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Romance™*

EMILY FORBES

Navy Officer to
Family Man



Emily Forbes

Navy Officer to Family Man

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About the Author

EMILY FORBES began her writing life as a partnership between two sisters who are both passionate bibliophiles. As a team Emily had ten books published, and one of her proudest moments was when her tenth book was nominated for the 2010 Australian Romantic Book of the Year Award.

While Emily's love of writing remains as strong as ever, the demands of life with young families has recently made it difficult to work on stories together—but rather than give up her dream Emily now writes solo. The challenges may be different, but the reward of having a book published is still as sweet as ever.

Whether as a team or as an individual, Emily hopes to keep bringing stories to her readers. Her inspiration comes from everywhere: stories she hears while travelling, at mothers' lunches, in the media, and in her other career as a physiotherapist all get embellished with a large dose of imagination until they develop a life of their own.

If you would like to get in touch with Emily you can e-mail her at emilyforbes@internode.on.net, and she can also be found blogging at the Harlequin Medical™ Romance blog—www.eharlequin.com

Dear Reader

This book is my fourth linked tale—I seem to be developing a habit! You might recognise my heroine Juliet from my last book, *DR DROP-DEAD GORGEOUS*. She was the heroine's sister, but she was having her own interesting experiences and was demanding that I tell her story too. I have never started a book knowing it's going to be the first in a series, but somewhere along the way my secondary characters develop to a point where I can't abandon them. So it was with Juliet.

She has had a rough eighteen months. A divorce, surgery and chemotherapy have taken their toll on her, and now she's a single mother to two young children and about to undergo more surgery. Juliet would love to turn the clock back a few years—wouldn't all thirty-something women?—but she knows that's impossible, and she's just hoping for a brighter future. I wanted Juliet to have that bright future, I wanted her to be happy, but the trouble was I'd already divorced her from the love of her life. Could I help her to find love a second time, or had her luck expired? Answering that question became my goal.

Juliet and Maggie are the second pair of sisters I've written about. That is no surprise to me, because I am lucky enough to share a close bond with all my siblings, including two sisters, and I enjoy giving life to characters who share that same relationship. It's a fabulous thing to have a person in your life who loves you unconditionally, and I hope that everyone reading this has someone—be it a sister, friend, daughter, cousin or mother—you know will catch you if you fall or will let you catch them. This story is for all the women of the world.

Best wishes

Emily

This book is dedicated to two women without whom this book would still be just an idea in my head. Belinda, my sister, and my editor Lucy

CHAPTER ONE

JULIET entered the courthouse, passing through the security screening area and into the foyer. Her unfamiliar heels clicked on the marble floor, echoing in the space, as she strode towards the notice-board on the opposite side of the atrium. She rarely wore heels any more, not since she'd given up a career in law for a career as a university lecturer, but she knew adopting a power-dressing approach would give her some much-needed confidence today. She'd deliberately chosen one of her old suits—she'd barely worn it and hoped it still passed inspection—and she'd teamed it with the confidence-boosting heels. At five feet two inches she needed all the help she could get in the height department and a couple of extra inches immediately improved her self-assurance.

She checked the list of the day's cases pinned to the board, looking for her name and case number. She found it, about a third of the way down. Today she was nobody special, just another number. She headed for courtroom number three, making her way towards the waiting area.

The waiting annexe was sombre, dull and outdated, depressing. Gone was the imposing decor of the entrance foyer, the marble floor and chandeliers giving way to stained carpets, fake wood wall-panelling and a mismatched collection of chairs, some plastic, some scratched timber and some with faded upholstery. She wasn't inclined to sit down.

Juliet knew she was being ridiculous with her silent criticism; the dull room was perfectly suited to her mood, but she wasn't used to feeling depressed and she wanted the room to lift her spirits, not contribute to the feeling of finality. She wanted the room to instil in her a sense that she was doing the right thing but all it was doing was making her feel worse. It exacerbated her loneliness and increased her sorrow.

But there was no turning back, despite her sister's parting words as she'd dropped her off at the courthouse earlier. Juliet had come this far and she wasn't changing her mind now. There had been times where she could have backed down, where she could have stopped this day from coming, but not now. Not any more. The decision had been made.

Juliet had always been stubborn and that hadn't changed. She sighed and chose a seat on the right-hand side of the room. While she sat waiting for her case number to be called she looked at the other people scattered around the room. Mostly they looked tired and worn out and their demeanour did nothing for her mood either. All of them were in everyday clothing, none of them had bothered to smarten up their attire, and the contrast between their outfits and hers flattened her confidence a little.

The weak winter sunlight struggled to penetrate the grimy windows, the glass surfaces were smeared with dirt, too high up to be easily cleaned and it looked as though no one had bothered for years. Juliet was watching the floating dust motes as they wafted through the sporadic beams of light, pushed about by the invisible breaths of air as people moved about the room. A large gust of air disturbed the dust as someone pushed open the door and the movement drew Juliet's attention. A stray shaft of sunlight illuminated a man as he entered the room, tall, smartly dressed and familiar.

It was Sam.

The love of her life. Her husband.

Soon to be her ex-husband.

But circumstances weren't enough to stop the tingle that surged through her every time she saw him. In her eyes he still looked as good as the day she'd met him.

He paused just inside the doorway and Juliet took a moment to admire him, knowing she didn't have long before he would find her in the small room. He was wearing his white naval officer's uniform, the crisp, clean colour even more eye-catching against the dirty, dull tones of the room. But, then, she'd always been a sucker for Sam in his dress uniform.

He was tanned from his time spent on the ocean and in the sun, his olive skin contrasting with the white fabric of his clothing. His thick blond hair was slightly longer than usual, long enough to be showing a little of its natural curl as it brushed the nape of his neck.

His eyes scanned the room and settled on her. He moved towards her, smiling his crooked smile. She'd never been able to resist his smile. It started on the right side of his mouth, that corner always lifted first, before the smile spread across his lips, revealing a row of perfect, white teeth, until it reached the left corner, by which time Juliet always found she was smiling too. Even now his smile was working, lifting the sombre mood, lifting her spirits, if only temporarily.

In a few steps Sam had reached her side. He sat beside her on an upright wooden chair and leant across to kiss her cheek.

'How are you?' he asked. His voice sounded calm and controlled, completely the opposite to how she felt. She was apprehensive and nervous, plus she'd been unable to sleep soundly for several nights and now she was exhausted. But she told him none of this.

'Good,' was her reply. And you?' She sounded so polite, almost as though she was talking to a stranger, not to someone who had shared her bed for a third of her life.

Up close she could see that Sam had a few more wrinkles at the corners of his green eyes and a few strands of grey in his blond hair. Neither detracted from his looks. He was still a handsome man and Juliet imagined he would always be. He would age well, she thought. She wondered how they looked to the other people in the room. What did they think she and Sam were there for? Would anyone guess they were about to get divorced? Would anyone else care?

