

A WIFE FOR THE BABY DOCTOR

Josie Metcalfe



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Содержание

A WIFE FOR THE BABY DOCTOR
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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‘Dammit, Dani—’ Josh began, but this time she wasn’t going to take no for an answer—not when it was obviously what they both wanted.

Her mind wasn’t really on what she was saying. What did conversation matter when she was finally where she’d wanted to be for so many years?

And it felt so good.

Ever since she’d first fallen in love with him she’d imagined what it would feel like when he finally held her in his arms, but this surpassed anything she’d ever dreamed. He was so tall and strong—the sort of solid bulwark that a woman could depend on to protect her when life turned rough.

‘Dani...’ he muttered, almost incoherently, and his head swooped down towards her even as he swept her up into his arms and pressed his lips to hers.

At last!

Josie Metcalfe lives in Cornwall with her long-suffering husband. They have four children. When she was an army brat, frequently on the move, books became the only friends that came with her wherever she went. Now that she writes them herself she is making new friends, and hates saying goodbye at the end of a book—but there are always more characters in her head, clamouring for attention until she can’t wait to tell their stories.

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A WIFE FOR THE BABY DOCTOR

BY

JOSIE METCALFE



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CHAPTER ONE

JOSH peered cautiously through the window in the door that barred the entrance to the unit, wary in case it was that fierce senior sister on duty.

He knew that his mother preferred to collect him from the homework club at school rather than have him walk for five minutes to the hospital on his own; knew he wasn't really supposed to come up here to wait for her shift to end; and he definitely shouldn't know the code to let himself into the unit, but he was so fascinated by the tiny babies she cared for that he just couldn't resist.

'Hi, Josh,' called one of his mother's friendlier colleagues, looking across at him from her position at the desk. He breathed a sigh of relief when he saw her welcoming smile. With Sally Nugent on duty he knew he wasn't going to be summarily ejected tonight. 'Your mum's nearly finished. Go on into the staff lounge

while you're waiting for her. There might even be some biscuits left in the tin.'

His stomach was empty but it was easy to ignore it when there was the fascinating world of medicine surrounding him. He might only be nine, but he already knew what he wanted to do when he grew up.

'Have you had any new babies in today?' he asked, lingering beside the desk while Sally frowned at something on the computer screen.

'Not so far,' she said with a distracted smile in his direction, just as the phone began to ring.

Josh could only hear Sally's side of the conversation but he could tell from the expression on her face that she was being told something serious. Usually Sally could manage to find a reassuring smile for everyone, no matter what was happening in the unit. This time he could tell from the way she suddenly went white that something very different had happened.

She clattered the phone down almost before she'd finished speaking, and instead of hurrying him through to wait out of sight in the staff waiting room—the way she normally would—she sat there for several seconds, biting her lip, apparently unable to bring herself to look in his direction.

Suddenly he felt sick with apprehension.

'Sally?' he prompted, hating the fact that his voice still sounded like a kid's when he'd been the man of the house from the moment he'd been born. Had something happened to his

mother? She and Pammy were all he had in the world, at least until Pammy's baby arrived. 'What's the matter? What's going —?'

'I'm sorry, Josh,' she interrupted abruptly, getting to her feet. 'You're going to have to leave the unit. Go down and wait in the main reception area.' She started ushering him towards the door. 'Your... There's an emergency coming in and your...your mother's going to need to stay on late tonight. Is there someone who can come and fetch you...to take you home?'

He knew she wasn't telling him the truth—at least, not the whole truth—and he dug his feet in, refusing to move another inch until he had an answer to the most important question.

'Is it Mum? Has something happened to her?' he demanded, a strange shaky feeling starting deep inside him. It was the same feeling that he'd got the day his mother had phoned to tell him there had been an accident and she was delayed in A and E.

He'd been so convinced she'd been injured that initially he hadn't been able to hear her telling him that she'd been nothing more than a bystander and was taking care of the victim's children until their father arrived. He'd known then just how devastating it would be if anything were to happen to his mother or to her best friend, Pammy. The three of them had been together all his life and were the only family he had in the world.

'Please, Sally. You have to tell me,' he demanded hoarsely, his heart beating so fast that it felt as if it was going to choke him. 'Has something happened to Mum? Is she ill? Hurt?'

‘No, Josh. It’s nothing like that,’ she said firmly, giving his arm a squeeze, and the fact that she met his eyes this time reassured him that she was telling him the truth. ‘Your mother’s fine, but she’s...she’s going to be very busy for a while. It would be better if you went out of the unit to wait, just until—’

The sound of the lift arriving only a few feet away had her breaking off with a soft curse under her breath, and he knew that whatever had her so jumpy was about to emerge from those doors.

There was a confused cacophony of voices and noises, with orders being snapped and vital signs being monitored by bleeping machinery. As the trolley began to emerge through the gaping doorway he could see that the figure on it was having some sort of a fit, like that boy in the top class at school who’d had an epileptic attack in the gym last term. Then he heard someone using the keys he’d pressed to unlock the door into the unit, and out of the corner of his eye saw the unit’s senior consultant stride into view.

‘Is this Pamela Dixon?’ he demanded, and Josh gasped as if he’d been winded by a punch. ‘Take her straight along to Theatre,’ the man ordered briskly after a lightning-quick assessment right there in the corridor. ‘Bloods *have* been taken for cross-matching, I hope?’

‘What’s wrong with Pammy?’ Josh demanded loudly, completely forgetting that he wasn’t even supposed to be there. ‘Her baby’s not coming for weeks yet. What are you doing to her?’

‘Josh...! Hush!’ He knew the feel of his mother’s arms as they

encircled him from behind, even though she smelt of that awful disinfectant in the hand-cleansing gel and not the lavender soap he'd bought her for her birthday. 'Pam collapsed while she was out shopping. Mr Kasarian is going to try to help her.'

'But, *Mum*, he said to take her to Theatre and Pammy *can't* have an operation,' he insisted, looking up into eyes the same golden brown as the ones that met him in the bathroom mirror when he brushed his teeth. Suddenly everything inside him clenched tight as he realised this was the first time he'd ever seen those eyes filled with fear—the same fear that was gripping him by the throat and turning his innards to water. 'He *can't* do it! It might hurt the baby.'

He tried to step forward to stop them pushing the trolley to the other end of the department, towards the one part of the unit that he'd never been allowed to investigate, but his mother held him back.

'Josh, you don't understand,' she said with a quiver in her voice. 'Mr Kasarian *has* to operate. He's trying to save Pam's life.'

'But...I don't understand.' He was having to blink hard against the hot threat of tears. 'She was all right this morning. We had breakfast together and she said she was going to walk to the shops after I went to school. She was going to buy some things for the baby, and...and...'

