



**JOSIE METCALFE**  
A Family to Come  
Home To



**MEDICAL  
ROMANCE™**



Josie Metcalfe

**A Family To Come Home To**

«HarperCollins»

## **Metcalf J.**

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Single father, single mother—a very special family! Dr. Kat Leeman is so relieved to finally hire a temporary physician. Running a busy surgery and bringing up two lively boys by herself was starting to take its toll. Single father Dr. Ben Rossiter is just perfect for the job, even if he is also distractingly handsome! Ben and his daughter never settle anywhere for too long. But there is something about Kat and her sad gray eyes that make him want to stay. Can Ben face his past and heal Kat's heart? If so, they both may finally have a very special family to come home to.

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**“And I’m happy to stay on for the rest of the three months, with an option for a further three,” Ben offered, even as a small voice was shrieking warnings inside his head**

He’d already grown far too close to this little family and staying any longer was a bad idea. But he couldn’t in all conscience leave her to be buried under that mountain of responsibilities again—at least, not until she’d found someone reliable to take over from him.

The look of relief and pleasure that spread over her face was like the sun coming up in the dark places inside him. But it also made his misgivings cast deeper shadows.

Kat was an incredibly strong woman, and as for her boys... What was it about Kat Leeman that had started to melt the block of ice around his heart?

## Dear Reader,

I'm a member of a big family that's growing larger with every year—brothers, sisters, nephews, nieces, in-laws. Sometimes the sheer numbers at a family get-together can be overwhelming, but the other side of the coin is the knowledge that there will always be plenty of people willing to help if one of us is in trouble.

Kat isn't so lucky. She's all alone and desperately needs help as she tries to cope single-handedly with her two boys and a busy family practice.

Ben certainly can't be the answer to her dreams because, on his own admission, he won't be around for long. Ever since he lost his wife he hasn't been able to settle anywhere for long, and will only promise to stay for three months. Except time doesn't seem to matter when Kat's heart recognizes that he is everything she needs. And when her younger son is diagnosed with a life-threatening illness, Ben can't help but show how much he cares—discovering that he needs Kat and her boys every bit as much as they need him.

I hope you enjoy seeing how the two of them heal each other's broken hearts and become the family they all need.

Happy reading!

Josie

# **A Family to Come Home to Josie Metcalfe**



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## CHAPTER ONE

‘HE’S here!’ the voice in her ear said with an unexpected touch of excitement.

Kat stifled a grin when she heard the attempt at a confidential whisper, glad that her receptionist couldn’t see her amusement on the other end of the phone. Obviously, the candidate in question was standing nearby and had somehow impressed her... By his manners? By his good looks?

Well, manners and good looks were all very well, she thought as she straightened her shoulders, ready for yet another waste of time, but they weren’t what she was looking for in the GP she needed to share the burden.

‘Then you’d better show him in, Rose,’ she suggested, hoping her weary tone wasn’t too obvious.

How many interviews had she conducted so far? She’d lost count. She supposed she should be grateful that she’d had people willing to apply, but this prospective locum was unlikely to be any more interested in the position than any of the others, not when he found out exactly how dire her situation was.

A brisk tap at the door snapped her into professional mode and she forced herself to stretch her mouth into some semblance of a welcoming smile.

‘Come in!’ she called, expecting to see Rose’s beaming motherly face as she led the man in. Instead, there was the man himself, tall, almost gaunt with the most sombre expression she’d ever seen. So it hadn’t been his charm that had bowled Rose over, she thought inconsequentially.

‘Your receptionist said to tell you that she had to stay to deal with the O’Gormans,’ he reported in an unexpectedly husky voice as he stepped into the room and closed the door.

For just a second Kat nearly asked him to leave it open, the air around her feeling strangely charged by his presence and making it hard to catch her breath.

‘Please, take a seat, Dr...’ She gestured towards the chair that her patients usually used, horrified to find that she’d completely forgotten the man’s name.

‘Ross. Benjamin,’ he supplied, then looked straight at her and met her gaze for the first time. ‘But I usually answer to Ben.’

He’s got green eyes! she thought in amazement, the colour almost unearthly when they weren’t being shadowed by his thick dark lashes. One dark eyebrow rose and she realised with a swift surge of colour that she’d actually been staring at him.

‘Well, then, ah, Dr Ross...Dr...ah, Ben...’ she stumbled, trying frantically to get her thoughts back on track.

‘Just stick to Ben. It’s easier,’ he said quietly, but the hand knotted around a copy of the practice’s brief prospectus Rose must have given him belied his apparent calm.

‘Ben,’ she echoed, conscious that it felt strangely intimate to use a diminutive of his name so soon after meeting him. ‘How much do you know about the situation here at Ditchling?’

‘If you mean, have I seen any adverts, then, no, I haven’t because I wasn’t really looking for a job,’ he admitted bluntly. ‘I heard that you were looking for help through a friend...of your husband’s?’ he ended on a questioning note.

‘It could be,’ she said quietly, quelling the stab of pain that came with the memories. ‘Richard died of leukaemia almost a year ago, just three weeks after he was diagnosed. He never went into remission.’

She wondered at the flash of agony she glimpsed in those extraordinary eyes before he shuttered them behind a screen of thick dark lashes.

‘I take it the two of you were partners in the practice?’ he asked, his voice huskier than ever. ‘Have you been trying to cope by yourself since then?’

Trying and failing, said a morose voice inside her head, but she refused to pay it any attention.

‘With the help of one arrogant potential partner and subsequent intermittent locums,’ she admitted, then, when she saw his frown, explained a little further. ‘The potential partner had just finished his GP training in a big city practice and, in spite of the fact that he was still as green as grass, thought that he was going to take over as the principle partner purely on the basis that he was a member of the superior sex.’

Ben winced and she almost allowed herself to smile.

‘Since then, I’ve found it a problem to interest anyone wanting a partnership to work the hours I need. Most of them complain that it would be too restrictive for either their family life, if they were married, or their social life, if they were single.’

‘And the locums?’ he prompted.

‘Are expensive,’ she returned immediately. ‘Sometimes I just don’t have any option, but...’ Kat shrugged, remembering the most recent spell of essential cover with an inward wince. It would be months before she could afford to take any time off at that sort of rate. But if Ben looked even halfway interested...

‘So,’ she began briskly, suddenly remembering that it was her responsibility to conduct the interview, and that meant asking questions, ‘what made you decide to move to the West Country? Have you got family in the region, or are you bringing your family with you to settle down here?’

‘No family joining me,’ he said crisply, the topic clearly not up for discussion. ‘And it’s a part of the country I haven’t visited before.’

Kat’s heart sank at the realisation that he was unlikely to want to stay in the practice long—what single man would? There really weren’t very many options for meeting women in this quiet little backwater. But even as she silently berated herself for getting her hopes up, she was telling herself to look on the bright side. If she could persuade him to stay a while, on an associate’s salary, it would give her some time to recoup and look for someone permanent.

She bit the bullet.

‘So, if your references are acceptable, how long were you thinking of staying?’ she asked, her fingers crossed out of sight as she wagered with herself. Even a month would be a help. More than that would be a bonus.