'How long until it's our turn?' His voice interrupted her thoughts. If he had any trace of concern he was hiding it well, sounding relaxed and completely unfazed by the situation. She could imagine him in a crisis on board a naval vessel, directing sailors, getting people to do what he wanted without having to yell. Nothing much ever seemed to rattle him and it looked as though today was no exception.

'I'm not sure,' she answered. 'I think there are still a couple of cases before us.'

She felt Sam's arm brush against hers and the contact made her look down. He was pinching the crease in his trouser leg, a crease she could see was ironed to within a fraction of perfection. Juliet could see the outline of the muscles in Sam's thigh straining against the fabric. His leg was too close to hers, making her feel an unfamiliar sense of unease. He was too close. She wished he'd left a seat between them, kept some distance, then maybe she would have been able to calm her nerves.

Sam looked fit, healthy and full of life. A huge contrast to the rest of the crowd and probably a huge contrast to her. She felt tired, a feeling she was getting used to and had attributed to life as a single mother. Sam, on the other hand, looked as energetic as the day they'd met. Thirteen years ago.

She kept her gaze focussed on her lap. She didn't want to look at Sam, couldn't face seeing him there. All it did was remind her of everything she was losing.

How had they come to this?

Her sister Maggie had suggested that she could still stop this process but Juliet felt they'd tried everything they could and still they were in front of the magistrate. She'd tried, they both had, but in the end they'd run out of options. A marriage couldn't work without compromise.

Her hands were shaking. She grabbed her handbag from the chair beside her, pulling it onto her lap, holding it firmly in an attempt to stop the shaking. Her engagement ring caught the light, shooting sparks over the floor in front of her, small bright spots glistening in the dirt. She hadn't removed her rings as in her mind she was still married. For a little longer anyway. She sneaked a sideways glance at Sam's hands. He still wore his wedding ring too.

'How are the kids?' Despite Juliet's less than enthusiastic responses, Sam continued to attempt to make conversation and Juliet thought she'd better make an effort to hold up her end.

‘Fine,’ she answered honestly. ‘They’re doing fine.’ It was true too, but, then, they were used to their father being absent for long periods of time. Even when he had lived with them he could spend months at sea. They thought it was normal.

Juliet hadn’t wanted it to be their normal circumstances. She’d wanted them to have a father who was around. She and Sam had planned for that to happen but their efforts had failed. She’d failed. And now the kids would have a father who was more absent than ever. She wondered if they’d forgive her when they were older and realised what they’d missed out on.

Would they forgive Sam for putting the navy first or would they blame her for not compromising?

Would they realise their father could have compromised too or would they take his view and agree that he’d been asked to make sacrifices, not compromises?

‘Is it okay if I take them out for dinner tonight? I’m only on leave until tomorrow.’ Sam’s question interrupted her musings.

‘You’ve only got twenty-four hours?’ Sam nodded. ‘Why did you come?’ Juliet asked. ‘You didn’t have to, you know. We don’t have to be here in person.’

‘I know. But I wasn’t going to pass up my last opportunity to see my wife.’

‘What do you mean?’

Sam turned slightly on his chair so he was facing her more directly. ‘This is it, Jules. We’re getting divorced. Next time I see you you’ll be my ex-wife, and I know I’ve missed a lot of things in all the years we’ve been together but I’m not about to let our marriage end in my absence.’

She wanted to stamp her feet and yell and scream. If only Sam had been prepared to make more of an effort to participate when they had been married, perhaps it wouldn’t have come to this.

‘So, can I take the kids or do you have plans?’

Juliet wanted to say, no, he couldn’t take the kids. She wanted to make it difficult. She wanted to remind Sam that it was his choice to be a part-time father but she knew that would achieve nothing.

‘We don’t have plans. They’d love to go with you.’ And they would. There was no reason for them not to spend time with their father. She wasn’t going to become one of those single mothers who denied children time with their father out of spite. She wasn’t spiteful and she was to blame for this situation as much as Sam. They’d both been too stubborn to back down. That’s what had brought them here.

‘Taylor versus Taylor.’ The bailiff called their case.

Sam and Juliet stood and followed the bailiff into the courtroom to stand before the magistrate.

The courtroom was in marginally better condition than the waiting area but still small and unimpressive. Juliet wasn’t sure what she’d expected but something a bit grander, a bit more official in appearance would have suited the occasion better in her opinion. If it weren’t for the raised bench where the magistrate was sitting, one could be forgiven for thinking they were in a school classroom circa 1980. At least the magistrate in her robes lent some formality to the occasion but the room itself was far from grand and in Juliet’s opinion it was diminishing the event. Not that she wanted the event celebrated but she wanted to be able to look back on their twelve-year marriage with positive thoughts and this sombre, dull, drab room was taking the gloss off those years.

The magistrate nodded at them before saying, ‘State your names, please.’

Juliet opened her mouth to speak but no words came out. She heard Sam’s rich voice beside her—‘Samuel Edward Taylor?’—and that gave her the courage to state her own name, although her voice quivered with nerves. ‘Juliet Ann Taylor.’

‘You’re filing for divorce?’

‘Yes, Your Honour.’ To Juliet’s relief, Sam answered. She’d done about as much talking as she was capable of. Her knees were weak and she wasn’t sure how long she’d be able to hold herself up. Her palms were sweaty and her mouth was dry.

‘It says in your petition there are two minors. Have satisfactory custody arrangements been made for the children?’ the magistrate asked.

‘Yes, Your Honour.’ Sam repeated his words.

‘All right. Your application is granted. Your divorce becomes absolute one month and one day from now and the paperwork will be posted to you. Next case.’

That’s it? Juliet was dumbfounded. Twelve years of marriage, dissolved in fewer than one hundred words. Sam turned and started walking away from the magistrate. Juliet followed him, feeling completely disoriented.

Sam walked the length of the courtroom and kept walking until he’d passed through the waiting chamber and into the corridor. Only then did he stop and turn to her.

‘Is it always that quick?’ he asked.

‘I don’t know,’ she said. ‘It’s the first time I’ve got divorced.’

Sam smiled and her stomach trembled in response. ‘I thought she’d ask a few more questions.’

Juliet shrugged. Now that she thought about it there wasn’t any reason for discussion with the magistrate. ‘She’s not a counsellor. As far as she’s concerned, as long as we’ve filled in the application properly and made arrangements for the kids, she doesn’t care. We’re not contesting anything. She was probably glad to have a straightforward case.’ She was irritated with herself over her reaction to Sam’s smile and her annoyance had made her respond abruptly. But it wasn’t Sam’s fault she still found him attractive and she attempted to tone down her snappiness. ‘But I know what you mean. It doesn’t feel real, does it?’

‘I guess it won’t until we get the paperwork,’ he replied.

Juliet didn’t believe that would make any difference. So much of their day-to-day life would remain unchanged, continuing as it had for the past year, if not longer. She’d missed Sam when they’d been married and she expected to still miss him. She didn’t expect much to change. The children would probably see just as much of him as they always had but she’d wanted him around more. That was what had started this whole process but now all that would change was that he wouldn’t be coming home to her.