The expression on his mother's face evaporated the words off his tongue, the desperation there telling him that, no matter what he said, it wasn't going to change what was happening now.

‘She collapsed in the shop, Josh...in the ladies’toilets... And nobody knew she was there until the cleaner heard noises in the cubicle and realised that the door had been locked for a long time.’

‘Wh-what’s wrong with her?’ His heart felt as if it was fluttering wildly against his ribs, like the little bird that he’d rescued from next-door’s cat. It was going so fast that it was making him feel quite light-headed, as if he was going to be sick. ‘What’s he going to do to her?’

‘Her blood pressure’s gone up much too high—it’s called eclampsia and that’s why she collapsed,’ she explained briefly, and he was struck that, even now, she’d remembered that he always wanted to know *why* things happened. ‘And the only way to make the blood pressure come down is to take the baby out of her...quickly.’

‘But, Mum, you said...’ His thoughts were such a panicky jumble that it was hard to find the words he needed first. ‘The baby...Pammy’s baby! It isn’t time for it to come out yet.’ Her face looked all blurry as he tried to put his thoughts in order, so he knew he was crying now, but he couldn’t help it. Ever since he’d been told that his mother’s best friend in all the world was expecting a baby he’d been so...so excited. And as soon as Pammy had told him that he was going to be able to help her to look after it...to feed it and protect it...it was all he’d been able to think about.

None of them knew whether it was a girl or a boy... Pammy

said she wanted to wait until the baby was born to find out, the way she always waited till Christmas morning to open her presents. Josh had already persuaded her that it should be called Daniel if it was a boy, but if it was born too soon, it wouldn't be able to live and it wouldn't matter what it was called because it would never survive long enough to know that he would have been the best big brother ever.

'Josh, they *have* to operate,' his mother said in a funny choked voice, and he felt even worse when he saw that she was crying, too. She and Pammy had known each other for hundreds of years...ever since they'd met in that group home when they were little. They always said that they might not have been born sisters, but they were sisters now. Better than sisters.

'If they don't operate quickly, Pam will die,' she continued urgently. 'She might die even if they do, and then the baby would die, too, so Mr Kasarian really doesn't have any choice.'

He flung himself into her arms and they clung together, sobbing and terrified that they were going to lose the only family they had in the world.

'I'm sorry, Sister Weath—Meredith,' Mr Kasarian interrupted himself, the grey pallor of defeat dulling his stubble-darkened golden skin and robbing his dark eyes of their usual sparkle.

Josh had never seen him like this before; had usually seen him smiling as he answered one of the millions of questions Josh peppered him with, even though he wasn't supposed to be visiting the unit. 'Even though Pam didn't work in this particular

department, she was one of ours, too, so you know that we did everything we could...’

‘Of course you did,’ his mother agreed softly from behind a shaky hand, her other hand tightening painfully around Josh’s. He didn’t care how tight she squeezed. Nothing could hurt worse than the pain inside him.

‘If only someone had found her sooner,’ the consultant continued. ‘By the time we got her to Theatre she’d already been convulsing for so long that...’ He shook his head. ‘She was already going into multi-organ failure. All we could do was to try to save the baby.’

‘So they’re both dead,’ his mother mourned, her voice so choked with tears that Josh could hardly understand the words. ‘My best friend and her baby, both gone in one day when we’d got so many plans to—’

‘No!’ the consultant interrupted, suddenly quite flustered. ‘I’m so sorry, Meredith. I can’t have made myself clear. I lost your friend, but her baby is still alive...for the moment, at least.’

‘What? It’s alive?’ Josh wasn’t certain whether *he’d* spoken or if it had been his mother.

‘Yes, Josh. It was a little girl, and she’s very small, but she’s a real fighter.’

‘A girl!’ Josh didn’t know whether to be disappointed that it hadn’t been Daniel, the little brother he’d wanted, or just to be pleased that Pammy’s baby was still alive.

‘Can we see her?’ his mother asked, and for one horrified

moment Josh thought she was asking to see Pammy, and the idea that he might see the woman who had been an extra mother to him the whole of his life lying there, dead, made him feel sick.

‘Of course you can, Meredith,’ the consultant said with a reassuring smile, and with a silent sigh of relief, Josh realised that he and his mother were talking about the baby. ‘Just as soon as she’s been settled in the unit and... well, I don’t need to tell you any of that,’ he added with a shrug. ‘You probably know just as much about that side of things as I do...probably more. You’ve been working in the unit long enough.’

‘Oh, Josh,’ his mother murmured when Mr Kasarian left, and when he saw her eyes filling with tears again a feeling of panic filled him in an overwhelming flood.

All his life it had been the three of them coping together against the world, him, his mum and Pammy. He’d never known his own father because he’d died in a motorcycle accident before he’d been born, and he’d never met the father of Pammy’s baby either, but there’d never been a time when Pammy hadn’t been there to help him cheer his mother up when she was sad. Now there was only him, and he had no idea what to say to stop her crying, not when he felt so much like giving in to the tears, too.

‘We’ll manage, Mum,’ he said shakily as he patted her arm, wishing he believed it even as he voiced the words that Pammy had always said. ‘We’re the three musketeers, remember? And we’ll *still* be the three musketeers...only this time I won’t be the youngest.’

‘The three musketeers,’ Josh murmured as he hung his stethoscope around his neck and stuffed a notepad in the pocket of his white coat. ‘What on earth made me think of that today?’

That scene had taken place at least twenty-seven years ago and had been a pivotal point in his life. The first moment he’d seen that tiny, almost transparent scrap of a baby he’d known exactly what branch of medicine he wanted to concentrate on when he was all grown up.

It must have taken some determination on his mother’s part to survive in those early years, going from a household consisting of one child supported by two wage earners to one of two children supported by just one SCBU nurse. He never did know how she’d persuaded the authorities to allow her to adopt Pammy’s baby, but he did know that she was a formidable woman when she set her mind to something. By his early teens he’d become very adept at finding employers who would overlook the fact that he was underage for a job by playing on the fact that he was tall and blessed with a responsible attitude. But even though he was helping to support their little family, nothing was allowed to interfere with his grades at school; nothing was permitted to get in the way of his eventual acceptance into medical school and the first step on the road to becoming a paediatric consultant.

The ring of the phone dragged him out of his unaccustomed ramble down memory lane.

‘Yes, Caitlin?’

‘Dr Dixon has arrived,’ his secretary told him quietly, and a

quick glance at his watch reminded him that he should have been ready ten minutes ago to greet the new member of staff beginning her first day on the unit.

