



*Medical
Romance™*

MARION LENNOX

Sydney Harbour Hospital:
Lily's Scandal



Marion Lennox
Sydney Harbour
Hospital: Lily's Scandal

Аннотация

Welcome to the world of Sydney Harbour Hospital From saving lives to sizzling seduction, these doctors are the very best! To nurse Lily Ellis, Sydney Harbour Hospital seems the perfect refuge from her mother's scandalous reputation...until she's discovered in a compromising clinch with brooding plastic surgeon Luke Williams on her first day!To protect Lily from gossip they fake a relationship – only neither's sure where fiction ends and fact begins!

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Welcome to the world of Sydney Harbour Hospital (or *SHH* ... for short— because secrets never stay hidden for long!)

Looking out over cosmopolitan Sydney Harbour, Australia's premier teaching hospital is a hive of round-the-clock activity—with a *very* active hospital grapevine.

With the most renowned (and gorgeous!) doctors in Sydney working side by side, professional and sensual tensions run sky-high—there's *always* plenty of romantic rumours to gossip about ...

Who's been kissing who in the on-call room? What's going on between legendary heart surgeon Finn Kennedy and tough-talking A&E doctor Evie Lockheart? And what's wrong with Finn?

Find out in this enthralling new eight-book continuity from Mills & Boon® Medical™ Romance—indulge yourself with eight helpings of romance, emotion and gripping medical drama!

Sydney Harbour Hospital From saving lives to sizzling seduction, these doctors are the very best!

Dear Reader

When I was asked to write for the *Sydney Harbour Hospital* series I was blown away with excitement. In my non-biased (?) opinion Sydney is the most beautiful city in the world, and Sydney Harbour Hospital is the most awesome hospital. Let's face it: it's been created by eight great Aussie authors—so what's not to love? Our city's fantastic, our staff are fantastic, the drama, heartache, laughter, gossip, and the sheer love of life engendered by the staff of SHH will suck you in as it's sucked me in. I loved it from the moment I read the outline. This series will catch your heartstrings like no other. Oh, and did I mention I think it's good? :-)

I adore the charismatic Dr Finn Kennedy, whose story weaves through the whole series, but most of all I love my Luke and my

Lily. I hope they tug at your heartstrings as much as they tugged on mine.

Happy reading!

Marion Lennox

Sydney Harbour

Hospital:

Lily's Scandal

Marion Lennox



www.millsandboon.co.uk

With thanks to the fabulous Alison Roberts—a gorgeous friend who wears truly awesome boots! And to the rest of the authors in this series—you're brilliant to work with and I love you all. Aussie and New Zealand authors rock!

Sydney Harbour Hospital

Sexy surgeons, dedicated doctors, scandalous secrets, on-call dramas ...

Welcome to the world of Sydney Harbour Hospital (or SHH ... for short—because secrets never stay hidden for long!)

This month enjoy our fantastic medical duo as new nurse Lily gets caught up in the hot-bed of hospital gossip in

SYDNEY HARBOUR HOSPITAL: LILY'S SCANDAL

by **Marion Lennox**

Then gorgeous paediatrician Teo
comes to single mum Zoe's rescue in

SYDNEY HARBOUR HOSPITAL: ZOE'S BABY by

Alison Roberts

Don't miss sexy Sicilian playboy Luca
as he finally meets his match this March

SYDNEY HARBOUR HOSPITAL: LUCA'S BAD GIRL

by **Amy Andrews**

Then in April Hayley opens Tom's eyes to love in

SYDNEY HARBOUR HOSPITAL: TOM'S

REDEMPTION by **Fiona Lowe**

Join heiress Lexi as she learns to put the past behind her in
May ...

SYDNEY HARBOUR HOSPITAL: LEXI'S SECRET by

Melanie Milburne

In June adventurer Charlie helps shy Bella fulfil her dreams—
and find love on the way!

SYDNEY HARBOUR HOSPITAL: BELLA'S

WISHLIST by **Emily Forbes**

Then single mum Emily gives no-strings-attached surgeon
Marco

a reason to stay in

SYDNEY HARBOUR HOSPITAL: MARCO'S

TEMPTATION by **Fiona McArthur**

And finally join us in August as Ava and James

realise their marriage really is worth saving in

SYDNEY HARBOUR HOSPITAL: AVA'S RE-AWAKENING by Carol Marinelli

And not forgetting Sydney Harbour Hospital's legendary heart surgeon

Finn Kennedy. This brooding maverick keeps his women on hospital

rotation ... But can new doc Evie Lockheart unlock the secrets to his

guarded heart? Find out in this enthralling new eight-book continuity

from Medical™ Romance.

A collection impossible to resist!

These books are also available in ebook format from www.millsandboon.co.uk

CHAPTER ONE

LUKE WILLIAMS had been operating since dawn. All he wanted was bed. Instead he was coping with stinking tallow, teenage hysteria and the director of surgery and the representative of the founders of this hospital thinking pistols at dawn.