She knew that, at least initially, she’d be the only one who’d feel like something was missing. Sam had his career, his whole other life, and the children were still young enough to be oblivious to all the grown-up worries surrounding them. It was fair to say that Juliet didn’t feel as though this situation had turned out quite as she’d planned.

Sam started walking, heading for the main foyer and the exit. ‘Do you need a lift? I’m going to grab a taxi to the hotel.’

‘No, thank you. Maggie will pick me up, I just need to call her.’

He stopped and turned to her. ‘I’m sorry, Jules. Sorry it’s come to this.’ He leant down and placed his hand on her forearm as he kissed her on the cheek. His hand and lips were warm and her skin burned where he touched her. ‘I’ll see you around five-thirty when I pick up the kids.’

Juliet nodded, the lump in her throat preventing her from talking.

Sam left her then. Left her standing in the foyer, alone. Juliet watched him go and only once he was out of sight did she let her composure slip. She collapsed onto a nearby bench and let all the day’s emotions pour out of her in a torrent of silent tears. She’d felt close to tears all day but she’d refused to let anyone see her cry. Not the children, not her sister, and especially not Sam. She searched her handbag for the packet of tissues she knew was in there as she wondered what had happened to their dreams, their plans for the future. But she knew what had happened. Sam had changed the rules and she had gambled and lost. She’d have to learn to live with that.

CHAPTER TWO

‘DAD’S here, Dad’s here.’

Juliet could hear Edward yelling. He’d been sitting at the front window since five o’clock, waiting for Sam to arrive—he’d never sat still for that long in his life. Now Sam was here and Edward was running around the house like a maniac. Thirty minutes of inactivity was obviously far too long for a five-year-old boy!

Juliet answered Sam’s knock at the door. He’d changed out of his uniform and was now wearing jeans and a pale green polo shirt. Juliet didn’t recognise the shirt and she wondered when he’d bought it. Sam never shopped, he spent so much time in a uniform he said he didn’t need many civvies so Juliet had always bought his clothes for him. Who was choosing them for him now? The shade of green was a perfect foil for Sam’s tanned skin and highlighted his green eyes. Juliet couldn’t imagine Sam choosing the shirt deliberately so he either got lucky with the colour or someone else bought it for him. It wasn’t her business any more but she couldn’t stop the flash of jealousy that raced through her.

She stepped back to invite Sam in just as Edward hurtled past her, launching himself at Sam like a little blond rocket. Sam caught him easily, scooping him up against his broad chest and carrying him inside. Juliet had been wondering whether or not to greet Sam with a kiss on the cheek but Edward’s body formed a wall between them, taking that option out of the equation. Had they just set a precedent for all future greetings?

‘Where’s your sister?’ Sam asked Edward.

‘Dunno.’

‘She’s in her room,’ Juliet replied, and Sam veered right, carrying Ed into Kate’s room.

‘Here’s my gorgeous girl?are you ready for dinner?’

Juliet followed behind them, stopping in the doorway. Kate was still getting ready?aged eight, she already spent more time in front of the mirror than Juliet did. She was sliding a clip into her brown hair and Juliet smiled, Kate had been doing her hair for the last ten minutes, trying out different styles with varying accessories?clips, headbands and bows—but Sam’s arrival seemed to have sped up the process. Kate finished her hair and grabbed her swing coat before crossing the room to greet her father with a hug and a kiss.

‘Where are we going?’ Edward asked.

‘Sofia’s.’

Juliet’s throat was tight and hot tears stung her eyes. Eating at Sofia’s Italian restaurant was a family tradition and it hurt to find that the tradition was going to continue without her. She blinked back tears, desperate to stop them from spilling over onto her cheeks. She couldn’t believe she was still so wound up, she would have thought she’d cried enough earlier in the day to last her a while.

‘Yay! Can I have *gelati*?’

Sam laughed and punched Edward lightly on the arm, immediately starting a play fight. ‘Spaghetti first and then *gelati*.’

Juliet let Edward wrestle his father for a minute before calling a stop to the physical stuff. ‘Okay, enough, guys,’ she said. ‘Time for dinner.’

‘Your mum’s right, champ,’ Sam said as Edward started to complain that their game had been halted prematurely. ‘The taxi’s waiting.’

Juliet hadn’t considered how Sam had got to their house but as she herded them through the front door and into the driveway she saw a cab parked behind her car. ‘You can take my car if that’s easier. I don’t need it.’

‘Aren’t you coming with us?’ Kate picked up on Juliet’s wording.

‘No, darling, this is Dad’s treat.’

Sam stopped, extending her an invitation. ‘You’re welcome to join us, Jules.’

‘Thanks, but there’s some stuff I want to do here. Let me get the car keys.’ She turned away from Sam, not wanting him to see the lie on her face. She grabbed her keys from the hall table and returned to find Sam had sent the taxi off. She handed him the keys and kissed her children goodbye. She watched them climb into her car and waited as they waved to her before they disappeared down the street.

She turned, picking up a stray football that was lying in the front garden, and took it inside with her, the vision of Edward’s fair head stuck in her mind. He was the spitting image of Sam to look at, a little ball of muscle. They were both bundles of energy and Ed was already mad about ball sports, although, living in Melbourne, he preferred Aussie rules football over Sam’s choice of rugby union.

Juliet had grown up in Sydney where rugby was the main winter sport, and although she hadn’t been a huge fan she now had a soft spot for rugby as that was how she’d first met Sam. She moved through the house, tidying up bits and pieces as she let her mind wander.

She was still finding it difficult to reconcile herself with the idea that Sam was no longer her husband. He would always be part of her life, connected to her through their children, and she needed to work out how they were going to deal with that. After twelve years of marriage she couldn’t expect to accept that it was over without some regrets but she knew she had to get past that.

The house was quiet, too quiet, but she had to be prepared to be alone. She wasn’t exactly looking forward to having the house to herself but she thought the solitude might at least give her a chance to make some sense of the day.

In some respects twelve years seemed to have passed in the blink of an eye. Mostly, if it weren’t for the changes she saw in her children and for the strands of grey appearing in her dark hair, changes that made it hard to ignore the passage of time, she wouldn’t believe she was nearer forty than thirty.

Other days she felt all of her thirty-six years. Today was one of those days. She felt tired, physically and mentally. She wasn’t surprised to be emotionally exhausted. It wasn’t every day one had to appear in court to get divorced but if she was honest with herself she’d have to admit that she was often physically tired by early evening. Realistically she knew it had nothing to do with being a single mother, she’d been a single mother for long stretches of time when Sam had been away on naval exercises, but she hadn’t been able to pinpoint any other change, except perhaps stress. She should probably go and get a check-up, she thought, she couldn’t afford to get sick.

She took some clean laundry into her room. Her bed was freshly made, the pillows plumped and inviting. The house was still. It couldn’t hurt to lie down for a few minutes, could it? Maybe a catnap would lift her spirits.

