying to concentrate on the relative merits of investing in treasury bonds or precious metals, when the intercom on her desk buzzed.

“I’m sorry to disturb you, Miss McCoy,” her secretary said, “but the nurse at Mandy’s school would like to talk to you.”

Anxiety gripped Shauna’s throat. Had the stomachache turned out to be appendicitis? Or had Mandy been injured somehow? She had only been at school for an hour—what could have happened in so short a time?

Half an hour later she was face to face with Mandy in the nurse’s office. “We couldn’t reach Mrs. Peters,” the nurse said. “There was no answer at all at the house.”

“She won’t be back till later today.”

“I am sorry to bother you, Miss McCoy, but I don’t think this should wait. It’s not the first time that Mandy has come in with stomach pain, you see.”

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“Yes,” Shauna said grimly. “I think it should be checked out, too.” It was obvious to anyone with eyes that Mandy was suffering.

“It doesn’t hurt so very bad,” Mandy said, as soon as they were in the car.

“Are you suggesting that I just take you home? Why don’t you want to see the doctor, Mandy?”

“It’s not that,” Mandy said defensively. “I like Dr. Stevens a lot.”

“But you told me this morning that your stomachache was gone, when it obviously wasn’t,” Shauna pointed out. “There must be some reason why you didn’t tell the truth.”

It was a very small voice that said, “Because I hate it when I’m sick. Mother’s always mad at me when I’m sick.”

“Mad at you? Why on earth would she be angry with you for something you can’t help?” Mandy didn’t answer. *Because it interferes with Jessica’s own plans*, Shauna concluded. *Or at least, it seems that way to Mandy.*

“Well, then, we should be glad that she isn’t home yet.” As an attempt at humor, it fell flat, and they were both moodily silent the rest of the way to the clinic.

Dr. Stevens was apparently very busy, because the wait — since they had no appointment — was a long one. Shauna flipped idly through a magazine as she watched patients come and go. They ranged from tiny babies to teenagers. It was a large group practice, with half a dozen pediatricians’ names listed on the door, and the waiting room seemed to be always full.

She put the magazine down. She couldn’t have told the name of it if she had been asked, anyway. “I thought you always saw Dr. Collins, Mandy.”

“That was a long time ago. I like Dr. Stevens better.”

Shauna glanced at her watch. Mandy was apparently not the only one who preferred him, she thought dryly, judging by the length of the wait.

A nurse took them back to an examining room. “Why do you like him so well?” Shauna asked idly. It wasn’t that she cared; she was only trying to keep the child’s mind off the delay.

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Mandy shrugged. "I don't know."

"There must be something special about him."

"He doesn't have cold hands," she said finally.

Shauna supposed that made sense. To a child, medical degrees wouldn't have much meaning; things like cold hands would.

The door opened and a young man in a short-sleeved striped shirt came in. *One of the patients' parents has barged into the wrong room*, Shauna decided. It must be just a baby, though, she concluded, because this was an athletically-built young man who couldn't have been much over thirty. His sun-streaked blond hair looked as if he'd just come in from a windy street.

Mandy held out her arms. The young man gave her a hug. "What's up today, Mandy?" She put a hand silently on her abdomen, and he said, "Yes, they told me you're having another stomachache. What are we going to do about it?" He turned to Shauna. "I'm Rob Stevens. And you are—?"

"Shauna McCoy. I'm Mandy's sister." Mandy was right, she reflected; his handshake not only wasn't cold, it was warm and strong and firm.

"Her half-sister, right?"

"Yes, if you want to get technical." She said it coolly; what difference did it make to him, anyway?

"It's the hair," he confided. "You certainly don't look much like sisters." Before she could gather her wits, he was talking to Mandy again.

Shauna occupied herself with memorizing the pattern of the wallpaper, only half-listening to the murmured conversation. When he spoke to her again, she was surprised that he even remembered she was there.

"When did this pain start, Miss McCoy?"

"Last night. She ate an awful lot of pizza, but..."

"I doubt it was the pizza. Mandy, I'm going to have to take some blood." It was gentle, but the tone of voice brooked no argument. Mandy scowled.

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A nurse put her head in the door. "Doctor, there's a telephone call for you. I wouldn't bother you, but..."

"Who is it, Jane?"

The nurse looked at Shauna as if she was unwilling to say anything in front of her, and then sighed. "It's the electric company about your bill. It's overdue again."

"You tell them that if they shut off the power in my apartment one more time, I'll sue them," he said, but it was calm, as if it didn't bother him much. "I mailed them the money."

"Are you certain?" Shauna asked idly.

"I beg your pardon?" Dr Stevens asked.