‘If we say a fortnight,’ he began, and she was hard-pressed not to moan aloud. It was hardly worth going to the effort of all the form-filling for that. ‘In that time, we would each be able to decide whether we work together well,’ he continued calmly. ‘If not, I would leave at the end of the fortnight.’

‘And if we did?’ She was actually holding her breath as she waited for his answer, surprised just how much it suddenly meant to her.

‘If we work well together, I would definitely stay for three months and perhaps extend it to six,’ he suggested. ‘I don’t usually stay much longer than that.’

She almost asked why, but the closed expression on his face didn’t invite personal questions. Anyway, the last thing she wanted to do was put him off before he’d even accepted the job by sounding nosy. There would be plenty of time to find out more about him if he decided to stay on.

The phone on her desk rang, startling her.

‘Excuse me,’ she said with a distracted smile as she reached for it. ‘Yes, Rose?’

‘Josh and Sam are here,’ the motherly woman announced. ‘They came home on the bus. Something about Sam forgetting his kit for sports club tonight.’

Kat glanced at her watch and groaned. The boys were supposed to have stayed on at school that day, allowing her to schedule a longer clinic and tack on the interview with Dr...with Ben at the end. Instead, they’d come straight home at the end of classes to collect the kit needed for the after-school club and now she’d have to drive them all the way back.

‘I’m so sorry,’ she said as she began a frantic tidying of her desk, quickly shutting down the computer and stowing everything movable into her desk or the top drawer of the filing cabinet and

locking both. 'This is one of the problems that keeps sending everything pear-shaped. Forgetful children.'

'Rose's or yours?' Ben had risen to his feet as soon as she had but it had been so long since anyone had shown her that old-fashioned politeness that it made her feel flustered.

'Oh, definitely mine,' she grumbled as she retrieved her handbag from the bottom drawer.

'Who's he?' demanded Josh with all the disdain that an eleven-year-old could manage when they emerged into the reception area.

'Manners, Joshua,' Kat reminded him softly, her heart aching for the turmoil her elder son was going through with the loss of his precious father. Unfortunately, those who told her it would get easier with time were wrong. Josh seemed to be getting worse by the week.

'Well, who is he?' Josh reiterated belligerently, somehow recognising that Ben was something more than just another patient. At least he couldn't possibly know how conscious she was of the man's quiet presence behind her.

'These are my two sons, Josh and Sam,' Kat said, holding on to her temper by a thread, sure that it would be an easier task if only she'd had more than five hours' sleep a night for the past year. 'And this gentleman has come here for an interview.'

'An interview to work here?' Sam clarified, her formerly happy-go-lucky eight-year-old asked, now needing everything to be precise and ordered in his mind. 'So you're a doctor, like Dad was.'

'Exactly,' Ben responded, with the first real smile Kat had seen, albeit a small one. 'Your mother wants to be able to spend more time with the two of you, so she needs me to take over some of the practice duties.'

Josh's scowl had grown even darker at the mention of his father and Kat knew he wasn't in any mood to give Ben the benefit of the doubt. Sure enough, before she could even draw breath to head him off, he was issuing the challenge.

'But you wouldn't want to work here because there's nowhere interesting to go and nothing exciting to do. You could work in a hospital.'

'I could do,' Ben agreed thoughtfully. 'In fact, I have in the past, but I wanted...I needed a change.'

Kat wondered at the change of emphasis in that word, but it certainly wasn't something she could question with her antagonistic son looking on.

'Anyway,' Ben continued with a fleeting glance in Kat's direction, 'your mother and I have agreed that I'll come for two weeks, just so she can have a bit of a rest and catch up with herself.'

Kat blinked but held her tongue. As far as she could remember, she hadn't actually had the time to go as far as offering him the job, but he'd certainly read her situation exactly...

'Mum, we're going to be late for sports club if we don't go now,' Sam interrupted.

'Sam...' It was a warning. She knew he needed his life to run to schedule, but that was no excuse for rudeness.

'Oh, sorry!' Her youngest ducked his head in apology. 'I'm sorry for interrupting, but...' He was almost hopping from foot to foot.

'Here you are, then,' Kat said as she separated the front door keys from the rest of the bunch and held them out to him. 'Go out to the house and get your kit. I'll meet you at the car. Don't...run,' she finished with a despairing roll of her eyes as he thundered out of the room and out of sight. She winced when the front door slammed behind him.

'Are you sure you don't want to change your mind?' she offered. 'It could be a very noisy two weeks living with us.'

That got more of a reaction out of him than almost anything else she'd said.

'Living with you?' he repeated faintly, clearly taken aback.

'Accommodation provided?' she reminded him. 'The practice is a purpose-built extension on the bungalow the other side of that wall and your part is in the roof conversion—a self-contained

little flatlet... Well, that's a bit of a generous description,' she rattled on, unable to meet the searing green eyes comfortably while she was thinking about this man living... sleeping... showering... and all just above her head. 'There's a bedroom and en suite and the other room has a rudimentary kitchen in one corner, but you're welcome to join us for meals. The other locums did sometimes,' she added with a weak attempt at nonchalance when he started looking every bit as uncomfortable as she felt.

Don't let it change his mind about staying, she prayed, and was suddenly shocked to realise that it wasn't just for the sake of the practice. There was something about this quiet man that told her he'd been... wounded, and she felt a sudden urgent need to... to what? Heal him?

'Do you want me to lock up when I go, or would you prefer me to wait until you get back?' Rose interrupted, before she could laugh at her ridiculous thoughts, and Kat could have hugged her.

'You might as well lock up and go home as soon as you've finished with the files,' Kat said with a smile, then turned to the silent man behind her. 'At least it's only a morning surgery tomorrow, so I should have time to show you all the intricacies of Ditchling's finest... Ditchling's only GP surgery.' A stray thought leapt into her head and she turned back to Rose. 'Was there any problem with the O'Gormans?'

'None at all,' Rose said airily, before giving an evil cackle. 'I just threatened to sit on them if they didn't behave.'

Kat couldn't help laughing, too. Rose's diet-resistant shape would be enough to strike fear into the rowdiest of preschoolers, even if they arrived in groups of four.

'Right, well, I'd better get going or Sam will be old enough to drive the car himself by the time I get out there.' Kat waved farewell and set off for the door, all too aware that she had an eleven-year-old thundercloud following her, one who had been glowering almost non-stop at Ben even before she'd introduced them.

She sighed heavily, hoping she hadn't just made a monumental mistake. Hiring Ben was supposed to make her life easier, not more stressful.

'I should be back in about fifteen minutes,' she said as she pressed the key fob to unlock the car. 'If you don't mind waiting, I'll get you a set of keys and show you where everything is when I get back—unless you'd rather have Rose get them for you and settle yourself?'

'I'll wait,' he said decisively. 'There'll probably be questions that only you can answer.'

'Fine,' Kat said briefly, managing to limit herself to a single word this time and sliding into the car. If Sam didn't arrive soon, she'd be making a complete idiot of herself, babbling non-stop. She switched the engine on then glanced into the rear-view mirror to check that Josh had put his seat belt on, before turning her head and starting to reverse out of her parking space in front of the practice.

Out of the corner of her eye she saw the briefest flash of something moving before Josh shouted out and something thumped against the car. Something hard.