‘You said multiple burns. Four children. I’ve spent most of the night with a kid with a collapsed lung, and you wake me for this ...’

Luke’s boss, Finn Kennedy, the taciturn head of surgery at Sydney Harbour Hospital, was practically rigid with fury, but Dr Evie Lockheart, emergency physician, was giving it right back.

‘I was told four children fell into a vat of boiling tallow from the meatworks. You think that’s not worth getting you and Luke down here? I wanted the best.’

‘Luke has other things to do as well. Like sleeping. And boiling? It must have been barely warm. You should have checked.’

‘And waste precious time? Pull your head in, Kennedy.’

Luke sucked his breath in at that. These guys were powerhouses in this hospital. Evie Lockheart, of Endowing-the-Hospital-with-Serious-Money Lockheart fame, and Finn Kennedy, the Do-Not-Cross Director of Surgery, had personalities to match their egos. Powerful intellects, serious

commitment, serious ... conflict. Conflict getting worse.

Could he back away?

No.

School holidays. A meat-processing operation out in the suburbs, with inadequate security. Four teenaged boys, fifteen or sixteen, egging each other to walk the plank—on rollerblades!—over a two-thousand-gallon vat of tallow being rendered down.

They were lucky the heat had only just been turned on. They'd fallen into the equivalent of a bath that was a bit too hot.

Through the office window, the kids and their frightened parents looked a pool of misery. The stench was unbelievable, but it could have been much worse. A pert little blonde nurse was swabbing tallow from one kid's legs, exposing only minor scalding.

He couldn't leave, he decided, not until things had calmed down. Meanwhile he had a choice. Join in the fight. Look at the kids. Look at the nurse.

This was a no-brainer.

The woman was cute, he thought, even in her ER scrubs. Her blonde curls were wisping from under her cap. As he watched, she tucked them back in, and then glanced through the window.

He caught her gaze and saw laughter, quickly suppressed.

She'd be seeing the conflict, he thought, even if she couldn't hear it. Was she laughing at these two? Not a good idea, he told her silently. Laughter would be really unwise right now, even for him, and he'd been working here for nearly ten years. He fought

—quite hard—the urge to smile back.

He also fought the urge to hold his nose. This stink was permeating the whole floor.

‘The gastro outbreak has given us nursing shortages through the whole hospital,’ Evie was snapping. ‘I didn’t have the nursing staff to clean and check each of these boys before calling you. Possible burns, possible major trauma, it’s my job to call for back-up.’

‘They’re not traumatised,’ Finn snapped back.

But they were, Luke conceded, looking through at the very-sorry-for-themselves kids. It looked to him like their parents had initially been terrified and then expressed shock in the form of anger. He’d seen it time and time again in this job, fright finding vent in fury.

A couple of the kids had been crying. Tough teenage boys, scalded and scared ... They should do a bit of reassuring.

But first he needed to defuse the battle of the Titans. How to stop World War III without accidentally escalating it?

‘You think your power gives you the right ...’ Finn Williams was growling to the Lockheart heiress.

Luke gave an inward groan and thought, Here we go.

The little blonde nurse had disappeared into the storeroom. Good idea, he thought. Could he follow?

Not so much. Finn was his direct boss. Evie was the granddaughter of the founder of this place.

If he valued his job he needed to stick around while these

power-mongers tore each other's throats out.

In truth he wasn't so worried about his job. As head of the plastic surgery team at the Harbour his credentials made him pretty much unsackable. But as well as being his boss, Finn was also his friend, or as much of a friend as either of them wanted. The last few weeks, he'd watched Finn's perennially short fuse grow even shorter.

Finn and Evie had sparked off each other from the moment they'd met. As a junior doctor, Evie had dared query one of Finn's decisions. She'd been wrong, she'd apologised, but Finn had mocked her family's right to power, and their relationship had been ... *interesting* ever since. But now, even for Finn, his anger was over the top.

It was messing with staff morale. It was also worrying, and Luke didn't like being worried. Luke Williams was a man who held himself apart. He didn't get close to people.

He was worrying now about his friend.

And through the window ...

He hadn't seen this nurse before.

Pretty. Great eyes. They were a blue that made you feel like diving into clear, sunlit water on a hot day. It must be her first night on the job, he decided. He would have noticed those eyes.

Where was she?

Maybe she'd gone to get a hose.

'There may well be second- or third-degree burns under that mess,' Evie was saying, almost hissing her anger.

‘There’s no sign of shock. All they need is a good wash.’

‘And then assessment,’ Evie snapped. ‘So then I’ll call you back?’

‘You won’t need to call us back. I’m guessing first-degree burns at worst.’

‘Could we find out?’