She lay down, trying to remember what she’d looked like thirteen years ago when she’d first met Sam. It was easier to recall exactly what he’d looked like. A gorgeous, blond Adonis, and it had been lust at first sight. She’d been twenty-four and had moved from Sydney to Canberra, the nation’s capital, to do her Master’s in international law at the Australian National University. Her flatmate, Stella, had dragged her to a rugby game between the engineering faculty of the ANU and a team from the defence force academy. It had been an annual event, a huge social day with the rugby match followed by a party, and Stella had been chasing one of the university players, so Juliet had been her moral support. Juliet had expected to help Stella meet her man, she hadn’t expected to find one for herself.

Canberra, 1995

Juliet was standing with Stella and a group of friends on the boundary of the rugby pitch when a man, a glorious, blond man, raced towards them, flying down the wing. He had the ball tucked under his right arm and his rugby jumper was moulded to his body. Juliet could see the outline of his biceps and deltoid clearly defined by the contours of his top. She was a sucker for good arms and there was no doubt that this guy had them. She watched as he fended off an opposing player with his left hand, a quick shove to the chest upsetting his opponent’s balance, and he was away, strong legs pumping as he headed for the try-line. He goose-stepped over a diving defender, his quick

movements belying his size. He had to be at least six feet of solid muscle but he moved with the agility of someone much lighter.

Juliet could see the last line of defence, a pair of opponents, blocking his path, lining up to double-team him. She saw him look around quickly, assessing his options. He had a teammate coming up on his outside. He didn't slow his pace but ran in a slightly diagonal line towards the centre of the pitch, straight towards the oncoming defenders. Juliet held her breath, willing this glorious stranger safely past them. She couldn't see how he could possibly manage to evade them—as solid as he was, the others were bigger again and there were two of them. They had the typical build of rugby players? massive limbs, thick necks and take-no-prisoners looks on their faces. They looked like two enormous tree trunks in the middle of the field.

Juliet waited, expecting to see the blond demigod attempt to dodge around the opposition? she was convinced he'd be fast enough to get around them but he kept running straight at them. She watched him drop his left shoulder and spin to his right as the full backs crunched into him, slamming him into the ground. Even on the soft grass the thud of bodies colliding was loud and painful. Her hands flew to her mouth? somewhere under that man mountain lay the most divine male she'd seen in a long time—how many pieces was he going to be in when the dust settled?

She felt someone bump against her, the crowd around her was screaming and yelling, people were jumping up and down. She saw the ball come sailing backwards, arcing through the air. Had he managed to release the ball before he'd been crunched?

The diagonal path he'd chosen, the path that had led him straight into danger, had given his teammate a chance to gain some ground and Juliet watched as the ball landed securely in the teammate's hands. He was ten metres from the opposing try line with no one to beat.

Juliet celebrated the try with the crowd, caught up in the moment, caught up in one man. She nudged Stella as the celebrations continued. 'Do you know who number fourteen is for the defence force?'

Stella shook her head. Juliet wasn't surprised; Stella was there to cheer for the university side—she had no allegiance to the defence academy. But that didn't mean Juliet couldn't adopt the defence force team as hers.

'Can I have a look at the programme?' she asked.

Stella handed over the paper she'd been holding and Juliet scrolled down the page. Number fourteen? Sam Taylor. It wasn't much, but it was better than nothing.

Juliet spent the rest of the half with one eye on Sam and the other on the crowd, trying to determine if anyone seemed to be following Sam particularly. There were plenty of supporters yelling for him whenever he got the ball, which seemed to be a frequent occurrence, but it was hard to tell if any of them were as focussed on Sam as she was. In the end she gave up and spent the rest of the time enjoying the spectacle and vowing to introduce herself to him after the match.

The spectators gathered in the university rugby club bar at the end of the game and wasted no time before ordering drinks. Juliet was careful to stay in control. The rugby players had all gone to shower and change and she wanted to be prepared for Sam's return. She was going to make sure she made a good first impression, for reasons she didn't fully understand but which seemed vitally important.

She and Stella positioned themselves between the band and the bar and kept an eye on the doors. The players were beginning to drift in now. They were easy to pick out of the crowd as most still had damp hair from their showers. The university boys were in civvies but the defence force boys were in their dress uniforms. In Juliet's opinion the defence force boys had an unfair advantage over the university boys. Dress uniforms trumped casual clothes any day.

Sam came through the doors, his white uniform immaculate. She'd always been a sucker for a man in uniform. He was six feet of muscle impeccably dressed. His hair was damp from the shower so it was a darker blond now, thick and wavy. Juliet wondered if there was a regulation about hair length

in the navy. Sam's hair looked longer than most, although it stopped short of his collar. His shoulders were broad and straight and he looked like a perfect gentleman, strong and protective, chivalrous. Juliet knew he might be none of those things but he could certainly sell the illusion.

She scanned the room, waiting to see if anyone went to claim him. A couple of his companions broke away to meet their girlfriends but Sam continued walking. From her spot on the far side of the room she could see him sweep his gaze across the crowd. Was he looking for anyone in particular? He hadn't stopped scanning the room and she was concentrating so intently on his movements that she was unprepared when his gaze swept her side of the room. Before she had a chance to look away their eyes locked. She tried to relax. After all, he couldn't know she'd been watching him ever since he'd stepped inside, and she thought she'd pulled it off until he winked at her. She felt herself blush and was tempted to dive behind Stella, but at least he'd noticed her. That was a good thing, so she smiled at him before looking away. She still had time to play it cool and work out her plan of attack.

She waited until he was at the bar then offered to fetch Stella another drink.

'Excuse me, would you mind if I squeezed in here?' People were packed tightly together along the bar, giving her the perfect excuse to cram herself in beside Sam.

'Not at all,' he said, moving over to make space for her. He smiled at her and Juliet felt her heart skip a beat. She'd always thought that was just a saying but there was no other way to describe the effect of his smile on her. If he was gorgeous when he was running around a rugby field, he was absolutely superb when he smiled. His smile was wide and white and started at the right-hand corner of his mouth before spreading to the left and finally reaching his eyes. Crinkles appeared in the corners of his eyes, but they didn't detract from his looks. He looked like a man who smiled often and easily. The moment his smile lit up his face Juliet knew she was in big trouble. Sam had to be hers?there were no two ways about it.

Her eyes were still locked on his as she thanked him for making room. 'I enjoyed the game. Congratulations on winning.' She paused for a fraction before deciding nothing ventured, nothing gained. 'It's Sam, isn't it? I'm Juliet,' she said, holding out her hand.

He shook her hand and Juliet had the strangest sense of déjà vu. His touch was familiar but she knew that was impossible, yet she could sense a memory, almost as though her skin had felt his touch before. It was slightly unnerving but Juliet couldn't force herself to remove her hand.

'Have we met before?' Sam asked. He was frowning and a crease appeared between his eyes.

'No.' Had he felt the same strange familiarity or was he only asking because she'd used his name? She could explain one reason but not the other. 'I looked you up in the match programme after that first try. I wanted to know who everyone was cheering for.' Juliet let go of his hand.

He smiled again, his right-to-left smile, and said, 'What about you? Who were you cheering for?'