'Oh, God, oh, God, oh, God!' she wailed as she slammed on the brakes and flung her door open. 'Sam!' she shrieked as she leapt out of the car and sped towards the back.

'Mum... I'm sorry! I forgot!' wailed her youngest as he threw himself into her arms.

'Sam!' Relief that he was apparently totally unharmed took all the starch out of her knees and they nearly buckled.

'I forgot about going round the front of the car where you can see me,' he said urgently. 'It's all my fault.'

'Well, you'll remember next time,' she consoled him, wiping an uncharacteristic tear from a cheek that still retained a trace of childish chubbiness. All too soon he would be grown up and... She shuddered at the realisation that his whole future could have been wiped out in that split second.

'At least you weren't hurt, so—'

'But he was!' wailed Sam. 'And it's my fault!'

'He?' Kat glanced up sharply. 'Who?'

‘I think he means me,’ said a voice somewhere at the back of her car, and her knees completely gave out.

‘Ben?’ She was reduced to crawling on her hands and knees but she didn’t have to go far to find him, his long legs out of her sight under the chassis while his upper body lay spread-eagled on the ground in front of her. ‘Oh, God, Ben! Are you hurt? Oh, that’s a stupid question! You wouldn’t be lying there if you weren’t. How badly are you hurt?’

Without even realising how she’d got there, she was at his head, her fingers gently winnowing through the thick dark strands as she searched for bleeding, lumps or, God forbid, depressed fractures. It certainly wasn’t the time to notice the sprinkle of silver strands at his temples.

‘Where did I hit you?’ she asked as she worked her way down his neck, conscious of the strong musculature even as she was examining each vertebra for damage or misalignment. ‘How did you fall?’

‘My leg,’ he said through gritted teeth. ‘I realised you were going to hit it and tried to get out of the way but...’ He shook his head in spite of her attempts to hold it still. ‘I managed to stop my head from hitting the ground.’

‘Is your leg broken?’ Her hands were shaking now as she continued her assessment with his arms, not daring to examine the rest of his spine while his lower half was restricted by the vehicle. She didn’t have enough people around to log-roll him.

‘If not, it’s the worst dislocation I’ve ever—Agh!’ His attempt at moving it must have been agony but he’d closed his mouth on the curse when Sam had crouched down beside them. Kat was immeasurably touched.

‘It was my fault, Mum,’ he hiccuped. ‘I was right behind the car and he... Is he going to die?’ The words were almost hysterical and she suddenly realised just how traumatic this was for a child who had lost his father only a year ago.

‘I’m too grumpy to die,’ Ben volunteered suddenly, and when Sam gazed at him in surprise, he aimed an exaggerated scowl at her son. ‘And I’ll get grumpier and grumpier the longer I’m lying on the ground.’

‘Kat! Oh, my stars!’ exclaimed Rose. ‘Josh came in to get me. Do you want me to phone for an ambulance?’

‘No!’ It was Ben who answered first. ‘No ambulance.’

‘But, Ben...’ she protested. It was obvious he needed expert help.

He hardly gave her time to speak before he was pushing himself up onto his elbows and beginning to inch himself backwards, out from under her car.

‘It’s not serious enough to warrant tying up an ambulance,’ he declared decisively. ‘Drive your car forward again, then you’ll have room to strap my legs together for support...if Rose will fetch some bandages?’ He threw a quick smile in the receptionist’s direction but if he’d looked gaunt before, now he looked ghastly. His skin was pasty and had a waxen sheen and the muscles in his jaw were bulging as he gritted his teeth to brace himself for the next few inches of progress across the tiny car park.

‘You will give me a lift to the hospital, won’t you?’ he asked, almost as an afterthought.

Of course she would give him a lift to the hospital if he was so stubborn as to refuse the offer of an ambulance. After all, it was her fault that he’d been injured. If she hadn’t been distracted with her thoughts about the way he’d almost shanghai’d her into giving him the job, she would have been more vigilant.

‘Yes. Of course I’ll give you a lift,’ she said crossly. ‘Just stay still until I’ve moved the car. You could be doing yourself more damage like that.’ She turned to get into the car and saw her two sons staring down at the injured man with very different expressions on their faces.

Sam’s was easy to read—a mixture of terror that he was going to watch another man dying, the way his father had, and guilt that it could have been his thoughtlessness that had caused the injury. Josh’s was more complicated, most of it hidden behind the mask of impassive resignation he’d worn

since his father had died, but she was almost certain she could see a measure of respect for the man's stoicism.

'Sam, you had better get in the car,' she ordered briskly. 'Get in the front and put the belt on. Josh, can you wait beside Ben? I'm going to need your help to get him in the car and then you can look after him on the way to hospital. Can you do that for me?'

For the first time in nearly a year there was a crack in his impassivity, the sudden glimpse of fear swiftly replaced by pride that she'd asked him to do this and determination that he wouldn't fail her. 'No problemo,' he said with a shrug full of the nonchalance of youth. 'And if you need some pieces of wood for splinting, Sam could get some of the off-cuts left over from when the fence was mended last week.'

'Good idea,' she said with a smile for both of them, while a secret doubt struck her.

Had she been going about things the wrong way this last year? she wondered as she quickly pulled the car close to the building again. Had she been wrapping her sons in cotton wool and giving them too much time to brood on all the ways their lives had changed for ever, rather than keeping their minds occupied?

Children's emotions were such a minefield. There certainly wasn't any way to practise helping them to cope with the loss of a parent. All she could do was take it day by day.

Kat climbed back out of the car and got her first look at the extent of the damage she'd caused. She felt sick.

There wasn't any blood that she could see—Ben's neatly pressed suit trousers were virtually unscathed. But the shape of the injured leg was a different matter, the damage to the bones just below his knee obvious even from a distance. A classic example of a motorcyclist's fracture.

'Here you are, Kat,' Rose said, as she bustled out with a small stack of towels and several wide bandages tucked under one arm, the other fully occupied with the oxygen cylinder she'd grabbed from the corner of Kat's surgery. 'I've attached the mask so all you have to do is turn the knob to regulate the flow.'

'Entonox?' Ben's expression lightened slightly at the thought, even though his eyes were clouded with pain as they met hers.

'Unfortunately not,' she said with a grimace. 'You'd need the ambulance for that... But it should be less painful once I've got your leg immobilised. Do you want me to get you some analgesic?'

'No, thanks,' he said with a definite shudder. 'I hate the feeling of being out of control.'

'Well, I'm sorry about that, but from now on I'm in charge so you'll just have to lie still,' she said firmly. 'Now, Josh, can you put my jacket under his head to make him more comfortable, then keep him still, OK? And, Josh, you have my permission to sit on him if you have to.'

Just before she looked down to focus on the task of completing her examination and stabilising the fractured leg against Ben's sound one, she registered a flash of mischievous glee in her son's face that had been missing for far too long. What a shame that it had taken something this dreadful to bring it back.

'Here,' Ben said, offering her a wickedly sharp blade already extended from the penknife attached to his keyring. 'You'll need that to slit my trousers.'

Kat threw him a regretful look. 'I hate the thought of ruining such beautiful tailoring,' she said, even as she began ripping them upwards from the hem.