It was Blue Eyes, out of the storeroom, popping into their private war with her arms full of plastic. ‘Sorry,’ she said, blithely, as if she hadn’t noticed any anger. ‘I know it’s not my place but I’ve spent the last couple of years working in a country hospital where all staff step in at need. I’m thinking we have four kids here, and four medics if you count me. How about we all put on protective gear, get each of these guys in a shower cubicle and do an individual check for any burn that needs attention? Split up the work from there.’

Whoa. Luke’s jaw practically hit his ankles. Did she know who she had here? Only three of Sydney Harbour Hospital’s most influential doctors. Head of Surgery. Head of Plastics. Member of the Lockheart family.

She wasn’t wearing the Harbour uniform. *She was an agency nurse?*

She was holding out the protective gear as if she was expecting them to take it.

But ... What choice did they have? There were no nurses spare. The gastro outbreak had badly affected the hospital, plus there’d been a brawl early in the night; he’d seen it on his way

off duty. Drunk casualties. That meant intensive nursing, guys who'd been stitched up but who were still affected by alcohol.

So Evie had been left with one lone nurse and four filthy kids with possible burns. An emergency department full of hysterical patients, parents and stink. No wonder she'd called for help, even if she'd called for help a bit high up the food chain.

Maybe the nurse was right, this was the fastest solution. And, besides, those eyes ...

'I'll take the beefy one with the scowl,' he said, taking a set of waterproof gear.

Evie gazed at him, speechless. 'You ...'

'You called me,' he said mildly. 'I assume you need me.' He grabbed another waterproof set and tossed it to Finn. 'It'll do us good,' he said. 'Bit of stress release. You want to take the little guy with freckles?'

Finn caught the waterproofs. Looked flabbergasted.

'I'll do the skinny one,' Blue Eyes said, and handed the last set of overalls to Evie.

There was a moment's pregnant pause. Very pregnant.

Blue Eyes calmly hauled on her waterproofs, then bent and started putting on boots.

She had wispy blonde curls on the back of her neck, Luke thought. Cute. Really cute.

Was that the reason he hauled on boots as well?

No. This was sensible. He didn't succumb to testosterone when it came to cute, not any more, but this place was clogged

with stinking kids. They all needed checking, there were no nurses free and this way ... Blue Eyes had it right, in the time they spent arguing they could get them checked and out of here.

‘I’ll ring the cleaning staff and tell them we need this place cleared while we’re showering,’ Blue Eyes said, now clad all in waterproofs. She tugged open the door, allowing contact between doctors and patients. *Before she even had Finn’s okay.*

‘Ross, you go with Dr Williams, Robbie, you’re with Dr Lockheart, Craig, you’re with Mr Kennedy and, Jason, you’re with me,’ she said. She turned to the parents. ‘Could you leave the kids with us? They’re in the best of hands; we have the most senior doctors in the hospital working with them. We’ll clean them, check there are no problem burns and then get them back to you. Maybe you could find an all-night supermarket and pick up some loose clothes. Is that okay with everyone?’

But before they could answer they were interrupted. ‘Excuse me ...’ The night receptionist edged into the emergency area like a scared rabbit. Of course she was nervous, Luke thought. Everyone in this hospital was nervous around Finn Kennedy, and for good reason. ‘The police are here,’ she ventured, and before she could say more two cops pushed past her.

Uh-oh. They hadn’t realised, Luke thought with grim humour, that they’d just entered Finn Kennedy territory. Facing gun-toting drug dealers might be safer.

‘These youths are facing charges of breaking and entering,’ the older policeman said, looking at the boys as if they were truly bad

smells. ‘The orderly outside said they don’t seem badly injured. Can we get the paperwork out of the way so we can get on with our night’s work?’

Uh-oh, indeed. Luke held his breath. Finn’s fuse, already short, was suddenly down to the core explosive, and he had a target.

‘Breaking and entering?’ His voice was icy.

‘That’s right, sir.’ The cop still didn’t see the danger—but here it came.

‘These kids have fallen into exposed hot fat,’ Finn snarled. ‘A life-threatening hazard to anyone who comes near it. An unsecured environment. Unlocked windows. You know as well as I do that a simple padlock on a closed door doesn’t begin to cover such a risk. Breaking and entering ... You can tell whoever’s thinking of pressing charges that he can go back to whatever stinking worm-hole he crawled from and expect a visit from Occupational Health and Safety, with lawyers following. These children are traumatised enough, and you’re adding more. Now get out of this hospital before I phone someone with enough clout to have you thrown out.’

Then, as the cops backed out with astonishing speed, he turned to Luke. ‘What are you waiting for? Get those waterproofs on and get these kids clean. Do what the nurse says. Now.’

The really good thing about being a nobody was that it didn’t matter whose toes you stood on. You were still just a nobody.