Exactly how many minutes had he been standing there wool-gathering when there was a whole department out there depending on his input?

‘Twenty-seven years on and I still can’t forget the chaos that tiny baby caused in our lives,’ he complained to the walls of his cramped office, then growled at the fact that Dr Danielle Dixon would definitely get the wrong impression if she heard him talking to himself.

He strode out into the corridor, trying to ignore the fact that he hadn’t a clue whether it was dread or excitement that was filling his stomach with butterflies.

‘I’m a consultant, for heaven’s sake,’ he muttered crossly as he strode out of the room. A relatively new one, admittedly, but as far as could tell, he was well respected by his immediate colleagues and his peers. He certainly didn’t need to worry that the newest member of the team was going to be able to find fault with anything that happened in his unit, but...

His thoughts stalled abruptly when he caught sight of the slender, almost child-like figure waiting uncertainly by the main reception desk at the entrance to the unit.

He couldn’t seem to breathe for a moment as he was struck by her ethereal beauty, then couldn’t help taking advantage of the fact she hadn’t seen him to look his fill.

She looked as if a puff of wind would blow her away, and that impression was only compounded by the soft cloud of silvery blonde curls and deep blue eyes that made her seem as if she only needed a pair of gossamer wings to complete the picture.

Utter nonsense, he scoffed silently. You only had to take a look at that determined little chin to realise that she had enough stubbornness for a whole herd of mules. That, after all, was what it would have needed to get her to this point in her life.

‘Ah, there you are, Mr Weatherby,’ the receptionist said, and the newest member of his team turned sharply towards him and almost felled him in his tracks with a single smile.

‘Josh!’ she exclaimed, hurrying towards him and clearly bubbling over with excitement.

‘Dr Dixon,’ he replied firmly, in spite of the fact that his voice felt almost rusty in his throat.

He saw the split second that she realised her *faux pas* and watched her deliberately replace her happy expression with a more serious one. ‘I’m sorry. I mean, good morning, Mr Weatherby.’

The attempt at keeping her expression straight failed in a second and he was almost tempted to laugh out loud. That face would never be able to hide what she was thinking and feeling, any more than those blue eyes could stop gleaming with the sheer joy of being alive. That was just one reason why he would always blame himself for...

‘I can’t believe it, can you?’ she demanded, stepping close

enough to grab his arm with one slender hand and almost bouncing with excitement.

Even through the thick cotton of his white coat and the thinner sleeve of his shirt he could feel the warmth of her hand, but the sensation was far closer to the sharp hum of electricity as every hair stood to attention all over his body at the innocent contact.

‘I finally made it, Josh! I’m on the way to being a paediatrician. Isn’t it just the most—?’

‘Congratulations,’ he interrupted formally, conscious of watchful eyes and wary of gossip.

As he forced himself to step back, he told himself that it was not only on his own account but for the sake of the newest member of his team. She would hardly want to be the subject of hospital gossip on her first morning.

The increased distance between them meant that she had to release her hold on him but he still had to stifle a groan at his body’s instant response to the innocuous contact from her slender hand.

It was just so wrong.

This was Dani, the tiny baby he’d fallen in love with from the first moment he’d seen her in the incubator that day, and who’d been his baby sister in everything but blood and name.

And from this morning on, he reminded himself silently, she was just the latest doctor to spend six months in his department while she decided whether it was the area of medicine in which she wanted to specialise.

‘Now,’ he said briskly, ‘if you’d like to follow me, let’s see just how much you’ve learned.’

He turned and strode back towards the other end of the unit, cursing himself for his abruptness. Once again he’d wiped the happiness off her face as swiftly as if he’d slapped her, and that hadn’t been his intention. He just couldn’t cope with any physical contact between the two of them, no matter how innocuous; had deliberately avoided being anywhere in her vicinity ever since the disastrous events of her eighteenth birthday.

‘I don’t know how detailed a tour you were given around the unit when you came for your interview, but—’

‘Josh,’ she interrupted softly, her dark blue eyes looking almost bruised. ‘Is this going to be too difficult for you...having me working in your unit?’

He nearly snorted aloud at the innocence of her question.

Difficult? Try bloody impossible, especially when she stood there looking as if she was made of spun sugar and all he wanted to do was...

‘You got the job on merit,’ he pointed out gruffly. ‘Remember? I excused myself from your interview in case my presence biased the choice of candidate. Now all you have to do is prove that the committee made the right decision.’

‘But...’ She paused uncertainly.

He knew he hadn’t answered her question, but hoped that at least he’d been able to redirect her thoughts. Then he saw those slender shoulders straighten and that neat little chin inch up a

little further, and knew she'd accepted the challenge.

He stifled a sigh, knowing that his life would have been very much easier if Dani had chosen a similar post in another hospital, but, without being big-headed about it, he knew that his unit was one of the best for the next stage of her training if she was still determined to specialise in paediatrics. That was especially true if she was leaning towards neonatal medicine.

'This is the neonatal end of the unit,' he said crisply, unable to prevent the touch of pride in his tone, 'and it's the most recent development within the department.'

'Did it take you long to get approval?' Those dark blue eyes were visually cataloguing the set-up, from the individual prettily-curtained bays—all occupied at the moment—to the mind-boggling array of monitoring equipment surrounding each clear acrylic isolette.

'Long enough, but it was securing the level of financing that was the biggest headache. There's just so much specialist equipment needed and the cost of each item is astronomical.'

'That always seems so strange to me,' she said thoughtfully. 'When the cost of electronic items on the high street has come down so much, why should similar items be so inordinately expensive when they're being sold to hospitals?'

He was unsurprised that she should have the same niggling suspicions that he'd been harbouring for years. It just didn't seem credible that so many extra millions could be poured into a system and do so little good.

But that wasn't the issue, here, he reminded himself sternly. He'd always known that she was ready to take issue with any injustice she uncovered, right from kindergarten age, and he was struck with a sudden desire to test the mettle of this new member of his team to see whether she had changed. This was no longer a matter of girls being prevented from joining the boys' football team but the hidebound monolith of the NHS she was criticising. How would she defend her contentious words?

'You make it sound as if hospital suppliers are profiteering at the government's expense—or that those in charge of the hospital's finances aren't doing their job properly,' he commented quietly. 'Either of those scenarios would be one heck of an accusation.'

'If I *were* making an accusation,' she countered calmly. 'All I'm saying is that it seems very strange that in the same week that I bought my brand-new top-of-the-line flat-screen computer monitor, the ward I was working on at my last hospital received a similar but several-years-out-of-date model costing three times the price.'

So, his new colleague wasn't easily flustered, he noted with pleasure, and she still had the keen eye for finances that was the result of the less-than-opulent upbringing that her good-quality clothing would suggest. Interesting.