'It'll be a lot less painful than trying to take them off,' he said with a groan as he dropped his head back on the jumper Josh had folded for him and left her to her task.

Once the trouser leg was stripped back to his knee, the injury was obvious—a textbook presentation. It was the work of seconds to check his capillary refill and that his reflexes were still working.

‘Can you point your toes for me?’ she asked, although there had been none of the ‘six P’s’ signs of compartment syndrome evident, but if his attempt produced pain localised in his calf muscle then, whether he liked it or not, she was going to phone for an ambulance.

‘No pain in the calf,’ he confirmed with a significant glance in her direction that told her he had been concerned about the same complication. ‘Initially, the leg was bent at a horrible angle. I think that by dragging myself out from under the car, I may have straightened it out and prevented circulatory complications.’

‘But it’s not a method I’d recommend,’ she said sternly, as she padded the lengths of board Sam had found and placed wedges of towels between his ankles before Rose helped her to bind everything into position with several swift turns of bandage. The support he needed closer to the fracture was much more difficult, especially as she was all too aware that it would be the most painful.

Finally, she’d done as much as she was able and it was time to get him into the car.

‘Sam, can you open the back door for us?’ she directed, wondering how on earth she was going to get Ben up onto his feet, never mind getting him onto the back seat. He was definitely taller than her own five and a half feet—probably several inches over six—and while he looked as if he could do with carrying a bit more weight on his lean frame, it would still be more than enough as dead weight on her much slighter build.

She drew in a deep breath and approached his upper half, sitting him up being the first essential stage.

‘If you can help me while I sit you up, well and good,’ she said briskly to hide her trepidation. ‘If it hurts too much, let me do all the work.’

His half-stifled groan told her that the manoeuvre was painful, but that didn’t stop him doing more than his share of the work.

‘Right. Catch your breath,’ she suggested, while she tried to work out her next step to getting him vertical. She may as well have saved her breath.

Almost as soon as he was sitting upright he somehow managed to take the bulk of the weight of his torso onto his hands and drag himself along for nearly six inches.

‘What do you think you’re doing?’ she demanded, too slow to prevent him doing it a second and a third time while she tried to work out how to stop him without hurting him.

‘Positioning myself by the car door,’ he said, his voice slightly laboured as the strenuous activity took its toll. ‘There’s no way someone your size could ever lift me, so we’ll have to do it this way.’

Kat could see the logic of his decision, even as she deplored it. She only had his word and her own cursory examination to tell her that he hadn’t sustained other injuries besides his broken leg. If there had been any spinal injuries...

She shuddered at the potential consequences.

‘If only you’d let me call the ambulance,’ she began, but by that time he’d managed to position himself right against the side of her car with his back against the door opening.

‘I’ll need some help for this bit,’ he admitted grimly, as though it went against the grain.

‘You don’t say,’ she muttered under her breath as she stepped forward until her feet straddled his. ‘What do you want me to do?’

‘I’m going to have to do the next bit in two stages,’ he explained, wiping a trickle of sweat from his forehead with an impatient swipe of one arm. ‘Could you support my legs while I lift myself onto the sill and then again when I transfer up onto the seat?’

‘Only if you promise that you’ll tell me if I’m hurting you,’ she insisted. ‘I couldn’t bear it if I were causing you more—’

‘I’ll be all right,’ he broke in with a meaningful glance in her sons’ direction, apparently more aware than she was that the two of them were hanging on every syllable of their conversation.

All she could do was send him a fierce glare that promised retribution at some later date.

‘So, are you ready?’ he said, and she knelt hurriedly to slide her arms around his legs, splints and all.

As if they’d practised the manoeuvre many times before, he put the heels of his hands on the sill behind him and with strength alone heaved himself off the ground. He was heavier than she’d expected, his thighs larger and far more muscular than she’d anticipated, but she managed to synchronise her effort exactly with his so that mere seconds later he had propped his hips on the sill between his hands.

‘And again,’ he directed, when he’d repositioned his hands to grip the door frame above his head, his voice definitely hoarser this time and his face so pale with the pain that it looked almost green. ‘Now!’

And then he was sitting on the edge of the seat while she supported his legs and it was comparatively easy for him to shuffle backwards until his back was resting against the opposite door.

He leant his head back against the window but only allowed himself a couple of breaths to recover before he opened his eyes again.

‘Can Josh come in the back with me?’ he suggested. ‘If he has something to pad his legs, could I rest mine on him?’

‘Of course you can,’ Josh declared almost eagerly. ‘The hospital’s not far...only about twenty minutes.’

Kat shut the door, leaving the two of them to settle Ben’s weight to their satisfaction while she checked that Sam was safely belted in and hurried towards the driver’s door.

‘Do you want me to wait till you come back?’ Rose asked, clearly flustered by such goings-on.

‘No, Rose. You’ve done a full day,’ Kat reminded her. ‘If you could check with the on-call service to make sure that they’re going to be picking up any after-hours calls and switch the phone through, that will be great. I’ll see you in the morning.’

‘Oh, please, Kat!’ she exclaimed. ‘You have to ring me when you get back from the hospital. I won’t be able to sleep a wink until I know Dr Ben’s going to be all right.’

‘Only if I’m back before ten,’ she conceded. ‘You know how long it can take sometimes, waiting for X-rays and then finding out whether the leg can just be put in a cast or whether he’ll need surgery.’

‘The poor man!’ Rose said softly, her pale blue eyes showing her concern clearly. ‘And all this because he worried more about saving Sam than himself.’

‘What?’ Kat wasn’t certain what she meant. Sam had apologised for running behind the car, but...

‘I thought you knew,’ Rose said in surprise. ‘I saw the whole thing out of the window. He saw what was going to happen and ran forward to push Sam out of the way. He just didn’t have a chance to move far enough before the car hit him. Kat, he’s a hero.’

## CHAPTER TWO

HE'S a hero... The words played over and over in Ben's head as he waited interminably for his leg to be dealt with.

'Hah! If only they knew,' he muttered, startling the poor woman who'd been detailed to put the temporary backslab on his leg.

'I'm sorry. Did you say something?' she asked nervously with her plaster-coated hands suspended in mid-air. Perhaps it was the fact that he was a doctor, or perhaps it was nothing more than the scowl he could feel tugging at his face.

'No. I'm sorry,' he countered with a deliberately ingratiating smile. 'And I'm very grateful for the fact that you bumped me up to the head of the queue to get this job done.'

But in spite of that, he was very aware that Kat and her two sons were waiting for him out in the reception area. He'd tried to suggest that she should take Josh and Sam to their sports club, but both boys had protested vigorously, as had Kat when he'd proposed getting a taxi when he was released.

And he'd been determined he was going to be released, the sooner the better. Just spending this long in a hospital was stretching his nerves. If he never had to smell this dreadful mixture of antiseptic and death again, it would be too soon.

'Where will I have to go to get some crutches?' he asked, suddenly realising that no one had mentioned that important item of equipment.

'Oh, you don't have to worry about that today,' she said with a smile. 'The physiotherapy department will sort all that out. Your leg will be checked tomorrow morning to see whether we can put the fibreglass cast on and the physio will do the crutches thing before you're released. For now, you'll only need a wheelchair to get you up to the ward for a night on observation.'