These guys were all big-wigs. Lily knew it, but she’d watched

the outburst of sound and fury with dispassion, not really fussed if the anger turned on her. What was the worst that could happen? She'd move on.

There were other hospitals. Her credentials were good. She could go somewhere else and be anonymous all over again.

The feeling was extraordinary. She felt like she was floating, light and free. She'd escaped.

She'd return eventually to Lighthouse Cove, the tiny community that judged her mother and who judged her. She knew deep down that this was a momentary escape. A promise was a promise. But right now her mother was in the middle of a dizzying affair with the local parish vicar, the whole town was on fire with gossip and Lily was staying right here, in nice, anonymous Sydney.

She was a bank nurse, employed by an agency. She was sent where she was needed, so if she stood on toes, if she wasn't needed, if these Very Important Doctors decided they wished to dispense with her services, then so be it.

She practically chuckled as she led Jason into a shower cubicle and along the line of cubicles three Very Important Doctors followed her lead.

Two of them looked grim. The other ... not so much. He was the head of plastic surgery, she gathered. Luke Williams looked lean and ripped, hovering above six feet, with sun-bleached brown hair and deep green eyes that glinted with repressed laughter. Very repressed, though. She caught his gaze and she

could have sworn he was laughing, but he averted his eyes fast. It wouldn't do to laugh out loud.

There wasn't enough laughter in her life, she thought, and she needed it. But she'd taken the first step, and it had felt good to exchange her first attempt at laughter in her new job with a doctor as hunky as Luke Williams.

There's an inappropriate thought, she chided herself, but she was still smiling inwardly.

'Will this hurt?' Jason quavered, and she gave him a reassuring smile.

'I suspect mostly just your pride. We need to get those clothes off. Are you hurting?'

'Stinging,' he admitted. 'A bit.'

The meatworks proprietor should have washed them straight away, Lily thought, growing serious. If the tallow had been really hot, they'd have been facing a nightmare. The owner of the meatworks hadn't checked. He'd simply threatened them with police and they'd fled. Their parents had brought them straight here, with hot tallow still intact. If it had been boiling it would have kept right on burning.

They'd been so lucky. Apparently the vat had only just started warming. The boys had climbed in through a high window, seen huge planks laid across to skim off impurities and dared each other to rollerblade across. The stupidity left Lily breathless. She'd heard the outline. One kid falling, clutching his mate as he fell, both grabbing the planking, which had come loose, tumbling

their mates in after them.

Lily turned the shower to soft pressure, skin temperature. She put Jason's hands on the rails and produced scissors.

'Just to my knickers,' Jason whimpered.

'There's nothing I haven't seen,' Lily told him. 'If you've burned anything personal, you'll need it fixed.'

Another whimper.

'There's nothing to this,' she told him cheerfully. 'These jeans are going to stink for ever so we might as well cut 'em off. So ... rollerblading over steaming tallow. Quite a trick. How long have you been blading?'

'A ... a year.' The water was streaming over the kid; his clothes were falling away and so was the muck that was covering him.

'You any good?'

'Y-yeah.'

'So of the four of you, who does the neatest tricks?'

Luke was in the next cubicle. He was scissoring clothes from his own kid. Ross had been blustering when Luke had first seen him, whinging to his parents that it wasn't his fault, that his 'expletive' mates had pressured him to do it, Craig had pushed him, his dad should sue.

Under the water, with Luke scissoring off his clothes, he calmed down. His legs were scalded. They were only first-degree burns, though, Luke thought, little worse than sunburn. He'd sting for a week but there'd be little long-term damage.

He'd been swearing as Luke had propelled him under the

shower, but when Luke had attacked with scissors ... the boy had shut up. 'We need to check down south,' Luke had told him. 'Check everything's still in working order. Steamed balls aren't exactly healthy ...' Luke wasn't reassuring him just yet. He liked him quiet, and, besides, with him quiet he could hear the conversation in the next cubicle.

'I've been blading since I was twelve,' Blue Eyes was saying.

'Girls can't blade.' That was her kid—Jason.

'You're kidding me, right? I suspect you'll need to come back in a week or so to make sure these scalds have healed. You bring your blades; I'll organise time off and I'll meet you in the hospital car park. Then we'll see who can't blade.'

Luke blinked. An assignation ...

'What, you can blade fast?' Jason had been shakily terrified but Blue Eyes had him distracted. He sounded scornful.

'Fast?' Blue Eyes chuckled, and it was a gorgeous chuckle. 'I do more than fast. I do barrel rolls, grapevines, heel toes, flips, you name it. I'm no gumbie, kiddo.'

'You're kidding.'

'Would I kid about something like blading? My skates were the most important thing in my life for a long, long time.' Blue Eyes suddenly sounded serious. 'It took my mind off other things and I loved it. I can't say I ever bladed over tallow, though.'