"I just wondered. You have a blue envelope in your hip pocket, you see, and it looks awfully like a utility bill."

His hand went to his pocket. The expression on his face as he stared down at the unstamped envelope was the funniest mixture of surprise and chagrin that Shauna had ever seen. He gave it to the nurse, as if he was washing his hands of the problem. "I'll need you to help with this exam in a minute, Jane," he said.

She looked at the crumpled envelope and sighed. "I just hope I can explain this in a minute," she said in a long-suffering tone, and let the door drop shut behind her.

Rob Stevens sighed. He looked a little embarrassed. "Bills," he said. "It isn't the money I mind, it's the paperwork. And I would have sworn I'd paid that on time."

Shauna stopped being quite so amused. What kind of a doctor was he, she wondered, if he couldn't remember details like electricity bills?

"Would you mind stepping out into the hall, Miss McCoy?"

"Why?" she asked baldly.

"Because I'd like to talk to Mandy alone for a little while."

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“That’s ridiculous. Mandy, you don’t care whether I’m here, do you?” She took a step towards the examining table, and somehow, even though he hadn’t seemed to move, Rob Stevens was in the way.

“It is not up to Mandy to choose whether you stay,” he said. “My primary concern is my patient, and I think it would be better for Mandy if she can talk to me privately.”

*My eye*, Shauna thought. *He just wants me out of here, no matter what excuse he has to use.* She picked up her Gucci bag. “I am very sorry that I embarrassed you by finding your electricity bill,” she said sweetly. “I promise not to tell anyone about it.”

He didn’t answer; he held the door for her instead. The nurse was coming down the hall. “Jane, would you show Miss McCoy to my office, please?”

Shauna sat in the cramped little office for what seemed hours, tapping the toe of her Italian shoe on the carpet. What in heaven’s name could they be doing to Mandy? she wondered. It was taking forever.

Finally she couldn’t bear to sit still any more, so she paced the floor and examined the room. According to the framed diploma that was the only thing hanging on the wall, his medical degree was from a prestigious university. *Probably a fluke*, Shauna decided.

The desk was covered with papers, magazines, and folders, though she had to admit they were in neat piles. On the floor behind his desk, in the corner, was a stack of frames.

“That figures,” she muttered. “He’s probably forgotten all about them, too. I wonder how many years he’s been here, and when he’ll get around to hanging his pictures up.” She wondered how his family felt about being relegated to the floor. Perhaps they’d grown used to it, she decided. *Who knows*, she thought; *they might even like living by candlelight!*

He came in just then and shut the door.

“Don’t doctors wear white coats any more?” Shauna asked irritably.

“Not in this office.” He pulled his desk chair around and sat down. “It frightens the little kids.”

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“I’d say you’d frighten more of them with that tie.”

He looked down. “What’s wrong with this tie?”

“If you don’t know, I couldn’t possibly explain it to you.”

“Miss McCoy, there is no need to be sarcastic. I asked you to leave; I didn’t throw you out of that examining room.”

“Oh? Then why do I feel bruised?” Her tone was flippant.

He looked at her for a long moment, his blue eyes like ice against his tanned face. “You deserve to, you know,” he said grimly. “How dare you put that child in that position?”

The sudden attack stunned her. “What position?”

“You didn’t leave her any choice in the matter. What was she supposed to say? *‘No, I don’t want you, get out’*? If she hadn’t asked you to stay, you would have been furious with her.”

“Well, you certainly took care of that.”

“Yes, I did.”

“Now, are you going to tell me what’s wrong with her, or is that between the two of you, too?” She knew she sounded nasty, and she didn’t care.

“I’ll tell you. Some adult needs to do something—I suppose I’ll try you first. I’m ordering a few more tests, but as best I can tell, there is nothing physically wrong with Mandy.”

“It’s all in her head?”

“Not exactly. In any case, I hope you’ll remember, Miss McCoy, that psychosomatic illness is no less painful simply because it doesn’t have a physical cause.”

“I have a college degree, Doctor. Of course I know that.”

“Letters after a name don’t have anything to do with common sense, Miss McCoy.”

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She smiled and struck back. “You should know,” she said sweetly. “But then we all have our own definitions of common sense. Mine includes paying my bills on time.”

He ignored the jab, and she felt a little ashamed.

“Mandy’s pain has been going on for several weeks,” he said. “In a case of this type, the first thing we suspect is trouble at school.”

“Mandy? She’s an honor student.”

“I know. I talked with the headmistress at the academy a few minutes ago, and she says there is no problem at all. That leaves Mandy’s other activities, and her home life. She’s been staying with you for the last week, I understand?”

“Yes,” Shauna said crisply. “And if you’re implying that I’ve been beating her or something...”