The sudden intrusion of one of the babies' monitors drew their attention and he led the way across to one of the unit's most recent patients.

They were just in time to see the nurse flick the bottom of the baby's tiny foot, then reach up to reset the monitor.

'She just needed to be reminded to keep breathing,' she said with a smile, before her gaze strayed to the woman standing at his side.

'Nadia, this is Dr Danielle Dixon. She has just joined us this morning.' He turned towards Dani, careful not to meet those stunning blue eyes. 'Nadia is one of our most experienced NICU nurses.'

'Pleased to meet you, Nadia. Call me Dani,' she said with that smile that came all the way from her heart. For a second her hand came up as if she was going to offer it in a shake, then she shook her head with a self-deprecating laugh. 'One of these days I'll remember that people wearing gloves don't want to contaminate themselves by shaking hands.'

'Believe me, it won't take long,' Nadia promised wryly. 'That antiseptic-antibiotic gel we have to use on our hands is so vicious that we learn to avoid any unnecessary contact very quickly. Another nurse in the unit had to give up nursing because her hands were permanently raw and bleeding and she just couldn't stand it any more.'

'They're trialling some new products at the moment,' Josh offered. 'Apparently, the hospital has received so many complaints that they've been forced into it, but they've got to make sure that the new products are at least as good at preventing cross-infection as the gel before they can sanction their use.'

‘In the meantime, in the interest of patient safety, the staff has to put up with the status quo, even though the discomfort is more likely to make them want to skip using the stuff causing the problem,’ Nadia pointed out.

‘Well, I hope you’re not implying that any of *my* staff are getting into slipshod habits,’ Josh demanded grimly. ‘If I thought that these tiny people were being put at risk by—’

‘Not a chance,’ Nadia interrupted with a quick smile. ‘You’ve hand-picked every one of them, so you know they’re not going to let you down.’ She turned her attention to Dani. ‘I hope you realise the impossible standards you’re going to have to achieve to keep up with this man.’

Josh couldn’t miss the gleam in those dark blue eyes as she met his gaze head on.

‘I’ve heard all about Mr Weatherby,’ she said quietly. ‘And even though I might not come up to his exacting expectations *yet*, it doesn’t mean that I’d ever give up trying.’

There was something in her expression that he couldn’t read and there was definitely something in the determination in her voice that told him she was delivering a personal message, but with Nadia as an onlooker this wasn’t the right time to ask what that message was. The last thing either of them needed was gossip and speculation about the two of them.

She didn’t know what impulse had her sending the message, but even though she was exhausted by a very long first day in her new job, she hadn’t been able to resist when she’d checked her

computer for messages and seen that he was logged on.

DaniD: Are you still speaking to me, BB?

Then, of course, she'd had to sit there, almost holding her breath while she waited to see if he would answer.

Had she made a monumental mistake in applying for the post?

It was all she'd ever wanted to do, but after that disastrous episode on her eighteenth birthday...all her own fault, of course...things had never been the same between the two of them since. If she'd made everything worse by—

BB: What's the matter, DaniD? Have you forgotten that I'm more likely to shout at you than go silent?

She was so relieved that he'd answered that her eyes were actually burning with the threat of tears.

DaniD: Not the strong silent type, then?

BB: Hardly!

She could almost hear his huff of laughter. He'd always been so driven to succeed in whatever he set his heart on that he definitely wasn't the sort to suffer fools gladly. She could imagine that his reputation as a perfectionist was well earned.

BB: Having second thoughts?

DaniD: About what?

BB: The job.

DaniD: No! None!

Well, that wasn't quite true.

She certainly didn't have any regrets about her choice of career. It was early days yet, but so far it looked as if it was going

to be everything she'd always imagined it would be.

No, the doubts were of a more personal kind, and something that really couldn't be shared with the man who'd dubbed himself BB...her big brother...from the moment she'd been born.

Except she hadn't seen him as a brother at all since long before her eighteenth birthday, while he never saw her as anything other than the little helpless girl he had to look after...even though she was now twenty-seven.

BB: Get some sleep. Tomorrow won't be any easier.

She growled aloud when she read the message. It could have been sent to an immature teenager needing a prod to send her to bed for the night, and sent her angrily scrolling across for the icon to close the messenger function on the screen. When would he ever admit that she was now an adult and could decide for herself when it was time to go to sleep? She—

Just before she could click the annoying man into oblivion he sent again.

BB: You did well today, Dani, especially getting that IV in first time. See you tomorrow.

She sat back and stared at the final message he'd sent before severing the connection and couldn't help the satisfied grin that crept over her face.

She'd been proud of herself for getting that right, especially with him hovering over her shoulder. That fragile vein couldn't have been much thicker than a thread of cotton and she'd been certain that everyone could see that her hands were shaking with

nerves, but the needle had gone in as easily as if she'd been doing it for years.

'So, my first day wasn't too bad,' she murmured aloud as warmth spread through her at his praise. 'Well, that's stage one of the master plan under way. By the time the next six months are over, I'll know whether I'm on track towards a paediatric consultancy.'

She pulled a face when a familiar voice in the corner of her mind said, *She's always been determined to follow in her big brother's footsteps, ever since she learned to walk.*

'Oh, Mum, if only you knew,' she said on a sigh, smiling when she remembered the last time she'd seen Meredith Kasarian, the only mother she'd ever known.

Josh's mother had only been persuaded to take early retirement when the consultant who had tried to save Pam Dixon's life all those years ago had finally convinced her to marry him.

Meredith had always been the sort to put on a cheerful face... but it had been a real eye-opener to see the soft expression in her eyes as she'd gazed at her new husband and to see her blushing like a girl when he'd claimed her with a kiss at the end of the wedding ceremony.

'That's what I want, too,' Dani whispered wistfully, far from certain that she would ever achieve it. After all, there was a huge obstacle in her way by the name of Joshua Weatherby.

She cringed when she remembered her first attempt at telling

him about her dream, and mourned the death of the closeness they'd shared for the first eighteen years of her life. From that day on, he had erected an impenetrable barrier between the two of them, preventing her from sharing anything but the most superficial of social conversations.

'Well, I've got six months to change his mind,' she declared aloud, needing to hear the words bounce back at her from the bland walls of her tiny staff flat to bolster her determination.

Even so, she couldn't help wondering just how different the last few years would have been if she hadn't drunk that glass of birthday champagne to bolster her courage before she'd spoken to him.

CHAPTER TWO

'AND what are you doing in here, young man?' said a voice over Josh's shoulder. After an initial start of surprise, he relaxed and smiled, knowing that the apparently gruff words would be accompanied by a twinkle in the consultant's dark eyes.