'I bet you could.' There was suddenly belief—and admiration—in the kid's voice and Luke found himself agreeing. If this slip of a girl could get Evie and Finn to don waterproofs and wash

off tallow, she might be capable of a whole lot more.

He wanted, quite badly, to explore the idea.

Bad idea.

She was an agency nurse. Her uniform told him that. She was one of the casual nurses employed to fill gaps at need in any hospital in the city.

After tonight he might never see her again.

But ... she'd made an assignation with Jason in a week. That might mean the agency had positioned her here for more than a night.

She had a great chuckle.

No. Beware of chuckles. And blue eyes. And twinkles.

He thought of Hannah.

He always thought of Hannah. Of course he did. Her memory no longer evoked the searing pain it once had, but instead was a basic part of him, a knowledge that he'd messed with the most precious thing a man could be given. The emotions that went with the sort of involvement he was briefly considering with Blue Eyes were gone. They were left behind in a bleak cemetery with what was left of his wife and his little son.

'Me balls ...' Ross whimpered. 'They gunna be okay?'

'They're gunna be fine,' he told the kid he was treating. 'They're a bit pink but they'll live to father sons.'

'I don't want to father kids!' The thought was obviously worse than hot tallow.

'No,' Luke said soothingly. 'I guess you don't, but one day you

might. Meanwhile everything's in working order for when you want them to do what they're meant to do. For when your chance in life happens.'

Ross and Jason were sent home. Robbie and Craig were admitted. They'd been in the centre of the vat. It had taken them longer to get out, which meant they had patches of second-degree burning. No full-thickness burns, though. Evie took them in charge, patching them up before admitting them. Luke somehow found himself doing the paperwork while Lily gave Ross and Jason's parents instructions on how to deal with minor scalds.

She then headed off to fill in a police report. Finn might have moved on, but Luke heard Blue Eyes asking questions, getting the boys to sign statements, and he knew because of her the open vats would be covered and there'd be no prosecutions of kids who were just being ... kids.

Lily was some nurse.

She wasn't your normal agency nurse. Most agency nurses were looking for a quiet life. They were mums with small kids who worked when they could find someone to care for their children. They were overseas nurses, funding the next adventure. They were older women who worked when grandkids and aching legs permitted, or they wanted funds for a few retirement treats.

Lily, though, didn't seem to fit any of these categories. She was in her late twenties, he decided, nicely mature. Competent. She had the air of a nurse who'd run her own ward, and who didn't suffer fools gladly. And the way she'd talked to Jason ...

She didn't sound like a young mum, wearily getting the job done.

He badly needed to get to bed. He had a full list in the morning. He shouldn't be awake now, but first ... First he finished the paperwork and casually dropped by Admin. And while he did he just happened to retrieve the fact sheet that had been faxed through with the notification that Blue Eyes had been allocated to work at the Harbour.

Blue Eyes.

Lily Maureen Ellis. Twenty-six years old. Trained at Adelaide. Well trained. He flicked through her list of credentials and blinked—hey, she had plastics experience. She was trained to assist in plastic surgery.

Plus the rest. Intensive care. Paediatrics. Midwifery. He knew the hospital she'd trained in. This woman must be good.

According to the sheet, she'd left Adelaide two years back to run the bush nursing hospital at Lighthouse Cove. He knew Lighthouse Cove. It was a tiny, picturesque town less than an hour's drive from Adelaide.

Fishing, tourists, pubs and not a lot else.

So what had driven Lily Maureen Ellis to pack up and leave Lighthouse Cove and put her name down as an agency nurse in Sydney?

Maybe she was following a man.

Maybe he needed to get some sleep.

'Why the hell aren't you in bed?' It was Finn, scaring the daylights out of him—as normal. The Harbour's Director of

Surgery had the tread of a panther—and night sight. Word in the hospital was that there was nothing Finn didn't know. He knew it before it happened.

'Why aren't *you* in bed?' Luke managed back, mildly. 'Have you been giving Evie more grief?'

'I haven't ...'

'Yeah, you have,' he said evenly. 'You're tetchy, and you're especially tetchy round Evie. What's eating you?'

'Nothing.'

'Headaches? Sore arm?'

'Why would I have headaches?'

'Beats me,' Luke said mildly. 'But you keep rubbing your head and shoulder, and if anyone puts a foot wrong ...'

'Dr Lockheart had no business waking us up,' Finn growled.

'She had four potentially serious burns and one agency nurse. Cut her some slack.'

'She drives me nuts,' Finn said, taking the fact sheet. 'So this is the girl handing out waterproofs.'

'She's got guts.'

'I'm sick of guts,' Finn said. 'Give me a good pliable woman any day. So why are we reading her CV?' He raised an eyebrow in sudden interest. 'Well, well. It's about time ...'

'No.'

'No?'

'No.'

'Hannah's been gone for four years now,' Finn said, gentling.

