

REALLY? AT YOUR AGE?

By Jacqueline Diamond

CHAPTER ONE

Cody Matchett was eating lunch in the hospital cafeteria—a cheese-and-sprouts sandwich with extra pickles—when the new nurse at her table asked the question Cody disliked most. On a bad day, detested. And considered nobody’s business.

The nurse had taken out her phone and was showing around pictures of her grandbaby. When Cody’s turn came, she mumbled a compliment and handed off the device. It would be rude to point out that, as an obstetrician, she’d delivered three equally adorable little people that morning.

“How about you, Dr. Matchett?” the woman asked. “Do you have grandchildren?”

There it was, The Question. Seemingly inevitable and eternally grating. Also painful, due to her mixed feelings about being childless.

“Nope.” Cody braced. It wasn’t that question she objected to as much as the ones that often followed. People assumed that, at fifty-two, she at least had kids, or a ready explanation why not. Seriously, how nosy was that?

Her sister Mandy, Rancho Allegro Medical Center’s director of nursing, cut in. “Cody and I are independent and happily rug-rat-free.”

The newbie glared as if Mandy had stripped to her undies and performed cartwheels across the lunchroom. “Rug rats? What an awful way to describe those little angels.”

“Angels?” muttered a radiology tech. “You should have seen my three-year-old this morning. He climbed on the kitchen counter, picked up a canister, and dumped flour all over the cat.”

“You let your cat on the counter?” The newbie appeared clueless about the miasma of aversion she was arousing among her colleagues. Or that she was sitting with them on unofficial probation. Only because they were eating lunch late on a Friday afternoon had there been an open chair at their table.

“The cat was on the floor,” the tech grumbled. “Along with a couple of pounds of flour.”

Sympathetic noises ensued. Mandy merely smiled, probably because her two cats were in no danger of being doused with anything by anybody.

Cody had no cats, only a house to herself and a garden full of flowers and vegetables. Which was how she liked it.

Mostly.

Her gaze traveled across the half-empty cafeteria to Ben Wright, the distinguished-looking hospital attorney who’d once been her neighbor and toward whom she’d felt drawn for years. While she believed the attraction was mutual, he’d kept his distance even after her divorce and, later, his wife’s death.

Although it was impossible to avoid him completely, she’d resolved not to waste any more time trying to figure him out. Or herself, where he was concerned.

His head lowered, he listened to one of his lunch companions. How did Ben keep his hair so full in his mid-fifties? He must be taking medication.

Finasteride. The drug's name popped into Cody's mind, although she never prescribed it since it was contraindicated for women. Wasn't one of the side effects a decrease in sexual desire? That must disappoint whoever he was dating these days.

Mandy broke into Cody's musings. "You ought to take off your white coat before you go to lunch. It's unhygienic and you'd save on your dry cleaning bill."

"Thanks, *Mom*." Did a big sister ever outgrow behaving like one? Mandy never missed a chance for a dig about Cody's coat, which symbolized her presumably elevated status as a doctor.

At moments like this, she almost wished she'd chosen to eat lunch in the doctors' lounge. But then she'd miss out on some cherished companionship.

"I'm not kidding." Her older sibling pointed. "Mustard."

Cody frowned down at the tiny spot. Due to the combination of turmeric and oil in mustard, stains were impossible to remove on the fly. Instead, she unpinned her name badge and moved it to cover. "Problem solved."

"You'll never get that out if it sets." Abruptly, Mandy stopped speaking.

The floor was quivering. Why? No thundering crowd of diners had headed for the exit.

Then Cody heard a low rumble and the windows rattled. "What on earth is that?" gasped the new nurse, who'd moved to California from the Midwest.

"Earthquake," Mandy and Cody said.

"Hang on," added the lab tech as the cafeteria began to sway from side to side.

CHAPTER TWO

Try as he might, Ben couldn't focus on his friends' discussion of investment strategies.

As a rule, he appreciated the insights gained when Quent Swaggert, a fiduciary who worked with trusts and estates, joined him for lunch. Their normally reticent companion, Dr. Nate Patton, appeared enthralled, asking question after question.

The three of them had a lot in common: all single, with Ben widowed and the other guys divorced; all professional men; all fond of jogging and swimming. Okay, fond might be putting it too strongly. All health-conscious.

Still, why did Quent choose to eat here about once a week? The cafeteria food was nothing remarkable, and he kept sneaking glances toward Cody's table.

Cody wasn't Quent's usual type and, to Ben's knowledge, they'd never dated. Blond and in good shape in his late forties, Quent picked glamorous ladies who layered on the makeup and wore heels high enough to require FAA permits. Ladies unlike down-to-earth Cody.

Twenty years ago, when she'd bought the house next door, Ben had been struck by her honest, forthright manner and warm smile. He'd tempered his fondness for contact, however, when he registered his wife's frosty manner.

Lorena hadn't been the jealous sort; she was too bold and confident for that. And she'd acted polite enough while serving as Cody's real estate agent. But she must have whiffed his reaction and assumed more than really existed. Even Cody's marriage a few

months later hadn't softened the hostility.

Well, that was old news. Lorena had been dead for two years now.