'I'm visiting my sister while I wait for Mum to finish work,' he explained, then held up his hands. 'I scrubbed and used the hand gel and haven't touched anything I shouldn't.'

'Good. Good,' Mr Kasarian said seriously. 'And how is our patient doing today?'

'Much better,' Josh said with a beaming smile. 'When she was first born I didn't know if she would stay alive... well, she was just so tiny, like a little bird that fell out of its nest before it grew any feathers.'

The consultant chuckled. 'That's exactly what they look like when they're that small,' he agreed.

'And then she kept forgetting to breathe, and Sally showed me how to flick her under her foot to remind her, but she hasn't needed to be reminded for a whole day... And she's put on some weight, too!' Josh couldn't believe how much better he'd felt when he'd seen that little rise on the weight graph. It was as if that tiny gain had given him permission to believe that they weren't going to lose Pammy's baby, too.

'There's something else that we've noticed,' Mr Kasarian said, drawing him out of his thoughts. 'Look up at the monitor screen next time you come to visit your sister and see what happens when you start to talk to her. Sally was watching the other day and saw a change in her pulse and respirations...her breathing.'

'And that's a bad thing?' Josh felt as if he'd been kicked in the stomach. The last thing he wanted was for his visits to make the baby sick. He knew from what his mum told him that the unit was always busy and there was never enough time to spend with her little patients. All he'd wanted to do was let the baby know that he was her big brother and he was there for her, but if coming to see her was causing her harm...

'Not at all!' Mr Kasarian exclaimed heartily. 'It's good. Very good. It seems as if she already recognises your voice, and her heart and her breathing are stronger when you're with her.'

It almost felt as if his own heart was swelling in his chest and for a horrible moment he thought he was going to cry.

‘Really?’ he croaked with a mixture of pleasure and disbelief, for once not caring that his voice still sounded like a childish squeak. ‘She knows when I’m here?’

‘Check it for yourself when you come next time,’ Mr Kasarian said with a smile. ‘Watch the readouts on the monitors when you start speaking to her and you’ll see what we mean.’

‘Don’t be afraid to talk to him,’ Dani encouraged the terrified new mother as she hovered at the side of the high-tech isolette.

‘But he’s so small,’ Linda Prentiss whispered as tears welled up in her bloodshot eyes, evidence of the hours of crying she’d done since her tiny son, James, had been born. ‘And he jumps at noises.’

‘Sudden loud noises will do that to them, the same way it does with us. Just keep your voice to a gentle murmur. That way you won’t overload his little system.’

‘Surely it’s too early for him to be able to take anything in,’ she argued softly. ‘I wouldn’t want to do anything that might hurt him.’

‘Actually, it will probably do him a power of good,’ Josh interrupted, although Dani had known he was nearby. Her whole body seemed to be tuned in to his presence whenever he was near. ‘He already knows your voice, from all those months inside you. You’ll be reassuring him that you’re still close by in this big scary world.’

‘How can you possibly know that he recognises my voice?’ she challenged, the expression on her face a confusing mixture

of hope and disbelief. 'My in-laws are saying that he's already so badly brain damaged that he'll never be any better than a vegetable.'

'I don't believe that for a minute,' Josh reassured her. 'Of course, some very early babies do end up with permanent disabilities, especially if they have serious bleeding in their brains. But, so far, your son hasn't had any problems like that, and we're going to do our very best to help him to get out of here in the best possible health. Many premature babies go on to lead perfectly normal lives; some even become doctors and come back to take care of other premature babies, isn't that right, Dr Dixon?'

'I've heard of at least one case where that's happened,' Dani agreed, silently cursing him for putting her on the spot. He knew how easily she blushed, and the last thing she wanted was for the whole hospital to know that she'd once been a scrawny little scrap like their tiny patients. She'd far rather that they judged her on her performance as a doctor now.

'But you really think he recognises my voice?' Linda was too firmly focused on her son to have taken in any hints of a personal history. 'How can you tell?'

'The electronic equipment will tell you,' he explained, and Dani held her breath as he paused for a moment, wondering if he was going to tell their patient's mother the tale that she'd heard about all her life.

For the first time since she'd joined his team he actually

allowed their eyes to meet and the feeling of connection was like an electric charge through her body.

‘Next time you come into the unit, you can test it,’ he continued with a slightly husky edge to his voice that told Dani he was reliving that long-ago shock of realisation. She’d first heard about it so long ago that it had always been a part of her life. ‘Before you say anything to him, watch the monitors, then see what happens to his breathing and his heart rate when you start talking to him. It might take a couple more days before you can see it clearly, because he’s had a traumatic few hours and needs to catch up with himself, but I shall expect a full report before the end of the week. OK?’

‘OK,’ she whispered, and Dani wasn’t surprised to see that for the first time since her son had arrived on the unit, Linda’s expression held more hope than despair.

‘He’s so nice,’ she whispered to Dani as Josh let himself out of the room. ‘From what you see on the television and in films, I thought consultants were all pompous tyrants, but he sounds as if he really understands what I’m going through; as if he really cares.’

‘He’s special,’ Dani agreed readily, then could have kicked herself when she saw the flash of speculation in the young woman’s eyes. ‘As you said,’ she continued hastily, ‘some consultants are terrible to work with. I haven’t been here long, but so far he’s been fine—a good boss and a good teacher. Now, how about making yourself comfortable in that chair beside the

isolette? Do you want a couple of pillows behind your back? You must still be very sore after the delivery, and your midwife will be very cross with me if I don't look after you properly.'

She hardly saw anything of Josh for the rest of that day, or the next, but that didn't mean that he wasn't constantly in her thoughts.

All it had taken was the retelling of the story of her infant self reacting to his presence to reawaken her teenage conviction that there had always been a special connection between the two of them.

As a little girl, she'd only known that Josh was the best big brother that any girl could have. He'd been endlessly patient with the way she'd slavishly followed him around, when her friends' brothers were forever telling *their* siblings that they were pests. And as for those times when she'd succumbed to a childish illness, because his...their...mother had needed to be at work, it had always been Josh's gentle ministrations that had soothed her feverish bad temper and distracted her with yet another story.

It had only been when she'd started looking at him with the new awareness of a teenager's eyes that everything had changed.

At first, she'd been frightened by the way her feelings towards her adored big brother had altered. There had been security in being his little Dani...the name he and his mother had compromised on in memory of the baby brother he'd wanted to call Daniel. The trouble was, each time he'd come home from medical school she'd seen how much he had changed while he'd

been away, and even though a part of her had longed for the security of their old relationship, it had been impossible to go back.