Tension tightened round his head and his chest like steel bands.

'Except I'm not going up to the ward,' he pointed out through gritted teeth. 'My lift is waiting patiently to take me home, and she's a qualified doctor eminently qualified to do any necessary observations. So I'll need some crutches tonight.'

'Oh, but—'

'Tonight,' he repeated implacably, staring her earnest expression down and feeling like the worst kind of bully. 'With or without crutches.'

'I'll see what I can do,' she conceded as she bent to her task again, smoothing her hands over the wet plaster of the backslab.

Battle won, Ben idly watched the woman's experienced hands shaping and moulding the heavy material around his leg. He was contemplating just how lucky he'd been to sustain nothing more complicated than a clean fracture of his tibia when he found himself wondering whether it would feel any different if it were Kat applying the cast...having her slender, capable hands smoothing the finish from ankle to thigh, stroking the...

Whoa! Bad idea!

He didn't have those sorts of thoughts any more, especially while he was sitting in nothing more concealing than his underwear. Not since—He pulled his thoughts up short. That had been forbidden territory for the last three years. He didn't think about himself with a woman...any woman...any more, not even if the person in his imagination was slender and feminine with soft grey eyes and a sense of responsibility that was heavy enough to flatten a world-class weight-lifter.

'Right. That's it,' the nurse said briskly as she stepped over to the sink to rinse her hands and arms. 'Wait here for a minute while I see what I can do about some crutches. The backslab isn't hard, yet, so don't go moving your leg or you might crack it and displace the ends of the bone. And I'll need to get the doctor to sign you off,' she added at the last moment, almost running out of the plaster room, apparently keen to escape from his presence.

‘Well, signature or not, I will be leaving,’ he growled mutinously, only his fear of destroying all the woman’s careful handiwork and having to have it done all over again preventing him from attempting to slide off the table straight away.

It was bad enough that he was going to have to come all the way back again tomorrow. Oh, he knew all the reasons why it was necessary. He’d seen the amount of swelling on his leg that, once it subsided, would leave any cast too ill-fitting to do its job.

It seemed for ever until she scurried back in with a pair of battered aluminium crutches clutched in one hand and a bundle of all-too-familiar green fabric in the other.

‘I thought you might need something to put on,’ she offered, placing the scrubs on the table beside him. ‘Your trousers are unlikely to fit over the slab.’

‘My trousers are residing in a bin somewhere, cut to ribbons,’ Ben said dryly. ‘I’m very grateful you thought of this.’ He shook them out and then realised that he had a major problem. His arms just weren’t long enough to reach.

‘Do you want me to call your wife in to give you a hand?’ The nurse offered helpfully. ‘She’s going to be doing rather a lot of it over the next few weeks.’

‘She’s not my wife.’ Pain made the words hard and abrupt but he only realised it when she took a step back and blinked. He forced himself to attempt a smile. ‘Unfortunately, she’s my new boss,’ he confided, and threw her a wry grin as he gestured towards the backslab. ‘This broken leg has probably lost me the job before I’ve even started it.’

It was strange, but that thought brought with it an unexpected feeling of disappointment.

‘Well, the only way you’ll find out is if you ask her, and you can’t do that without some clothing on,’ she pointed out, as she shook out the generously large scrubs trousers. ‘Now, you’ll find it easiest to put things on the broken leg first, as it’s the least manoeuvrable.’

With the calm competence of an experienced nurse she was soon helping him to pull the gathered fabric up over his hips, and with a complete lack of fanfare put one shoe back on his foot. ‘Hang on to the other one,’ she instructed. ‘You won’t need it for a while, but you don’t want it to get lost in the meantime.’

She bustled out of the room muttering, ‘Now, where has that man got to...?’ only to reappear just moments later with a burly porter in tow with a wheelchair.

‘I don’t need that. You brought me some crutches,’ he protested, hating the idea of being dependent on anybody.

‘Trust me when I tell you that you’ll need this, at least until you get proficient with the crutches,’ she warned. ‘And the leg extension attachment will help to protect the slab while it’s still hardening. It’ll take several hours when the plaster’s this thick.’

He subsided with bad grace, uncomfortably aware that he was behaving every bit as impatiently as Kat’s boys had, but they were only kids. He was a rational adult male who ought to be able to mind his manners better.

The transfer from table to wheelchair was awkward and ungainly and he hated the lack of control he had over his own body, but eventually he was safely settled in the despised thing.

He gave a huge sigh. None of his problems were her fault and yet he’d been taking his frustrations out on the poor woman. ‘I’m sorry I’ve been such a grouch,’ he said, looking up at her penitently.

‘Don’t worry about it,’ she said, her tone almost patronising. For one awful moment he almost thought that she was going to pat him on his head. ‘You’re a doctor. We expect it of you when you’re the patient.’

‘Hmm! Watch it, or I’ll take my apology back,’ he threatened. ‘Can’t be done. Not until you can run faster than I can,’ she said with a smug little wave of her hand as he was wheeled out of the door, clutching the plastic bag that contained the contents of his trouser pockets, a bottle of painkillers, a pair of crutches and a single shoe.

Still, she was good at her job, he mused, remembering her swift expertise. He could do far worse than find her on duty when he returned tomorrow for the fibreglass version.

‘There he is, Mum,’ called a childish voice. ‘There’s Dr Ben...and he’s got an enormous cast on! It’s humungous!’

And there they were, waiting for him, Sam wide-eyed and once again bouncing around, Josh trying hard to seem worldly-wise but still visibly impressed by the bulky green-clad burden stuck out for all the world to see. And Kat...sweet Kat, whose fragility and vulnerability he shouldn’t even be noticing, was standing with her keys clenched tightly in her hand, her soft grey eyes examining him carefully as he was wheeled towards her little family.

‘They said you insisted on coming out tonight.’ Concern was clear as she examined his ungainly leg and the bottle of painkillers. He doubted he looked like anyone’s idea of an ideal house guest.

‘I hate hospitals,’ he growled, startling a giggle out of Sam. ‘But don’t tell anyone,’ he added conspiratorially. ‘If doctors say that, they get a black mark.’

‘Well, we’d better get you out of here before anyone over-hears you,’ Kat suggested with a tired smile that piled several layers of guilt on top of the mountain he already carried. The poor woman already had enough responsibilities on her plate. She certainly didn’t need him adding to them.

And yet...somehow he couldn’t make himself say the words that would set her free to go on her way. Something inside him was telling him that it was important that he should go home with her little family, that it would be a good thing, but whether that was going to be a good thing for him or for them, he couldn’t guess.

‘Are you going to be all right in the back with me, Josh? My leg’s even heavier this time,’ he warned.

‘Yeah, but it’s only one leg, so that should make it the same as the two together when we were coming to the hospital,’ he pointed out with perfect childish logic. ‘Can I push you to the car?’

‘No! I want to push him,’ objected Sam. ‘You’re going to have his leg on you all the way home so it won’t be fair if you’re the one who pushes him, too!’

‘I think we’re all going to have to take turns pushing,’ Kat mediated swiftly, before the argument could escalate. ‘Remember how far away I had to park the car?’