‘A man can’t mourn for ever.’

‘Says the whole hospital,’ Luke said grimly. ‘It’s driving me nuts.’

‘So have an affair.’ He motioned to the CV. ‘Excellent idea. Get them off your back. Get a life.’

‘Hannah didn’t get a life.’

‘It wasn’t your fault.’

‘So whose fault was it?’ he demanded, explosively. ‘Fourteen weeks and I didn’t even know she was pregnant.’

‘You were working seventy hours a week and fronting for exams. Hannah knew the pressures. She was also a nurse and she knew her way around her body. To lock herself in her bedroom and suffer in silence at fourteen weeks pregnant ... She was fed up that you were caught up in Theatre. It still smacks of playing the martyr.’

‘Don’t.’

‘Speak ill of the dead? I say it like it is. If one stupid act of martyrdom stops you from getting on with your life ...’

‘I don’t see you getting on with your life.’

Finn stiffened. Finn was his boss, Luke conceded, but their relationship went deeper. He knew as much of Finn’s background as anyone did. Finn had a brother who’d been killed in combat. He’d been wounded himself. There’d been a messy relationship with his brother’s wife, then a series of forget-the-moment flings.

Was he about to throw those in his boss’s face? Maybe not. Not at two in the morning, when they were both sleep deprived—

and when a cute little blonde nurse had suddenly appeared in the background behind Finn. Waiting for an opportunity to break in.

‘Don’t make this about me,’ Finn snapped. ‘Meanwhile, you ...’ Finn waved the folder. ‘An agency nurse, ripe for the picking. That’s what you need. A casual affair and then move on.’

The blue eyes widened.

Luke stifled a groan.

‘Excuse me, doctors,’ the Agency-Ripe-For-The-Picking nurse said, in a carefully neutral voice. ‘The paging system doesn’t appear to be working down here. Dr Lockheart has asked me to find you, Dr Williams. Not you, Mr Kennedy. Dr Lockheart’s words were, “*Keep that man out of my department at all costs*”. But a child’s been admitted with facial injuries from dog bites. Dr Lockheart says to tell you, Dr Williams, that this is serious and could you please come now.’

CHAPTER TWO

JESSIE BLANDON was headed for Theatre—if he made it that far.

He was four years old. He'd woken in the middle of the night, needing his mother, the bathroom, something. He'd stumbled through the living room. His mother's boyfriend's Rottweiler had been on the couch.

As far as Lily could see, he'd lost half his face. Or not completely lost; it was hanging by a flap. How he'd not bled to death, she didn't know.

Lily didn't have time to think about what she'd just overheard. She flew back to Emergency with Luke.

'Tell me,' he snapped as they strode down the corridor at a pace practised by most emergency medics. Never run in a hospital. Walk—exceedingly fast.

She outlined what she'd seen and Luke's face grew grim.

'Dogs and kids,' he muttered. 'No matter how trustworthy ... Hell.'

It was hell. Lily had seen the mother and her boyfriend as the ambulance had wheeled the little boy in. They looked shattered. This would be a great goofy dog, she guessed, normally quiet, startled from sleep into doing what dogs were bred to do. Attack and defend.

How good was this man beside her?

She was about to find out.

She'd not dealt with a case like this at Lighthouse Cove. For the last two years, in her tiny hospital, any serious case had been transferred to Adelaide. Still, she had the training to back her up. Those long years, travelling back and forth from Lighthouse Cove to Adelaide Central, struggling to do her training yet still support her mother, they'd been hard but they'd provided her with skills, so that when Luke Williams said, 'You've done plastics, you trained with Professor Blythe? You'll work with us on this?' she could nod.

But she wasn't nodding with confidence that they'd save the little boy. He was desperately injured. She was only confident that she could back up this man's skills.

If he had the skills.

He did.

To say she was impressed with Luke William's professionalism was an understatement. This was a life-and-death emergency. Every minute they wasted meant this little boy had a smaller chance at life, yet Luke exuded calm from the moment he saw him.

First and foremost he made sure Jessie was feeling no pain. He had an anesthetist there in moments and Jessie was placed swiftly into an induced coma. He assessed what needed to be done. He gave curt, incisive directions with not a word wasted. He even found a moment to talk to the couple outside.

'Things are grim,' he told them. 'There's no way I can assure

you your little boy will be okay. I don't know. No one knows. But he's in the best of hands, and we'll do everything we humanly can to save him. Meanwhile, I want you to ring a reliable friend and ask them to bring in Jessie's favourite things, a bear maybe, his blanket from his bed? Reassuring stuff. The paramedics will have informed the police. Tell your friend not to go near the house until he's sure the police have the dog under control.'

'The dog's a pussy cat,' the man said, brokenly.