It was only after the disaster of her eighteenth birthday that she'd realised that the changes had all been on her side. The look of horror on his face when she'd kissed him had proved that he'd been completely oblivious to the fact that she'd been growing up, that she didn't see him as just a brother any more, and that expression was something she'd never been able to forget.

So, what on earth was she doing working with the man? Was she completely mad to put herself through six months of...of what?

She forced herself to think about the situation, calmly and rationally.

For a start, there wasn't a post anywhere in the country where she would get a better grounding in her chosen field than in Josh's department. In spite of his comparative youth, there were few who could equal his knowledge or his dedication. And if that came with six months of butterflies in her stomach whenever she heard his voice, or fighting down the urge to leap on him every time she saw him and beg him to kiss her senseless? Well, that was a price she was willing to pay.

Anyway, she'd never given up hoping. If she was lucky, her protective big brother might finally come to realise that she wasn't his baby sister any more but an attractive woman who was as dedicated to her profession as he was.

‘But that won’t happen if I stand around with a besotted expression on my face when there are tests to perform and results to chase up,’ she muttered under her breath, and had to stifle a shriek when she saw the time. She’d come in early that morning to give herself some leeway, but now there was less than an hour left before Josh started the morning’s staff meeting, and the last thing she needed was to arrive late with half of the files incomplete.

Josh bent over the frail little figure in the isolette and had to work hard not to let his thoughts show on his face.

He couldn’t think of anything more that any of them could have done to help this precious little boy in his fight for survival, but with every passing minute it was becoming increasingly obvious that their efforts had been in vain.

Unlike the progress James Prentiss was making, at twenty-three weeks gestation, it had already been unlikely that Max would escape unscathed if he *did* win the battle. A series of bleeds deep inside his brain had almost guaranteed that he would be severely disabled, but his parents had been so desperate that their last hope of a family should have a chance that he hadn’t been able to shut their hollow-eyed expressions out of his mind long enough to sleep for more than an hour or two at a time. He hadn’t even been able to force himself to go home last night and now had the stiff neck that often came as the result of dozing off in a chair.

As if standing beside him and watching as Max fought for

every breath would make any difference, he berated himself silently, especially with that deadly infection rampaging through his lungs unchecked by everything they'd thrown at it.

'Max *is* going to get better, isn't he?' Letty Montgomery pleaded, but it was painfully obvious how hard she was having to work to try to sound optimistic.

'Is your husband here, Letty?' he asked, sidestepping her question with one of his own. 'He usually comes here on his way to work, doesn't he?'

'He should be here any minute,' she confirmed shakily, suddenly looking every one of her thirty-nine years as she collapsed onto the nearby chair as if her legs wouldn't hold her any more.

Josh knew that, in spite of her hopeful question, he almost didn't need to spell out the bad news. The look of misery in her eyes was mute evidence that she knew what he wanted to talk about, and that it wasn't good.

'When he arrives, would you get Dr Dixon to give me a buzz? I just need to chase up some of Max's lab results.' And take a couple of minutes to work out exactly how he was going to break the bad news.

The fact that he worked in an area of medicine where his patients often existed right on the very knife edge of survival meant that a higher proportion of them weren't going to survive. As a depressing consequence of that, he had to go through this conversation far more often than most, but it didn't matter how

many times he'd had to do it, it never seemed to get any easier. In fact, he'd found out early on in his training that somehow it was always worse when it was a child involved rather than someone who had lived a long and fruitful life.

'Mr Weatherby, I think Dani went up to the lab to chase up the results,' Letty volunteered tentatively. 'She took more tests when she came in this morning.'

'Good,' Josh said with a reassuring smile even as he wondered just what time Dani had arrived that morning.

Had she even gone home last night? he pondered when he saw the dark circles under her eyes a few minutes later when she arrived in his room with a small sheaf of paperwork in her hand. It was all very well, wanting to do a good job in a new post, but she wouldn't succeed if she exhausted herself in the first few days.

'Well?' he prompted as he held out his hand for the printout of Max's results, hoping against hope that the figures would give at least some grounds for hope.

There weren't any.

'Damn,' he muttered when he saw the readings that confirmed the fact that Max's infections were growing worse instead of better. And there was absolutely nothing he could do about it. That tiny body just didn't have any spare resources to battle the invader. It had never been intended to take on such a foe at a time when it should still have been safely inside the shelter of a cosy womb.

‘Josh, you *are* going to speak to them...to warn them that...?’ He heard her swallow as she allowed the sentence to die away but they both knew how it would have ended. He had to warn the parents that their baby had very little time left. That it could be a matter of hours before the battle was lost.

Before he could speak there was a tentative knock at the door and Letty’s pale face appeared when he called an invitation to enter.

‘James has arrived,’ she said. ‘And Sister told me that Dr Dixon was already in here with you, so...’

‘Come in, please, both of you.’ He gestured towards the group of chairs in front of the window. ‘Would you like a drink? Tea, coffee or...?’

‘N-nothing, thank you,’ Letty stammered, her eyes wide with dread. She was visibly trembling as her husband tried to guide her towards one of the chairs.

Josh couldn’t help but be impressed that, even though she looked as though she would fall over at any moment, she stood her ground and forced herself to stare straight at him.

‘You’re going to tell us that Max is dying, aren’t you?’ she said in accusing tones, the very picture of a lioness defending her cub. ‘You’ve brought us in here to tell us that you’re not going to bother to do anything more to save our little boy...our precious little...’

‘Shh, love. Shh,’ her husband soothed as he wrapped an arm tightly around her shoulders and pressed her into the nearest chair. ‘Let the man speak.’

There was something in his eyes as they met Josh's that let him know that he understood what was coming; that he'd already resigned himself to the fact that he was going to lose the only child he'd ever have.

For just a moment Josh longed to be able to give them something to hope for, but that wouldn't just be dishonest, it would also be unkind.

He flicked a glance towards Dani and wondered for an instant if she'd really thought through her career choice carefully enough. Of course there was an enormous amount of satisfaction in the work he did, but there was also so much devastation when there was absolutely nothing they could do for their tiny charges. Dani was a gentle, soft-hearted girl. Would it damage something essential inside her if she specialised in a branch of medicine where she had to deal with this sort of scene time after time?

Suddenly, he realised that the expectant silence had been going on for several beats too long while he'd been distracted with thoughts about his newest colleague. With a quick glance down at the papers in his hand to restore his focus, he deliberately stepped forward to lower himself into the chair opposite the Montgomerys and leant forward.