‘How about if you go to get the car and drive it right up to the entrance?’ Ben suggested, hating the thought that a woman who was already tired to the bone would have to exhaust herself still further. ‘You could leave Josh and Sam with me...to take care of me,’ he added quickly, in case boyish sensibilities were bruised.

He watched those soft grey eyes take in each of her sons’ responses to the suggestion before replying.

‘If you don’t mind waiting while I get it. It shouldn’t take me more than a couple of minutes.’

‘Don’t hurry,’ he said with a sudden flash of inspiration. ‘It they’re as hungry as I am, the boys and I will be discussing the relative merits of the various take-away establishments between the hospital and home.’ And when she looked as if she was going to argue against the idea, he added, ‘I just don’t feel up to cooking for myself tonight, and the boys would be very late to bed if they have to wait for you to make something once you get home.’

‘That seems sensible,’ she agreed blandly, but he caught a glimpse of a keen intelligence behind those soft grey eyes that warned him she wouldn’t allow him to manipulate her into doing anything she didn’t really want to, no matter how much easier it might make her life.

And she certainly needed her life made easier, he realised when he and the two boys tucked into steaming plates of pizza at the kitchen table while she barely sat down.

In the time that it took him to fill the gnawing hollow inside, she’d put a load of washing in the machine, prepared lunch boxes for Josh and Sam for the next day and put them in the fridge ready for the morning and had made several forays out of the room that involved strange unidentified thumps that were only explained when she sent the boys off to the bathroom to get ready for bed.

‘While you’ve got that temporary cast on you won’t be able to get up the stairs, so I’ve put you in one of the rooms down on this level...if that’s all right with you. I thought it would be safer while you’re getting used to using the crutches.’

His first instinct was to object. The very idea of sharing a relatively small space with Kat and her two sons would be too much to cope with, especially if she’d given up her own room for him.

While he’d been trying to find the words to turn down the offer, she’d quietly taken charge of the wheelchair and without any fuss had piloted him along the hall.

‘There are the stairs,’ she said, pointing to the wrought-iron spiral of steps rising from the corner of the hallway through a circular hole in the ceiling—obviously impossible for a leg in a cast, as she had known. ‘And here is the bedroom with a bathroom opening directly off it.’

Kat pushed him into a room that was much bigger than he’d expected, but every breath he took told him that this was her private space he was invading.

There was nothing overtly fussy or flowery about the décor, everything in shades of calm neutrals with accents of a soft sage green. But it smelt like she did, of something not quite flowery but not spicy either. Whatever it was, it wasn’t helping that he was looking at the freshly made bed that she’d been sleeping in last night. And that was another thing he shouldn’t be thinking about.

‘The previous GP who lived here put in this bathroom when his wife had a stroke,’ she said as she pushed him to the open door, continuing with her low-key guided tour. ‘As you can see, it’s got a walk-in shower with a seat that folds away. I thought that would be much easier to cope with unaided if you taped some plastic around the top of your leg to protect your cast.’

He sighed silently, conceding that she was right. He was in no fit state to clamber up those stairs and a bath would be beyond him.

‘I don’t like putting you out of your room,’ he pointed out uncomfortably, wondering if he would be able to sleep, knowing it was her bed. ‘I’ll stay in here just for a few days...until I get proficient on the crutches.’

‘Take your time,’ she said. ‘It’s no problem for me to use the other room.’ She left him for a moment and returned with the small stash of belongings he’d carried home from the hospital, depositing the plastic bag on the bedside cabinet and propping the crutches against the bed. Her second journey had her returning with the suitcase he’d stowed in the back of his car, last seen parked in front of the practice.

‘You didn’t have to do that,’ he objected, his protective male instincts rebelling against the thought of someone as slight as Kat hefting such a heavy weight. She threw a wry glance in the direction of his bulky leg, pointing out without saying a word that he certainly wasn’t in a fit state to carry anything, and he subsided glumly.

‘It hardly seems worthwhile bringing everything in when I won’t be staying long,’ he said, when she returned with the last of his luggage. ‘You’ll be needing the room for whoever takes the job.’

‘But the job’s yours!’ she exclaimed, clearly startled. ‘It’s my fault that you’ve been injured, so it’s my responsibility to look after you until you’re on your feet again.’

That was just what he didn’t want...to be another responsibility for her to carry on those slender shoulders. But the alternative—to leave Ditchling without ever having a chance to get to know this courageous woman—was unthinkable, too.

‘I can’t just be a burden on you,’ he objected. ‘The whole reason why you were advertising for an associate was because you’re either rushed off your feet without a minute to call your own, or you’re paying vast sums for other people to cover for you.’

‘Mum! Can you come and hear me read?’ called Sam, his voice loud in the sudden silence between them.

‘Coming!’ she called back. ‘Have you brushed your teeth?’

She paused in the doorway, almost as if she was momentarily suspended between her roles of mother and GP. ‘We’ll talk about this when I’ve finished settling the boys down. There must be something...’

That little pleat was back between those silky eyebrows and he was struck by the sudden urge to smooth it away with a fingertip...or a kiss.

‘Enough!’ he growled to himself as soon as she was out of earshot. ‘You don’t need any complications in your life, especially ones that come with children, no matter how tempting their mother is.’

‘And she doesn’t even realise just how...’ He was lost for words, searching for them inside a head that could only think about how much the light fragrance surrounding him suited her.

‘Is this some sort of reaction to the accident? Did they give me something in A and E that’s scrambled my brain?’

The only solution was, as ever, hard work that left him no time to think.

‘Time to unpack,’ he decided, gripping the wheel-rims of the chair and turning it laboriously around.

It didn’t take him long to discover that making the decision wasn’t the same as carrying it out. Even the smaller of his two suitcases was beyond him when he couldn’t use his lower body to help him lift it onto the bed, and that would be the only level at which he could reach into it.

He paused for a moment, slumped in the hated chair and muttering swearwords under his breath when he had the prickling sensation that someone was watching him.

A quick glance over his shoulder told him the worst and a wave of guilt swept over him that he’d been caught setting such a bad example.

‘Sorry about the bad language,’ he said flatly. There was a brief flash of surprise on the youngster’s face, as though he hadn’t expected an apology from him, but he could tell that their brief truce surrounding his injury was over.

Josh’s hackles were up again.

‘This was my dad’s room...and my mum’s,’ he announced truculently, letting Ben know in no uncertain terms that his presence wasn’t welcome on such hallowed ground. But Josh hadn’t finished. ‘My mum’s a widow but she still loves my dad,’ he added fiercely, and Ben wondered just how badly his usual control had slipped. Had his unexpected response to Kat been so obvious that even an eleven-year-old had noticed? It was time for some judicious damage control.

‘Good,’ he said with an approving nod. ‘That’s how it should be in a good marriage.’ Hah! The little voice inside his head commented. What would you know about it? You couldn’t even...

‘So, why has Mum put you in here?’ Josh demanded, childish frustration at the incomprehensibility of adult actions spilling over. ‘It’s her room now. And you’re supposed to be upstairs in the flat.’