'No one really...not for the first fifteen minutes anyway. I came with a girlfriend to cheer for the uni team but I might have swapped allegiances.' She gave him a sideways glance, hoping he'd pick up on her invitation.

'So you don't have a boyfriend on the uni team who's going to get upset if I buy you a drink?'

'No boyfriend.'

And that had been it. Somewhere along the way Juliet had remembered to give Stella her drink and had been relieved to find her in a group that included the boy she was keen on, but after that Sam had been the only one who had held any interest for Juliet.

They'd had such passion and she still found it hard to believe that it hadn't been enough to sustain them. Hard to believe they hadn't made it.

She'd only ever had eyes for Sam but passion was no match for reality.

The sound of the front door opening brought Juliet out of her reverie. Initially she thought Sam and the children were home but then she heard Maggie calling her. Her sister had gone for a run

and was now probably wondering where everyone had disappeared to. The house was in darkness as Juliet hadn't turned any lights on and it probably seemed abandoned.

'In here, Mags,' she called out, letting Maggie know she was home.

Maggie stuck her head into Juliet's room. 'What are you doing?'

'Nothing,' Juliet said as she sat up.

'It's very quiet. Are the kids already in bed?'

'No, Sam's taken them out for dinner.'

'He's still in town?'

'He goes back tomorrow,' Juliet said.

'And then what?' Maggie crossed the room and sat on the bed beside Juliet.

'I'm not sure. That's what I've been thinking about. Where do I go from here? On one hand nothing's changed but on the other...'

'Everything's changed.'

Juliet nodded.

'You could have gone with him.'

'I could have but moving every three years or, worse, every six months wasn't the right thing for the children, especially Kate. Regardless of her issues, moving constantly once we had a family wasn't our plan and I thought that given the childhood Sam had he'd want to keep his family together. I thought it would be important to him. But the navy was more important and Sam couldn't, or wouldn't, give it up.' Juliet picked at the quilt cover as she spoke. 'I made him choose between the navy and us, and I lost.' She shrugged. 'No point sitting here feeling sorry for myself. I'll just have to get on with things.'

Maggie hugged her. 'You know I'll always be here if you need me.'

'Thanks, but I can't expect you to jump on a plane and fly down to Melbourne at the drop of a hat. You're here now and I do appreciate that but I'm an adult, and I should be able to manage on my own.'

'You can manage but there will be times when it's tough to do that and Sam won't always be able to help you with the kids in a crisis?he could be on the other side of the world. I'll only be in Sydney so if you need me, I want to know. You've done it for me and I'd be upset to think you wouldn't call me. Okay?'

Juliet nodded. 'Thanks, Mags.'

Maggie squeezed her shoulders. 'No probs. Now, can I make you a cup of tea before I jump in the shower?'

'No, I'm fine really. The kids should be back soon. Have a shower while there's still some peace and quiet.'

Maggie disappeared into the guest bathroom and was still in there when Sam and the children returned. Juliet met them at the door and Sam handed her the car keys and a pizza box. 'We thought you probably hadn't eaten. It's a Margherita.'

'Thank you,' she said as she took the box from Sam's hands. Margherita was her favourite. Sam had always been good at the little things but it was the big things that had torn them apart. He could remember her favourite pizza topping and how she liked her tea but couldn't understand why she didn't want to move house every three years for the rest of her life.

Let it go, she reprimanded herself, it's over.

She took the pizza into the kitchen and she could hear the children asking Sam to tuck them into bed before he left. She let Sam help them brush their teeth, change into their pyjamas and read them a story while she ate a couple of slices of pizza, leaving some for Maggie. When the children were ready for bed she stood and watched as Sam kissed them goodnight, amazed as always that she and Sam had created two incredible little people. Two miniature versions of themselves.

But the similarities between her and her daughter were physical rather than psychological. Kate, with her thick dark hair and bright blue eyes, was the spitting image of herself at the same age but she was far more reserved than Juliet had ever been. Juliet was stubborn and headstrong and prone to making quick decisions; Kate was far more measured and in control of her emotions, even at the age of eight. Juliet sometimes wondered if Kate's dyslexia had influenced her personality. Had she learned to take her time with her responses to ensure she made fewer mistakes or was she simply less volatile than her mother?

Edward and Kate were as different as chalk and cheese, both in looks and behaviour. Edward had inherited his father's looks and much of his personality. They were both adrenalin junkies, both attracted to danger. She was constantly on the lookout around Edward because he was still too young to assess risk. Sam liked order and routine, he liked to follow the rules and would never make a rash judgement. Juliet hoped Ed would develop some of his father's sense as he matured but she was worried because she suspected Sam might have always had that slightly sensible gene and that healthy regard for the rules may have been reinforced by his defence force upbringing. Sam's love of order and routine had certainly helped him to cope with the frequent moves that he'd been exposed to as a defence force brat. From what he ate for breakfast and how he read the paper to the system in his wardrobe and in his bookshelves, Sam was a creature of habit. Even the kids' bedtime routine had been started by Sam. And now Juliet had taken away some of that.

She followed Sam's lead, kissing the children goodnight as an unwelcome thought burrowed its way into her head—other than their children, they hadn't made much of a success of their life together.

CHAPTER THREE

August 2008

JULIET was rushing around the house, trying to get several last-minute jobs out of the way before fetching Edward from kindergarten, when she was interrupted by a knock at the door. A postman waited with a letter, registered mail. She showed the postman her driver's licence as identification and signed for the envelope with a shaky hand. She knew what the envelope contained? it could only be one thing. It had been a month and a day since she and Sam had been in court.

This was it. Her self-imposed D-Day.

She'd been delaying a whole host of things, things she couldn't put off any longer. She hadn't set a date exactly but she'd decided that once the divorce was final and she had the paperwork that said so, she would have to face facts.

She took the envelope to the kitchen and slit it open with a knife.

It had been a month and a day since she'd seen Sam, one month and a day since they'd been in court. Her divorce was absolute. It was there in black and white in front of her. She was now officially a divorcee.

Before she could procrastinate again or let herself be distracted by the children, she did the two things she'd been avoiding. She slid her wedding and engagement rings off her finger and slipped them onto her right hand. It was a slightly tighter fit but she wasn't ready to be without them totally, though she also had no cause to still be wearing them on her left hand. The rings felt heavy on her right hand and her thumb automatically fiddled with the bands. She supposed she'd get used to the sensation.

One more task to do. She picked up the phone but hesitated before dialling. She put it onto the kitchen bench while she deliberated. What if she didn't need to make this phone call after all? She palpated her left breast with her fingers, hoping, once again, that maybe the lump had disappeared. But it was still there, about the size of a small walnut. She retrieved the phone and made a long-overdue appointment with her doctor.

'Good morning, Juliet,' Dr Wilson said as she called her into the consulting room. 'What can I do for you today?'

'I've found another breast lump,' Juliet said as she sat down. She had a history of benign nodules and she'd had various tests done in the past but thankfully they'd all come back negative for any malignancy.