'No,' Luke said grimly. 'He's a dog. And your son ...' He closed his eyes for a fraction of a moment and when he opened them Lily saw something behind his eyes that looked like pain. 'Jessie,' he said. 'It's up to us now to see if we can save your Jessie.'

She'd come on duty tonight as an unknown nurse, expecting to be treated as very junior. In fact, she'd kind of wanted to be junior. Anonymous. Working steadily in the background, a tiny cog in a big wheel, disappearing as soon as she was off duty, coming on duty tomorrow on another ward, knowing no one, no one knowing her. Bliss.

What she hadn't expected was to be part of a close-knit, highly skilled team, working desperately to save one little life.

That weird conversation she'd overheard in Admin was put aside. For some reason Luke had been checking her credentials. Whether the conversation between Finn and Luke should have the pair of them up before the medical board for sexual discrimination was immaterial right now. What was important

was that Luke knew she was up to the job in hand and he let the rest of the team know it. The hospital was desperately short-staffed, so she was no doormat, standing in the background. She was scrub nurse, working with every ounce of her knowledge and skill.

They all were.

The child's face had been torn from chin to forehead. A vast flap of skin and flesh was hanging from his cheek. Among the blood and mess, they could see bone.

His eye socket, his nose, the side of his mouth ... Unspeakable damage ...

But the flesh hadn't been ripped away entirely. If Luke had the skills he might ... he must ...

The alternative was unthinkable. If the flap couldn't be replaced, this little boy would be facing years of grafts, even a face transplant. A life of immuno-suppressant drugs. If he lived.

The alternative was that Luke sorted this mangled mess and teased it all back into place. That he keep the flap alive, re-establish blood supply, leave nerves undamaged ...

A miracle?

No. Pure skill.

Her initial impressions of the man were that he was ... okay, a womaniser. He'd been laughing with her. Eyeing her appreciatively. Talking with the director of surgery about her in *that way* ...

Now every speck of concentration was on what he was doing.

Jessie's face was an intricate jigsaw puzzle that had to be fitted together before the blood supply was compromised. Every tiny torn piece had to be sorted, cleaned, put into careful, cautious position.

The nursing team of the hospital might have been hit by gastro but there was no hint of understaffing now. This was priority one, a child's life. Luke was assisted by a surgical registrar, a paediatric anaesthetist, two scrub nurses and two junior nurses. All were totally focused.

And in their hands was a little boy called Jessie. Redheaded. Freckled on the tiny part of his face that wasn't damaged. He was intubated, heavily anaesthetised. He'd been lucky he hadn't drowned in his own blood.

Every person in the room was totally tuned to what they were doing. This was the most important job in the world, saving a child's life ... piece by piece ...

Lily thought briefly of a case she'd worked on three years back. A professor in Adelaide, trying to save a man's lips. Problems with drainage afterwards. Like Luke, the professor's total attention had been caught in what he was doing, but afterwards he'd talked through what might have helped.

She turned to the closest junior nurse.

'Slip out and find Dr Lockheart,' she said. 'Tell her we may need medical leeches. Tell her priority one.'

'I don't have authority ...' the girl said, casting a worried glance at Luke, but Luke's attention was all on what he was doing.

He might not have the head space to think beyond his current actions, Lily thought.

The anaesthetist, the registrar, the senior scrub nurse were totally focused as well.

‘Just say leeches are needed urgently,’ she told the nurse. There was no need to say the agency temp had ordered them. ‘Be it on my head if they’re not.’

And it would be her head, too, she thought. Leeches were kept in only a few medical facilities around the country. Her order might well involve helicopter, urgency, cost.

So sack me, she thought grimly, and went back to what she was doing. Elaine, the senior scrub nurse, needed to back off a little; there was only so long that she could hold the suction tube steady, that her fingers would do as she bid.

Luke’s fingers didn’t have a choice, they had to keep going. ‘Lily, move in,’ Luke growled, and he’d sensed it too, that the older nurse was faltering.

She moved in and kept on going.

Two hours later her decision was vindicated. The flap of skin was finally closed around the nostril and left lip. Luke was working under the little boy’s eyelid but he rechecked the lip and swore.

‘The blood’s coagulating,’ he said. ‘I need drainage. Hell, I didn’t think we’d get this far.’

‘We have leeches on hand if you can use them,’ she said diffidently, and the nurse in the background was already

unfastening the canister.

‘How the ... ?’ Luke was momentarily distracted. ‘Did Dr Lockheart order these?’

‘Lily did,’ the junior said, and grinned, the atmosphere in the theatre lightening as the outlook improved. ‘She’s not bad for an agency temp, is she?’

‘Not bad at all,’ Luke said, and caught Lily’s gaze and held, just for a moment, a fleeting second, before he went back to work.

Lily went back to work, too, but she was flushing under her mask.

Not bad at all.

His glance had unnerved her.