‘And I would be if it weren’t for this.’ Ben knocked his knuckles on the cast draped in voluminous pale green cotton. ‘I can’t manage stairs with it yet, but in a couple of days...’ He shrugged, hoping it looked nonchalant enough to convince Josh’s protective instincts. Once more he reached for the suitcase and this time tried to swing it up onto the bed. Instead, he nearly toppled the wheelchair over and wrenched some of the more tender areas of his back.

He only just managed to hold in a curse but thought the effort well worthwhile when he caught a glimpse of sympathy replacing the animosity in Josh’s stance.

‘I could help you with that,’ he suggested suddenly, and Ben blinked in surprise. Unfortunately he was going to have to refuse.

‘I think it would be too heavy for you to lift. I’m afraid I usually pack too many books,’ he added hurriedly when Josh began to look affronted, obviously seeing his refusal as a slight.

‘Could we do it together?’ Josh offered, for the first time moving further into the room than his defensive position in the doorway.

Agreement was Ben's only option. For Kat's sake he had to get on with her sons if he could. He was already a major burden on her. A bad atmosphere in the house might be the final straw.

'We could give it a go,' Ben agreed, as he wheeled the chair back a little to allow him to take up position on the other side of the case. 'How do you suggest we go about it?'

It was the work of mere seconds after that to decide on a likely method and to implement it.

'That was completely painless,' Ben said, as he reached forward to unzip the case and flip the lid back.

To his surprise, Josh burst into chuckles.

Ben couldn't help an answering grin when he saw just how untidy it looked.

'That's what my suitcase looked like when I tried to pack it,' Josh confided. 'I had to get Mum to do it for me because I couldn't fit everything in.'

'Perhaps it's a woman thing...being able to pack a case properly?' Ben suggested, and had to stifle another smile when he saw Josh considering the idea so seriously.

'Probably,' Josh pronounced several seconds later with a decisive nod. 'And they like everything else to be tidy, too, so you have to put your laundry in the basket and make your bed and put your toys away.' He sighed heavily.

'I can remember my mother making me do all that,' Ben agreed, only too willing to foster the glimmer of a bond. He lifted his wash bag out of the suitcase, deposited it on his lap and started turning the wheelchair to take it to the bathroom.

'I could take that through for you,' Josh suggested diffidently. 'I'll put it beside the basin.'

Ben caught his eye and when he saw the answering gleam of mirth they added in unison, 'Tidily!'

An hour later, Ben collapsed into bed completely exhausted. He would never have believed how much energy it took just to get himself undressed and washed. It had probably been a wise decision not to practise getting about on the crutches tonight. He'd probably have fallen flat on his face and broken something else.

The trouble was, even though he was physically tired, his brain was still wide awake, contemplating the consequences of his temporary disability.

Obviously, I won't be able to drive anywhere for a while, he thought dryly, trying to imagine how far back he would have to push the seat to get the cast into the car. Would he even be able to reach the steering-wheel?

But if he wasn't going to be able to do the home visits that Kat wanted her associate to take over for her, then, in all conscience, he should go so that she could find someone else who could.

Except...

Except he didn't want to go, he admitted reluctantly and sighed.

For three years he'd had an absolute rule of non-involvement, but within hours of meeting Kat and her little family—and in spite of ending up with a broken leg—there was something about all three of them that made him reluctant to leave Kat to struggle on alone. So, he had a major problem. He didn't want to leave, at least until she'd found someone suitable to take his place, but in his present state he was worse than useless. If only there was some way he could...

Kat had come to a decision while she'd been finishing off the evening's list in the never-ending round of chores.

It didn't matter that he couldn't do anything to help her at the practice, it was her responsibility to take care of Ben until he was well enough to travel back to his home. And it was time she reassured him of that fact. After all, if she were in the same position, she would want to know exactly where she stood...or sat in his case, she tacked on with a wry smile.

'Ben...' she called softly, tapping on the door to what had been her sanctuary since Richard's death.

'Come in,' the husky voice invited, but when she opened the door and saw him propped up in her bed, naked to the waist, she almost dropped the steaming mug in her other hand.

‘I...I’m sorry. I wouldn’t have disturbed you if I’d known that you were...I only wanted to...’ For heaven’s sake! What was the matter with her? She’d seen a semi-naked man in that bed every night of her married life.

But never one with such a broad muscular chest, decorated with a thick swathe of dark silky-looking hair from one dusky nipple to the other, countered that dratted voice in her head.

‘I heard you telling the boys that you still enjoyed a mug of hot chocolate,’ she said, hastily diverting her eyes from the stunning view in front of her to the prosaic white mug. ‘And I thought I ought to have a word with you...’

‘Come in and shut the door,’ he invited, and he must have seen her surprise at the unexpected request because he quickly added, ‘So that we don’t disturb Sam and Josh.’

Kat felt a swift rush of heat scorching her cheeks. As if she had to worry about her reputation with a man like him. If he was looking for a relationship, he certainly wouldn’t be interested in a permanently exhausted mother of two.

‘I was thinking...about you and the job,’ she began tentatively. ‘Of course, you’re welcome to stay here until you’re fit enough to go home, but—’

‘Kat, before you say any more, can I ask you a favour?’ he interrupted, just when she was getting into her stride. ‘You see, I haven’t got a home to go to at the moment.’

‘What?’ she exclaimed, unable to believe such an outlandish statement.

‘It’s true,’ he said with a tired smile. ‘It had been on the market for ages and suddenly I had a purchaser who was in a hurry to buy. So, rather than lose the sale, I packed everything up and moved it into storage just a couple of days ago, then was told about the vacancy here.’ He caught her eyes with his, their clear green almost seeming to envelop her in the calming hush of a leafy sunlit glade before he continued, ‘If you kick me out, I’ll have nowhere to go...at least, nowhere so suitable for life in a wheelchair or on crutches.’

‘But...the job,’ Kat said helplessly, even as a minor war was being fought inside her. She had a niggling feeling that she was being manipulated in some way but that was completely vanquished by the impossible elation caused by the fact that he might not be leaving after all.

‘Yes. The job.’ He paused for a moment in thought, looking up at her from under those thick dark lashes. ‘I’ve been thinking about that, and I wondered... Well, I know it’s going to take me a few days before I’m really competent on the crutches, but once I am, I should easily be able to get from here to the practice. And if you’re happy to do the leg-work...the home visits and so on...I would still be pulling my weight.’

How could she refuse? she asked herself even as she admitted that she really didn’t want to refuse. To put it bluntly, she needed his help. And it was all very well rationalising that it was her duty to accommodate him because it was her fault that he’d been injured, but the plain fact of the matter was that there was something about the man that called to her...that made her feel things that she’d believed were gone for ever.

‘It’s pointless thinking about him that way,’ she whispered into the darkness, once she’d silently made her way up the spiral staircase and slipped into the bed that should have been his. ‘He’s a drifter, so he’s the last person I could ever get involved with, no matter if he does set my hormones buzzing.’

The boys wouldn’t understand, and would be hurt if she had a relationship with the man, only to have him leave at the end of his contract. They’d been devastated when Richard had died. Heaven only knew what sort of psychological damage it would do to them if they grew close to another man, only to have him leave.