'Unfortunately, I haven't got anything good to report,' he admitted with an all-too-familiar ache in his heart. 'The latest test results aren't any better than before. In fact, they're worse,' he continued bluntly when Letty would have interrupted. 'Much worse because, in spite of everything we've been pumping into

his system, the infection's gained so much ground that his lung function is almost zero and without oxygen getting into his system...'

'But he's got the mask on and that's connected to the oxygen...' James Montgomery might think he was holding together well, but he was just as close to the edge as his wife.

'That's true, but normally the oxygen is taken up in the lungs to be transferred into the blood and circulated around the body. In Max's case, even on the highest flow rate, the infection is preventing enough oxygen being taken up. That is pretty bad in itself, but these latest tests show us that the infection has broken through from the lungs into the blood, and has now spread throughout his body. Unfortunately, even when it was confined to his lungs we couldn't find anything to get rid of it, so we're very much afraid that it won't be long before all his organs start to shut down.'

Damn, he cursed silently. He'd had all too much practice at coping with crying patients and their families, but even over the sound of their distress he'd heard Dani gulp as she fought for some semblance of professional control, but to see the glitter of tears in her eyes was enough to choke him.

'H-how long before...before...?' James stumbled over the sound of his wife's heartrending sobs.

'It's impossible to say, but...' Josh shook his head. He'd seen some babies struggle on for days, their lives ebbing slowly away, while others went rapidly downhill, seemingly in minutes.

‘Probably within hours,’ he suggested gently.

‘J—Mr Weatherby,’ Dani corrected herself quickly. ‘Would it be all right if Letty and James hold Max while he’s...?’

‘Of course it would,’ he agreed hastily, silently kicking himself for being so distracted that he hadn’t suggested it. ‘We can detach a lot of tubes and wires so you can cuddle him properly.’

‘And you can talk to him and tell him how much you love him,’ Dani continued as she gently shepherded the two of them out of the room, the glance she threw his way over her shoulder just before she left his room so full of empathy with the couple’s plight that it was almost enough to break his heart.

Four hours later, Max’s fight for life was over.

In spite of his own workload, Josh had been aware that Dani had hovered just outside the isolation room for most of that time, doing whatever she could to make the grim inevitability of the baby’s impending death at least a little more bearable. Tiny hand-and foot-prints had been made of the almost transparent limbs and precious photographs had been taken, for the first time without the ubiquitous evidence of all the technical efforts that had been keeping him alive.

The hospital chaplain had appeared with remarkable speed when the possibility of a christening had been mentioned, and an unbelievably tiny christening gown had appeared, apparently from thin air.

In the end, there had just been two broken-hearted people sitting side by side with an arm around each other and their son

cradled between them as his tiny heart finally gave up the unequal struggle. Two people inside the room, Josh noted, but Dani was still keeping vigil outside, with her cheeks every bit as wet as theirs.

And why had he stood just out of sight in his own doorway, stupidly wanting nothing so much as to wrap her in his arms and promise her that she'd never have to cry again?

Stupid, that was the right word to describe him. As if she'd ever accept that sort of comfort from him. After a lifetime of battling against the odds, she'd be more likely to cut him off at the knees. It was useless remembering that one lapse in judgement the night of her birthday and wishing he'd handled the situation differently. It had probably been a minor aberration fuelled by a glass or two of alcohol and she'd doubtless forgotten all about it in the years since. A girl...*woman*...who looked like Dani, and with her bubbly personality and obvious intelligence, wouldn't have been short of offers in the intervening years.

And the fact that he wanted to throttle any man who'd ever dared to lay a finger on her was his own stupidity.

Of course, he could always try to fool himself that it was a brother's typically over-developed need to protect his little sister, but that wouldn't account for the other feelings that swamped him every time he caught sight of her.

Enough! He cut off his spiralling thoughts fiercely, wondering how on earth he was going to survive the next six months. Now that she'd actually started on his team, it would be

impossible to transfer her out of his sight without making some very embarrassing explanations, and...well, apart from seriously blighting her career, it would totally destroy his credibility as the leader of this team, to say nothing of injuring his standing within the medical community.

If it had been nothing more than the obvious age difference between the two of them, that would be bad enough as far as the gossips were concerned, but it wouldn't be something that would cause him any major problems with his colleagues. No, it was the fact that she was a junior member of his team that could potentially leave him open to accusations of sexual harassment, and while the powers that be were fully aware of the connection between the two of them, if the scandalmongers were to find out that Dani was his sister...

'You look dreadful,' he said sharply when her blotchy tear-stained face finally appeared in the doorway to his office. He was becoming more afraid by the hour that this specialty would be too much for her, and his harsh tone was the only way he could cover up the sudden ache around his heart. She'd only been on his team for a matter of days but the busy unit would seem almost empty without the possibility of finding her sunny presence around every corner.

She gasped at his words as if he'd physically struck her, then a familiar mulish expression crossed her face, followed by, 'Well, excuse me for momentarily giving way to my emotions, Mr Weatherby. Not all of us have had the operation to remove them.'

And the door closed behind her with a pointed, well-controlled click that spoke more than a slam ever would.

‘That went well.’ He sighed harshly and rubbed both hands over his face. ‘The next six months are going to be an absolute nightmare.’ Especially if he was going to have to watch every word around her. ‘So, what’s different about that?’ he grumbled. ‘You’ve been having to watch yourself around her ever since... ever since that kiss she gave you on her eighteenth birthday.’ And that was an image he didn’t need to have inside his head the next time he saw her.

Thank goodness they would only be interacting in a professional capacity over the next few months. With his mother finally taking the long-delayed trip to meet her new Kasarian relatives, he wouldn’t be forced to hide his feelings in a social or family context.

CHAPTER THREE

DANI watched Josh bend over the delicate little wrist, one lean-fingered hand positioning it just right while the other directed the fine surgical steel of the needle into the threadlike vein at the first attempt.

‘I’m sorry, sweetheart,’ he murmured when his little patient wailed fitfully. ‘I didn’t mean to make you cry.’

Dani couldn’t help the warm feeling that spread inside her chest because she knew that he meant it. He really didn’t like making his little charges cry, even when the things he was doing to them were for their benefit.

‘At least she *can* cry now,’ she pointed out. ‘When she had that tube down her throat she couldn’t even let you know she wanted to complain that you were making a pincushion of her.’

‘It’s a strange sort of progress when you track it by the baby’s ability to cry,’ he said darkly, but she could tell from the golden gleam in his eyes that he was happy with little Leonie’s latest milestone.

Happy enough to accept an invitation to go for a drink this evening? she wondered, but didn’t fancy her chances. She’d actually thought that working with him might go some way towards helping him to see that she was a grown woman... an attractive adult who was ready, willing and able to have a relationship with him. As if that was going to happen when he spent most of the time at the other end of the department, or at least the other side of whatever room she happened to be working in.