'When did you notice this one?'

'A few months ago,' she answered honestly.

'Any changes in this one?'

'I think it's got bigger.'

Dr Wilson looked at her with one eyebrow raised. 'Any reason why you haven't been in to see me sooner?'

Juliet knew that the change in the size of the lump should have sounded warning bells. It had, she just hadn't had the time or energy to deal with it. Part of her had also tried to pretend that this lump was just like all the others and they'd been fine, hadn't they? But she knew that this lump wasn't the same—it had kept on growing.

'Sam and I got divorced. I had a lot on my plate.'

'I'm sorry to hear about the divorce?that must have been tough.' Dr Wilson paused before adding, 'Do you want my lecture on how important it is not to neglect your health now or should I save it for later?'

Juliet shook her head. 'Save it. I know I owe it to my children to look after myself, that's why I'm here.'

'Fair enough. Let's have a look at this lump, then, shall we?'

Juliet undressed and was poked and prodded for the first of what would become many times over the course of the next few days. The lump was tender but no worse than the others had been.

‘How big was it when you first noticed it?’ Dr Wilson asked.

‘About the size of a pea,’ Juliet recalled.

‘Just under a centimetre, then. It’s now between three and four. When did you notice that it had got bigger?’

‘Probably five or six weeks ago,’ Juliet estimated. It had been around the time she and Sam had gone to court, which was one reason she’d ignored it. It hadn’t reached the top of her list of priorities yet.

‘I think we need to check this out further. You can get dressed and then I’ll take some blood, and I’m also going to send you off for a mammogram. You haven’t had one before, have you?’

‘No, only ultrasounds.’

‘It can be a bit difficult to get a clear picture with a mammogram in the under forty-five age group because your breast tissue is still quite dense, but I want to do that so we can get a look at the size and shape of the lump and a clear idea of its position. I’m going to refer you for a biopsy as well but those results will take a little longer to get back.’

Juliet was dressed now and sat in the chair beside Dr. Wilson’s desk, extending her left arm, ready for blood to be drawn. The needle stung as it entered her arm and she watched the dark red blood fill up the vial, wondering what sort of nasty things her blood was harbouring.

‘I want you to have the mammogram this afternoon, and I’ll make some calls and see if I can get you in for the biopsy tomorrow,’ Dr Wilson said as she capped and labelled Juliet’s blood. ‘Is there someone who can help you with the children if the appointment times clash with school pick-ups? It might make it easier to get appointments for you if you can be flexible.’

Juliet nodded silently. She didn’t have a clue who to call but she was sure she’d think of someone once her brain had time to process all the other stuff Dr Wilson was talking about. Mammograms, biopsies, blood tests. She hadn’t actually said the word yet but Juliet knew what she was thinking. Cancer.

Juliet was struggling to get past that word. The word was stuck in her head, making it very difficult to concentrate on everything else Dr Wilson was telling her. The word was also stuck in her throat, making it difficult to breathe. Perhaps she’d feel better if that word was out in the open.

‘You think I have cancer?’

Saying it out loud didn’t improve matters much. She was breathing now but the tightness in her chest had been replaced by nausea.

Dr Wilson’s reply didn’t ease her fears. ‘I think this lump is different from the fibroadenomas you already have. It’s presenting more like a tumour because it’s growing rapidly and I don’t like that. I think we need to get as much information as we can to determine what we’re dealing with but, remember, not all lumps are malignant.’

Juliet nodded but nothing else changed?she still felt nauseous, she still had a new lump in her breast.

‘Do you want to call someone now? Get someone to drive you to the breast-screening clinic?’ Dr Wilson asked.

‘No, I’m okay, I’ll drive myself,’ Juliet replied, thinking that she needed to get through the mammogram as quickly as possible to make sure she was in time to collect the children from kindy and school.

‘Okay. But can you arrange for someone to drive you to the biopsy? Your chest is likely to be quite sore once the local anaesthetic wears off and you’d be wise not to drive.’

Juliet nodded and left Dr Wilson’s surgery with referrals for the mammogram and the biopsy and a follow-up appointment for two days hence. The receptionist would ring her with a time for the biopsy.

The mammogram was not the horrific experience she had been anticipating, judging from comments she'd heard from other women over the years. It was uncomfortable but in the scheme of things it was bearable.

Maybe she was in shock, numb to what was happening around her. She felt as though she was in a nightmare. The whole day had a surreal quality to it and she half expected one of the children to wake her up at any minute. Trying to take on board everything that she was being told was proving difficult when she felt as though she was wading through thick fog. Nothing was making sense. Was it really possible that she had cancer?

She tried to think through the situation but it was virtually impossible, partly because she had no facts yet and partly because she couldn't believe it was really happening.

She got dressed after the mammogram and hoped she was giving all the right responses as the technicians gave her more information, but her mind had already moved on to the next day and to the arrangements she would have to make. There was a message on her phone with the appointment time for the biopsy. Who would drive her to her next appointment? Perhaps she should take a taxi. Who could she ask to collect the children? She knew that this might only be the beginning of a host of favours she could need from people. If there was bad news then Dr Wilson was right?she was going to need support. Where was this going to come from?

She put those thoughts to the back of her mind while she drove to the kindergarten to collect Edward, focussing on the road and on getting there safely.

Edward's face lit up with a delightful smile, Sam's smile, when he saw her waiting to collect him—it was as though her presence was a big surprise. She wondered who would collect him if something happened to her and then quickly pushed that thought to the back of her mind as she hugged Ed to her when he arrived at her feet at full speed. He was closely followed by his best friends, Jake and Rory—they'd met on their first day of three-year-old kindergarten and were almost always together, like the three musketeers. Their mothers, Anna and Gabby, had become good friends of Juliet's by association and she wondered if their friendship would stretch a little further if she needed their help.

She saw Gabby arriving to collect Rory, running late as usual. Gabby waved and came straight over to Juliet. 'Hi, how are you? Rory was wondering if Ed would like to come for a play. Would that suit you?' Gabby asked, not pausing for breath. She always did things at a fast pace and was always busy, and Juliet sometimes wondered if she ever slept.

'Is there any chance you could have him tomorrow instead?' Juliet hated asking but if Gabby was offering to have Edward surely she wouldn't mind if it was tomorrow and not today? 'I need to have some tests done and I'm not supposed to drive afterwards.'

The boys, sensing that their mothers weren't in a hurry to leave, had made a beeline for the playground adjacent the kindergarten. Gabby and Juliet wandered in that direction too.

'Are you having eye tests?' Gabby asked.

Juliet knew that eye tests often involved eyedrops that dilated pupils, making driving difficult. She wished it was something that simple. She supposed she should explain; she would end up telling Gabby at some point anyway as she was sure to need her help. 'No. I have to have a biopsy. I found a lump in my breast.'

Juliet heard Gabby's sharp intake of breath and saw her eyes widen. 'When did this happen?'

'I noticed it a while back but I was at the doctor today.'

'And you're straight in for a biopsy?'