And you haven't taken the first step toward getting closer to a woman you see almost every day at work. At this point, if he decided to make a move, he might have to elbow Quent out of the way.

Not that Ben intended to. He didn't believe he and Cody had compatible values. And while his marriage to Lorena had been far from ideal, he retained a strong sense of loyalty to her.

A rumbling noise jolted him. "What the hell?"

The place swayed as if a truck had rammed the building. Terrorists? A bomb? Although Ben had recently reviewed a document about preparing for those threats, every recommendation flew right out of his head.

Nate was white-knuckling the edge of the table. "It's another quake!" There'd been a small tremor a few days ago. "A bigger one."

That wasn't as bad as terrorism, Ben thought, randomly. Not exactly a good thing, either.

"Hope this hospital carries plenty of insurance." With those words, Quent ducked under the table.

The lights flickered, and items clattered to the floor. Lots of clinking and thumping followed. Not much obvious breakage, thanks to the resilience of plastic dishes.

The shuddering ended. While it had lasted less than a minute, it seemed longer. A weird factoid poked out of Ben's memory: sandy soil near beaches magnified quaking, and in severe cases could transform into quicksand, in a process called liquefaction.

And the abyss will swallow us? Get a grip, Ben.

The five-story hospital was situated in the inland section of Rancho Allegro, on firm ground. Although constructed fifty years ago, it had been upgraded to current standards, including being retrofitted with rollers. Despite the likelihood of damage, the place wasn't about to collapse.

The lights steadied. Had power been restored citywide, or were the hospital's generators kicking in? Perhaps both.

Aware that his heart was racing, Ben deliberately slowed his breathing. People relied on him in an emergency. He had no excuse for freaking out.

Nearby, Nate and Quent were brushing themselves off. Neither appeared the worse for wear.

Ben surveyed the handful of people in the room. "Is anyone hurt?" he called, and received a chorus of "I'm okay" and "we're fine" in response.

At Cody's table, one of her companions had gone rigid. A quake novice, he presumed. Cody herself remained clear-eyed, although her lips were pressed into a grim line.

Judging by the disheveled state of the cafeteria, with dishes and drinks spilled on the floor, the rest of the hospital must have suffered an impact as well. Still, he doubted the quake had been strong enough to cause structural damage. As a precaution, no doubt an engineer would be hired to confirm that.

Moreover, equipment might be damaged. Also, it would be catastrophic if patients had fallen, rolled out of bed or suffered heart attacks.

Ben took out his phone to coordinate with the administrator. Did cell service still

work? Yes, but by instinct he pressed the number for his daughter instead.

"I'm fine," Hayley said without preamble. "I just brought the twins home from school." Ben's granddaughters attended first grade. "They think the shaking was great fun."

"Anything break?" Ben and his late wife had turned over their old house to their daughter. At Lorena's urging, they'd moved to a more prestigious neighborhood and a larger home, which Ben still occupied.

"A few knickknacks we can live without," she said.

"And the place next door?" It belonged to Cody.

"Still standing."

Briefly, Ben wondered about the state of his own place. Most likely it was fine, due to modern construction. As for the contents, he doubted the faux-antique, hardwood furnishings would yield to anything short of a pickaxe.

"Duty calls," he told his daughter.

"Go head off those lawsuits, Dad." Hayley sounded almost merry.

"That isn't my main concern."

"No, but it's a close second." She chuckled. "I'm glad you're okay. See you soon."

"Ciao." As he clicked off, Ben noticed Nate hurrying out of the cafeteria. A fertility specialist, he must have patients to check.

"I'm off, too." Quent collected his tray, and cast another look toward Cody.

"She's fine," Ben grumbled.

"I can see that." With a grin, his friend swept away.

When Ben glanced at his cell, he discovered that the hospital administrator, Susan Lane, had issued an alert to senior staff. They were instructed to assess problems in their immediate vicinity and then report to her office to coordinate their response, as per the hospital's emergency plan.

A list unscrolled in Ben's head. Check on the welfare of patients and staff. Make sure the emergency room was prepared to treat an influx of injuries. Apologize to everyone for unavoidable delays while they confirmed that equipment was functioning, pharmaceuticals were safe, and so on.

Adrenaline surged as he shot photos of the cafeteria breakage for the record. His body thrummed with energy at the challenges ahead.

It had been several years since he'd assisted at an emergency, the result of a major brush fire that had spread to nearby neighborhoods. He'd kept an eye on the proceedings from a legal standpoint, and also pitched in to fetch supplies or push a gurney as needed.

While Ben hoped there were no serious problems today, this heightened awareness exhilarated him. Was it time, after two decades, to rethink his safe little niche as hospital attorney?

The floor shivered. Ben braced for a large jolt, but none came. Relieved when the aftershock ended, he headed for the corridor.

Really? At Your Age? Synopsis

After life has kept them apart for decades, can a couple in their fifties find a path to love? When a quake rattles their small town, Dr. Cody Matchett and hospital attorney Ben Wright are both jolted into rethinking their life choices. That includes their long-

simmering attraction, and the fate of half a dozen frozen embryos. Is Cody ready to become a mom—and to accept love—at age 52? Unexpected twists, emotional depth, and moments of laughter characterize *USA Today* bestselling author Jacqueline Diamond's novels.

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