He shook his head. “Please, Miss McCoy. I don’t suspect anything of the sort.”

That was some consolation, she found, and she was a little ashamed of herself for jumping to the conclusion that she was being accused.

“If you had been mistreating her,” he went on smoothly, “she’d have had symptoms earlier in the week.”

“Why, you—!”

He went on ruthlessly. “On the whole, I’m inclined to think that she’s miserable at home, and that’s what’s causing her pain. She doesn’t want to go back there.”

“Did Mandy tell you that?”

“Not exactly. Mrs. Peters seems to be a very cold woman.”

“Are you suggesting that Mother is abusing her?”

He shook his head, but his eyes were watchful. “There is no evidence of physical abuse.”

“Well, if you’re talking about neglect, you’re off base. Mandy has everything she could want. She’s an extraordinarily sensitive child, and like every girl, she sometimes has problems getting along with her mother.”

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“You sound as if you know what it’s like.” His tone was bland. “Did you also have trouble getting along with your mother?”

“We aren’t discussing me, Dr. Stevens. When I need psychoanalysis, I’ll go to a specialist.”

“Miss McCoy, I only meant that there is something in Mandy’s home environment that is upsetting her badly, and I thought perhaps you could help explain it.”

Shauna shook her head. “Doesn’t Mandy know what’s bothering her?”

“If she could face it, talk about it, and deal with it,” the doctor said dryly, “she wouldn’t be having stomachaches.”

*That’s elementary psychology, Shauna, she told herself. She felt a little ashamed of herself for not realizing it.*

“She said her mother is coming home today.” When Shauna nodded, he said, “I’d appreciate it if Mrs. Peters would call me.”

“I’m sure she will.”

“I’m not.” He reached for a prescription pad. “I’ve been Mandy’s doctor for nearly a year, and I haven’t met her mother yet.”

Shauna blinked in astonishment. “Then how do you know she’s...” She stopped herself short. She hadn’t come here to discuss Jessica’s character defects; family matters should stay in the family. It was a lesson she had learned long ago—more from Jessica’s bad example than from her teaching.

He looked as if he’d like to pursue it, and Shauna said quickly, “Then how does Mandy get here?”

“Sometimes the housekeeper brings her. Or Mrs. Peters’ maid. I haven’t seen the chauffeur and the gardener yet, but I expect to make their acquaintance any day.”

“Oh,” Shauna said softly. “I didn’t know that.” It wasn’t exactly a shock, though, she reflected. It sounded like Jessica. Her time would be too valuable to spend waiting for a doctor’s appointment.

“I’m not surprised.” His hand skimmed across the tablet’s surface.

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He was left-handed, she realized, and he wore no ring. Had wedding rings for doctors gone out along with white jackets? she wondered. On the other hand, she couldn't imagine any woman putting up with the electricity being shut off on a regular basis...

*Restrain your curiosity, she told herself firmly. It's certainly none of your business.*

"Here are the orders for a few additional tests I'd like to do, just to be certain." He tore off the top sheet and handed it across the desk. "Would it be possible for you to take her over to the hospital right now? It will take a couple of hours, I'm afraid."

"That's no problem."

He smiled. It was quite a charming smile, Shauna realized.

"I'll let them know you're coming, then, so there won't be any more delay than necessary."

"Thank you," she said, feeling a little awkward. It had been more than an hour, she realized, since he'd first walked into that examining room, and he had shown no impatience, no hurry, even when she'd been sarcastic. There were probably dozens of people waiting for him, too, as she and Mandy had waited. "I appreciate everything you've done."

"That's my job."

"I'm sorry I was a little..." She paused, and then decided it was better not to go into detail. She picked up her handbag. "By the way, about your electricity bill..."

"Yes?" The single word was clipped. He had risen from his chair.

She was sorry she'd brought it up, but it was too late to back out now without looking like a total fool. "I'm a certified public accountant," she said lamely. "One of the things my firm does is personal financial assistance. We pay people's bills, do their personal record-keeping, that sort of thing. If you're interested..." She held out a business card.

He looked at it. "Really? Do you do a lot of it?"

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At least he hadn't taken offense, she thought with relief. "Mostly, it's for people who have run up bills too enormous to pay," she admitted, "so they give us their paychecks each week, and we take care of keeping the creditors away from the door while they get back on their feet. But there's no reason we couldn't help you out."

"And my electricity won't ever be turned off again?" He sounded intrigued by the possibility.

She raised a hand. "I'll personally guarantee it."

He laughed, then. It was a nice laugh, she thought, low and infectious. "Don't make idle promises," he warned. "This war's been going on for a year, you know. But I may take you up on that offer."