Juliet knew Gabby was considering the timeline, recognising the sense of urgency. 'I had a mammogram today. My GP wants the information as quickly as possible.'

'Have you got any info yet?'

Juliet shook her head. 'No, the mammogram results will go straight to my GP and to the surgeon for tomorrow.'

‘How are you getting to tomorrow’s appointment?’ Gabby was firing questions at Juliet, once again barely pausing for breath.

‘I’ll catch a cab.’

‘Why don’t I drive you? I’ll make sure you get home and then I’ll pick up the boys and Kate and bring them home later.’

‘What about work?’

Gabby waved a hand, dismissing Juliet’s protests. ‘Finn’s around. I’ll just tell him he’ll need to manage the gallery—it doesn’t need both of us there.’

Gabby and her husband owned an upmarket art gallery and travelled frequently. Juliet started to protest and then stopped herself. As much as she didn’t like to ask for help, she would have to get used to it, just as she would have to get used to accepting help when it was offered. ‘If you’re sure, that would be fabulous. I’m a bit apprehensive.’

‘Of course you are, anyone would be, but I’m sure it will all be fine.’

Juliet wished she could be so certain. She was expecting bad news, she could almost feel it coming, but she didn’t comment. She called to Edward, told him they needed to collect Kate, and then gave Gabby the details of where and when the appointment was, and agreed to be ready an hour before.

The next week was a whirlwind of appointments. Juliet saw the specialist and had a core biopsy under a local anaesthetic; she had a follow-up with her GP and then went back to the specialist. It was all she could do to keep track of which doctor she was seeing on which day, which hospital she had to be at and which forms she needed to take with her, without having to worry about the routine things like feeding the children. Fortunately Gabby was fabulous. She stepped in and basically ran Juliet’s life for her, taking over all the general household chores and giving Juliet time to deal with the doctors and to hug her children. Over the next week Gabby alternated between being Juliet’s taxi service, nanny, personal shopper and cook, but even Gabby couldn’t stop the downward spiral that was Juliet’s medical condition.

Seven days after the mammogram the specialist delivered the diagnosis and it was just as Juliet had feared. The lump she’d been ignoring for several months was a malignant tumour.

She had breast cancer.

Juliet’s world was crumbling around her. She had two small children and she was on her own. She was divorced. She had breast cancer.

She wanted her old life back. She wanted her health back. She wanted Sam.

Gabby was supportive. Once again she cooked dinner for Juliet’s children on the night Juliet got her diagnosis and she offered to cook for Juliet too, but she couldn’t eat. She couldn’t imagine that she’d ever feel like eating again.

Gabby did what she could but she wasn’t Sam.

She’d offered to stay, had offered to keep Juliet company after the children had been put to bed, but Juliet had said she wanted to be alone.

She’d lied.

What Juliet wanted was Sam.

Sam was her rock. He had got her through her first crisis, her first two crises. She remembered how Sam had been there for her nine years ago and she knew she wouldn’t have managed without him. Who would be her rock now?

Darwin, 1999

Juliet carried the last of the shopping bags into the house. It was a humid, steamy day, typical Darwin dry-season weather, and she could feel the beads of sweat trickling down between her breasts. She unpacked the groceries, putting the things that had to go into the fridge away before deciding to leave the rest until after her swim.

She and Sam had moved directly from wintry Canberra to the tropics of the Northern Territory. It had taken her a while to acclimatise to the tropical Darwin weather but she'd finally learned to slow her pace to suit the climate. Things moved more slowly in the north. It was something the rest of the country always commented on and Juliet could understand why—it was impossible to maintain a hectic schedule in these hot, moist, stupefying temperatures.

They'd lived in Darwin for nearly three years now and because of the city's transient population they were almost considered locals. Being part of the defence force had made the transition relatively easy. Defence force personnel were accustomed to people coming and going and were generally a sociable, welcoming group of people. They had settled easily into the city. Juliet had completed her Master's in international law in Canberra and had gone on to complete a diploma in education as well. She was teaching at the law school at the university and through this network and the defence force they had a wide circle of acquaintances.

There was always something happening—a barbeque, a game of tennis, drinks for someone who was leaving or to welcome new arrivals—and Sam and Juliet had an active social life, but what Juliet really loved was when it was just her and Sam, together, their own little unit. They'd moved here as virtual newlyweds and Juliet still cherished the rare occasions when she had Sam to herself. It was an idyllic lifestyle and they existed in a state of euphoria and contentment. Only a few weeks ago, their little bubble had expanded when Juliet had got a positive result on a pregnancy test. She now had everything she'd ever wished for.

She finished putting away the groceries and went to find her bathers. It was an afternoon ritual for her to meet Sam at the swimming pool on the naval base for a late-afternoon swim and a game of tennis or a drink with whoever was around in the officers' mess. The base was only a five-minute drive from their married quarters and the trip was worth every second in this hot and humid climate.

Juliet found her swimsuit and changed out of her sundress. As she stepped out of her underwear she noticed some spots of blood. Just small spots, but surely that wasn't normal. Beside her bed was the bible of expectant mothers and, slightly panicked, Juliet grabbed the book, searching for information. What did the book say about spotting? Was there anything in there to reassure her?

Chapter two said some women got spotting in the first month of pregnancy around about the time their period would normally be due. The advice was to rest and see if the bleeding stopped. But Juliet was eleven weeks pregnant. She flipped through the book, frantically searching for more. Chapter seven talked about bleeding in the last few weeks of pregnancy but there was nothing in between. She found nothing that set her mind at ease. Swimming was obviously out of the question if there was bleeding. Rest seemed to be the answer. She lay on her bed and continued scouring her book for any more information as she willed herself to stay calm and relaxed and prayed for the bleeding to stop.

It didn't.

Calm and relaxed turned into stomach cramps. Juliet was almost too afraid to check but she had to know. She went to the bathroom. The bleeding was heavier and the blood was bright red. That wasn't good.

She phoned Sam and he was by her side within ten minutes. Fifteen minutes after that he'd whisked her off to the emergency department at the Darwin Hospital and she was being taken into a cubicle for an ultrasound scan. Sam held her hand as the technician started the consult and stayed beside her when the technician went to call for the doctor. Juliet felt her pulse increase its pace with nervousness. She wanted the technician to show her an image of the baby on the screen, not fetch the doctor. She'd read enough of her pregnancy book to know she should be able to see her baby on the monitor. The only thing that kept her from panicking, that prevented her from screaming and yelling and demanding to know what was wrong, was Sam's calming presence. She knew if he let go of her hand she would lose control. Somehow Sam knew that too and he held his position, comforting

her with his solid, dependable presence. Maybe, just maybe, she thought, things would be okay as long as Sam was there.

The female doctor was young, too young to be completely reassuring, but she had a calm and confident manner that helped to put Juliet at ease.

‘How far along are you?’ the doctor asked as she moved the ultrasound over Juliet’s abdomen. ‘Eleven weeks.’

The doctor nodded and then pointed towards the ultrasound monitor. There was a little arrow that moved about the screen as she manipulated the mouse. ‘Can you see that circle?’ she asked. ‘That’s the foetal sac.’