## CHAPTER THREE

'HOW soon will it be before Dr Leeman finishes surgery?' enquired a male voice, just as Ben was preparing to leave the room Kat had allocated to him.

'Oh, hello, Mr Sadowski,' Rose said cheerfully. 'Did you want an appointment?'

'Not this time,' he said, and something about his tone of voice set every one of the hairs up on the back of Ben's neck.

Depositing the pile of patient notes in their tray, ready for Rose to collect, he reached for his crutches.

He arrived in the reception area just as Rose put the call through to Kat's room.

'Dr Leeman, there's a gentleman here to see you,' she said formally. 'It's Mr Sadowski, from the chemist,' she added. She waited a moment for Kat to speak then said, 'I'll tell him,' and put the phone down. 'She'll be out in a minute,' she told the newcomer. 'If you'd like to take a seat while you're waiting?'

Ben took the last few hobbling steps to the counter, envying the other man the easy way he sauntered across the room. It felt like years since he'd been able to do that when, in fact, it had only been a little over a week. At least most of that time had been spent in a modern lightweight fibreglass cast rather than the heavy temporary plaster of Paris one.

'I've left the files on the desk, Rose,' he murmured to the bustling receptionist. 'I'm sorry it's giving you extra work to fetch them, but I just can't manage to carry the basket through with these wretched things.' He waved a battered crutch.

'Don't you worry about that, Dr Ben,' Rose said with a fond smile, using the more formal form of address in front of the other man. When it was only the practice staff on the premises, they all went by first names. 'You've taken such a load off Dr Leeman just by being here that I'd gladly fetch and carry all day.'

'Hmm! Perhaps you shouldn't have told me that,' he teased, liking the down-to-earth little woman more and more the longer he knew her, not least for the way she clucked over Kat and her boys. 'I might be tempted to take advantage of you.'

It sounded almost as if the man waiting impatiently by the pile of magazines and children's books muttered something like, 'As if you aren't already,' but the words were half-buried under Rose's laughter.

And then Kat came out with her own basket of patient notes and when Ben saw the avid expression on the other man's face he suddenly understood only too well what was going on.

'Mr Sadowski?' she said politely when she recognised him, and the sharp claws of jealousy loosened their grip a little.

'Greg,' he said with a smile, but Ben could see from the tension around the man's eyes that he was not happy to be having this meeting in front of so many witnesses.

He had no intention of leaving.

'Ah, Rose said you weren't here for an appointment?' The raised tone at the end of the sentence made it into a question.

'No. Um, actually, I was here to, um, well...to ask if you'd thought any more about that invitation?'

'Invitation?' Her forehead pleated in puzzlement and Ben nearly chuckled aloud. Kat really had no idea what the man had in mind, which meant that there was almost no chance that she was attracted to him. Although why that should matter to him was something he would have to think about later.

For now, he was enjoying watching the man sweat a little while he tried to make-believe he was a smooth man of the world, when in actual fact he obviously came nowhere near deserving a woman like Kat.

‘Um, the dinner-dance? This Saturday?’

This was almost painful, but Ben didn’t want to miss a delicious moment of it, especially as Kat was apparently oblivious to the fact the man was almost hyperventilating, waiting for her answer.

‘Oh, Mr...Greg, I’m sorry, but I couldn’t possibly. I’m on call all this weekend.’ And the sooner Ben was able to take that chore from her, the better, he thought darkly, hating the idea that he wasn’t pulling his weight on such an exhausting part of the workload.

Ben saw the man throw a glare in his direction and, guessing what was coming, leant back against the reception counter and deliberately crossed his broken leg in front of the good one.

‘Oh, but surely that’s why you employed...’ Too late he realised his mistake.

‘Sorry, old man, but I can’t even get behind the wheel at the moment, let alone drive out to do a house call,’ Ben said smugly, knowing he was putting an end to the man’s dreams. ‘And, anyway, if I was called out, who would look after Josh and Sam if Kat was out with you? I certainly couldn’t take them with me and they’re too young to be left alone.’

‘But...’ Ben had to give him his due—the man didn’t want to admit defeat—but this time it was Kat who interrupted.

‘I’m sorry...Greg. It was good of you to think of me but, as you can see, my life is a bit complicated at the moment. Perhaps another time...?’

It was beautifully done, with regret for turning him down sweetened with the possibility of another chance at some unspecified time in the future, but Greg definitely wasn’t happy about it. Man to man, he probably knew that Ben would be gloating over seeing him turned down because he would have in the same situation.

‘Dr Leeman?’ Rose interrupted the charged silence. ‘You haven’t forgotten that the boys need collecting from sports club tonight?’

‘Tonight?’ Kat whirled to face Rose and Ben nearly chortled aloud at the faces Rose was pulling to stop Kat pointing out that it had been sports club night yesterday. ‘Ah, yes. Thank you for reminding me, Rose. I’d better go and get my keys now, or I’ll be late.’ She turned back to the chemist briefly. ‘I’m sorry to have to dash off, but thank you for your invitation,’ she said like a well brought-up child then walked briskly out of the room.

‘Well, that’s my cue to get the meal on the table,’ Ben said casually, as he adjusted his grip on the crutches and straightened up to his full height, stupidly pleased to note that he topped the other man by nearly half a head. ‘The boys like it to be ready when they get home so they have time to do their homework before bedtime.’ And if that didn’t sound cosily domestic, nothing did, he thought as he turned his back on the man, only to catch Rose trying to wipe a grin from her face.

‘And it’s time I finished putting these files away and locked up,’ she volunteered briskly, picking up the basket Kat had brought through. ‘Tomorrow will be here soon enough. Goodnight, Dr Ben. Say goodnight to Dr Leeman for me, will you?’

‘Oh, I will, Rose. I will,’ Ben called over his shoulder, as he left the building and made his way as swiftly as he could safely manage round the corner of the practice in case the disappointed suitor should see him laughing.

‘Rose, could you ask Mrs Couling to come through, please?’

Kat paused just long enough for the receptionist’s murmured reply before putting the receiver down, then blew out a steady stream of air through pursed lips and marvelled that the embarrassment was still there, just as fiercely, several days later.

She’d never been a social butterfly, even as a teenager. She’d been far too focused on her goal of becoming a doctor for anything but the most cursory of dates until she’d met Richard part way through her training.

‘I just hadn’t realised how clueless I was,’ she muttered, and the heat surged into her cheeks all over again when she remembered looking out of the window to see when her unexpected visitor left, and had caught sight of Ben laughing himself silly.

That had been when the penny had dropped.

Until that moment, she honestly hadn't realised that the pharmacist had any sort of intentions towards her. Perhaps the fact that it had now been more than a year since Richard had died should have reminded her of the strange conversation she'd had with him some weeks ago. À propos of absolutely nothing, he'd started talking about the fact that he was a very traditional sort of man who liked the 'old ways'. Looking back on it, had that been his way of telling her that he was waiting until the old-fashioned 'year of mourning' was over before he felt free to ask her out?

Ben had certainly understood what had been going on and had been highly amused, but had it been necessary for him to laugh like that? At least he'd spared Mr... something... George? No, Greg... Greg Sadowski. At least he'd been spared the humiliation of knowing that he was the butt of the joke.

## **Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.**

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