Well, as long as he wasn’t staying out of her way because she wasn’t good enough to be on his team... No. If that were the case, he certainly wouldn’t be taking himself off to the other end of the unit. He would be finding the fastest way to shift her into another specialty altogether. So, it must just be that she’d seriously calculated wrongly if she’d thought he was going to change his mind about her, and the important thing to do now was damage limitation. She was going to have to find some way of sitting him down to talk, and then she was going to have to find the right words to let him know that all she wanted from him

was to pass on his medical expertise...

Ha! And what a lie that would be. For the last nine years every man she'd met had been measured against Josh and been found wanting, so it was highly unlikely that making a decision to become...what?...friendly colleagues would work?

It would only work if he could somehow metamorphose into someone who didn't set her pulse racing with nothing more than the sound of his voice.

'But I have to work with him for the next six months, so I've *got* to get it under control,' she muttered through gritted teeth, even as her hackles rose at the sight of Josh smiling at one of the nurses. And that was just plain stupid. She had no right to feel jealous when it was nothing more than one of the hundreds of smiles he showered around in the course of a day...wasn't it?

Of course it was. And to prove that it didn't mean a thing to her, she was finally going to speak to the man and get their new relationship on an even footing, once and for all.

'Josh...ah, Mr Weatherby...' she corrected herself as she approached the two of them, wishing that her own legs were as long as the leggy beauty who was laughing prettily at something Josh had said. 'Excuse me, but would it be possible to have a word with you?' she asked, feeling almost like a child speaking to two grown-ups as they towered over her. It was bad enough that the top of her head barely reached Josh's heart, but to have the other woman looking down her nose at her as well....

'Thanks for this, Gillian.' He held up some sort of binder. 'I'll

let you have it back as soon as I can.’

‘Let me know when you’re bringing it over and I’ll cook you a meal...it’s the least I can do to show you how grateful I am,’ the stunning redhead purred before she undulated her way out of the unit on legs that seemed to reach all the way up to her armpits.

‘You wanted to speak to me?’ Josh said, and she couldn’t help noticing that the easy smile that had hinted at the dimples he’d always despised as a teenager had completely disappeared now that he was talking to *her*.

Dani glanced around and cringed at the number of members of staff within earshot of the two of them. This was hardly the venue she’d hoped for when she’d decided this conversation was necessary, but as the likelihood of Josh agreeing to meet her for a drink at the end of the shift was slim to non-existent, it would have to do.

She drew in a bracing snatch of air and began in a rush. ‘I wanted to apologise. I realise it was completely unprofessional but I can’t absolutely guarantee that it won’t happen again because even though they warned us right through our training that we shouldn’t get too emotionally involved with our patients, I just couldn’t help it... He was such a tiny little thing and his parents were just so...’

Josh held both hands up, palms towards her, and shook his head.

‘Dani, *breathe*,’ he said, and her heart lifted when she heard the hint of humour in his tone. ‘Come into my office, because I

haven't got a clue what you're talking about.'

He led the way, his long-legged stride forcing her to trot to keep up as he detoured through his secretary's cramped space rather than accessing the room from the door in the corridor.

'Drat! I'd forgotten that Caitlin wouldn't be here,' he muttered as he dropped the glossy folder he was carrying on her desk and reached for a block of bright yellow sticky notes. For a moment there was silence while she watched his familiar slashing handwriting filling the available space, then he peeled the note off the block and stuck it on the folder. 'Drugs reps,' he growled in the same tone of voice he would use to speak about an outbreak of MRSA, and scowled darkly before leading the way into his own room. 'It doesn't matter how many times they're told to make an appointment, they still try to waylay me to persuade me that their latest wonder drug will solve all my problems.'

'Perhaps it will,' she suggested sweetly in a replay of several such conversations over the years, then had to fight the urge to grin when he turned the scowl on her.

'It might,' he admitted, 'but I'm not willing to let my fragile patients be used as guinea pigs in an unproven drugs trial just because they send a scantily clad female to offer me an all-expenses-paid holiday.'

'Very high-minded of you,' she agreed, and saw those golden eyes narrow ominously in her direction.

'Wretched girl!' he complained as he dropped wearily into the chair he'd occupied when he'd broken the bad news to Max's

parents, and waved her to take one, too. ‘You always did know how to wind me up. So, tell me what all that was out in the corridor just now.’

‘You mean, when Miss Scanty-pants was trying to climb all over you?’ she asked with an attempt at innocence, enjoying the rare episode of light-hearted teasing between them too much to want to spoil it, even to get the necessary apology off her chest.

He scowled at her but didn’t comment, opting instead to wait for her to come to the point.

‘I just wanted to apologise,’ she said simply. ‘I realise it wasn’t very professional for me to be standing around in a corridor, dripping, and I promise that it won’t happen—’

‘I would be most concerned if it *didn’t* happen again,’ he interrupted sharply. ‘If you aren’t the type of person who can empathise with what these families are going through, then you’re not the right person to be working in *my* unit.’

‘But...’ she tried to interrupt, confused by his apparent about-face.

‘That doesn’t mean to say that you should allow your emotions to get in the way of doing your job,’ he continued, totally ignoring her attempt at interruption, ‘and doing it to the very best of your ability. But shedding tears is almost an occupational hazard when you’re working here.’

Now she really was confused.

‘Well, if you see crying as par for the course, why did you snap at me earlier if it wasn’t for crying after baby Max died?’

He sighed heavily and ran his fingers distractedly through his hair, disturbing the professional-looking neatness and revealing the fact that it was definitely more than a week beyond its usual neatly barbered length. Any longer and it would start looking like a lion's mane with those natural pale streaks in the dark blond thickness of it.

'I'm sorry about that, but...' He paused and shook his head, a frown of concern etched on his forehead. 'If I snapped at you it's because I'm not certain whether this is the right specialty for you. You're so soft-hearted that you'll probably end up breaking your heart over every one of the patients and—'

'And you're so hard-bitten that you don't? Ha!' she challenged with a disbelieving laugh. 'Josh, I've known you too long to believe that eye-wash. Don't forget, I saw you every spring when you tried to rescue the baby birds that fell out of their nests, *and* when you saw that cat hit by the car that day when you came to meet me from school. I walked all the way to the vet's with you when you carried it there to see if they could fix its leg.' Apparently, the poor creature had been so badly injured that there had been nothing the vet could do but put it out of its misery, but she could still remember the expression on Josh's face and had known that he'd taken the animal's death as a personal failure.

'That was a long time ago,' he said dismissively, but she couldn't help seeing the hint of colour that washed up over his lean cheeks.

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