Yes, Juliet thought, that’s better. The doctor will be able to show me my baby. Maybe the technician was just having trouble finding it. But the doctor hadn’t finished.

‘I should be able to see a heartbeat within the sac but there’s nothing there. Your baby hasn’t developed.’ The doctor removed the ultrasound transducer from Juliet’s abdomen and wiped the gel off her stomach. ‘I’m sorry.’

Juliet had no words of reply.

Sam wasn’t quite as stunned. ‘You’re sorry? What do you mean, you’re sorry? We had a positive pregnancy test,’ he said. A frown creased his forehead and Juliet knew he was trying to understand what the doctor was telling them. It wasn’t making much sense to her either.

‘You were pregnant but the pregnancy hasn’t progressed,’ the doctor explained.

‘You’re telling us there’s no baby?’

The doctor nodded.

‘What happened?’ Sam asked.

‘We never really know,’ the doctor replied. ‘It’s impossible to tell at this stage?the foetus just stops developing. One in three babies don’t make it. It’s not uncommon, it’s just that people don’t talk about it much. Give yourself some time to heal and grieve and then you can try again. Most of the time there’s no rhyme or reason for losing a baby, just like there’s no reason to think things will go wrong next time.’

Juliet didn’t say a word. She couldn’t think about the next time, all she could think about was this baby they’d just lost. The doctor had called it a foetus, but it hadn’t been a foetus, not to her. It had been their baby.

Sam took her home and put her to bed and held her while she cried, held her while she mourned their child. He didn’t try to tell her everything would be okay. It was too soon for that and Juliet loved him for being able to feel her loss. He felt it too.

A baby had been the next step in their life together. Juliet doted on her sister’s children. Maggie had married and had had her children at a young age, and while Juliet loved her niece and nephew she’d never had a burning desire to have her own family until she’d met Sam. Everything had changed for her then. She’d found the man she wanted to spend the rest of her life with and that included the man who she wanted to be the father of her children. She’d been ecstatic to discover she was pregnant and now that had been taken away from her with no warning.

Sam had been just as excited. He was an only child and his mother had died when he’d still been quite young. While he was close to his father Juliet knew he loved the idea of creating his own family and she knew he was upset too. But Sam made it his priority to look after her and for the next few weeks Sam was her rock.

He organised sick leave for Juliet and took time off work himself and they flew to Ubud on the Indonesian island of Bali, where they spent a week in the mountains. The villa Sam rented came with a housekeeper and a cook and Juliet regained her appetite on a diet of fresh fruit, lean meats, fish and salads. They walked every morning and spent the afternoon lying by their private pool.

Juliet still cried herself to sleep but Sam was there for her and after a few days Juliet's spirit started to recover. After four days Sam's crooked smile returned and that lifted Juliet's spirit even further.

After five days they ventured down the mountain into the hustle and bustle of beachside Kuta. Juliet had been apprehensive about the crowds but no one knew her and no one knew she'd just lost a baby. She looked no different to any of the other tourists and no one gave her a second glance. No one except the hawkers, but they weren't targeting her specifically, they targeted all the foreigners.

She found the hawkers overwhelming at first after the more relaxed shopkeepers of Ubud but Sam protected her from their frenzied persistence and Juliet eventually embraced the noise and the colour and, to a lesser extent, the crowds. The smells were a little harder to embrace but even those she eventually got accustomed to. She could have hidden away from the overwhelming vibrancy, she could have insisted that Sam take her back up the mountains, but instead, with Sam beside her, she absorbed the energy and felt it restore some life into her soul. With Sam beside her she survived the streets of Kuta and that felt like a major achievement. Not only had she survived but she was starting to come back to life, and Juliet knew she would be okay, knew that, as long as she had Sam, things would be all right.

They were back at their villa in time for dinner. Sitting beside the pool, surrounded by the scent of frangipani and dining by candlelight, they began to talk about the future again, to discuss their hopes and dreams for the family they would surely have. Slowly Juliet started to trust that their dreams were not over, just delayed.

A couple of days further on and she was ready to return to Darwin. She felt rested and, if still not fully recovered, at least able to face her life. She understood that there wasn't always a reason for things and she trusted that children would be part of their lives when the time was right. Sam had given her comfort; he'd known how to help her heal, and while she never forgot this pregnancy she was able to get past the loss.

What she didn't know as she boarded the plane in Denpasar was that the miscarriage would be the first test of her resolve that year, but not the last.

One week later she received a call from her father. That in itself was unusual?her mother normally phoned and her dad would speak briefly once she and her mother had finished gossiping. Juliet immediately anticipated bad news and assumed it involved her mother. Why else would her father call? He reassured her that her mother was fine and he was calling about her brother-in-law, Maggie's husband, Steve.

Steve was a policeman in Sydney and he'd been called in as part of reinforcements when riots had broken out at a Sydney beach. Juliet had seen images on the evening news the previous day—temperatures were soaring in an early summer heatwave and some longstanding cultural differences had spilled over from verbal sparring into physical violence. Juliet had called Maggie to check on Steve and had been told he'd sustained a head injury but had been discharged from hospital. She'd relaxed and she relaxed again now—she'd only spoken to Maggie a few hours ago, she could reassure her father that all was well.

But her father had more recent news, and was calling to tell her that Steve had been readmitted to hospital during the night. He'd had a large subdural haematoma and had died before the neurosurgeon had reached the hospital.

Her sister Maggie was a widow.

Juliet and Sam were on the next flight to Sydney.

Sam had been worried that Steve's death would stretch Juliet to breaking point but for Juliet, Steve's death put things into perspective. Her loss paled in comparison to Maggie's. Thanks to Sam, Juliet had been able to escape to the sanctuary of Bali where she had been able to hide from her life until her sorrow over the miscarriage was able to be tucked away in her heart. It was no longer completely overwhelming and all-consuming.

Maggie had lost her husband and she was left with two young children to comfort, explain to and care for. There was nowhere for Maggie to hide and despite Sam's concerns Juliet was able to embrace the responsibility of being the one to support and comfort Maggie.

She stayed in Sydney when Sam went back to Darwin but when she returned to Sam she was her old self, determined to move forward. They had each other and they would be okay, she'd make sure of it.

Throughout all of this, Sam had supported her and she knew she would never have made it through to the other side without him. He'd been her rock then but who would be her rock now?

CHAPTER FOUR

September 2008

IT HAD been several days since she'd finished having all the tests and since the oncologist had given her the bad news. It had taken Juliet a few days to get it all straight in her own head and some time to work out the best way to inform her family of the situation. She needed to make sure she had all the facts and information clear in her own mind before she attempted to explain it to others. She needed to make sense of the diagnosis, treatment and prognosis, and she felt it was important that she have control over who was told when.

Everyone who needed to know, other than the children, was in New South Wales—her parents, her sister and Sam. The best plan was to arrange a weekend visit, organising it as just a weekend away with no other agenda. There would be time for explanations when she arrived.

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