Luke Williams was a womanising surgeon, she told herself. She was here as a temporary nurse, knowing no one, wanting to know no one.

But his gaze ...

It did something to her insides. Twisted ...

She didn’t have time for anything to twist.

Work. Anonymity. Just do what comes next.

At five in the morning she was totally drained.

‘Go home,’ Dr Lockheart told her. ‘We’ve thrown you in at the deep end tonight. I know you’re not off duty until six but no one’s expecting anything more of you now.’

‘And if you’d like to change agency nursing for permanent nursing at the Harbour, you’d be very, very welcome,’ Elaine said warmly. ‘Dr Williams is already asking that you be made a

permanent member of the plastics team.’

‘I don’t want to be a permanent member of anything,’ she said wearily, and went to change and fetch her gear from her locker.

Home.

Problem. She didn’t actually have a home. Not until ten o’clock.

She’d arrived in Sydney yesterday, fresh from her mother’s dramas, wanting only to escape.

Her mother was, even by Lily’s dutiful daughter standards, an impossible woman. She drifted from drama to drama, and the small town they lived in had labelled her as trash, for good reason. She wasn’t trash, Lily thought. She was ... needy. She needed men. And in between needing men, she needed Lily.

This last fling, though, had pushed the townspeople to the limit. It had pushed Lily to the limit. Two days ago—had it really been only two days ago?—the wife of the local vicar, a woman who was also the head of the hospital board, had stormed into Lighthouse Cove hospital and slapped her. As if her mother’s actions were Lily’s fault.

‘Get your mother away from my husband. You and your mother ... She’s a slut and you’re no better. She needs a leash! You think you can be a respectable nurse in this town while your mother acts as the town’s whore?’ She’d slapped Lily again. A couple of patients’ relatives had had to pull her away and she’d collapsed in shock and in fury. Lily had caught her as she’d fallen, stopped her from hurting herself, but there had been no gratitude.

No softening of the vitriol.

Why would there be?

‘Get out of my sight,’ the woman had hissed as she’d recovered. ‘Get out of our hospital. Get out of our town.’

She’d had no right to sack her. It was her mother who’d played the scarlet woman, not her.

But in a tiny town distinctions blurred.

She’d sat in the nurses’ station with her stomach cramping, feeling sick, knowing she couldn’t live with this stress a moment longer. She was being unfairly tarred with the same brush as her mother, and she knew she didn’t deserve it. But it was a small town and so far she’d always stuck up for her mother ... that couldn’t go on.

On the way home she’d stopped to buy groceries. Walking into the general store had been a nightmare. Shocked, judgmental faces had been everywhere.

The Ellis women.

Then she’d tried to use her card to pay for groceries. ‘Declined: Limit exceeded.’

Her mother had been using her credit card?

Speechless, she’d gone home and there was the vicar, pudgy, weak and shamefaced, but totally besotted with her mother.

‘Make yourself scarce for a while, there’s a good girl,’ her mother had said. ‘We need time to ourselves. It’ll be okay, dear,’ she’d cooed as Lily had tried to figure what to do, what to say. ‘We were going to go to Paris but we’ve run out of money. It

doesn't matter. If Harold can just borrow a little bit more from his relatives we'll leave. We're in love and everyone just needs time to accept it.'

Enough. What had followed had been the world's fastest pack. She'd driven eight hundred and fifty miles from Adelaide to Sydney. A seventeen-hour drive, her stomach cramping all the way. She'd had cat naps at the side of the road, or she'd tried to, but sleep had refused to come. She'd arrived in Sydney late in the afternoon, trying to figure how she could survive on what little money she had.

She'd walked into the nursing agency before it had closed and they'd fallen on her neck.

'All your documents and references are in order. There's a job tonight, if you're available. Sydney Harbour Hospital is desperate.'

She'd found a cheap boarding house, dumped her luggage and booked accommodation for the next night. That was tonight, she thought, glancing at her watch. She could have the room from ten.

But it was five hours until ten o'clock, and she was so tired she was asleep on her feet.

Her stomach hurt.

She stared at her locker, trying to make her mind think. The thought of finding an all-hours café until then made her feel ill. There'd be an on-call room somewhere for medical staff, she thought. Probably there'd be a few. There'd be rooms for

obstetricians waiting for babies. Rooms for surgeons waiting for their turn in complex multi-specialist procedures.

Rooms to sleep?

Just for a couple of hours, she thought. Just until it was a reasonable time to find breakfast and book into her boarding house.

Just for now.

He had a whole hour of thinking he'd done it right. One lousy hour and then the phone went off beside his bed.

'Problem.' It was Finn. Of course it was Finn—when did the man ever sleep?

When did Finn ever wake him when it wasn't a full-blown emergency? Luke was hauling his pants on before Finn's next words.

'It's Jessie,' Finn snapped. 'It seems he has a congenital heart problem. No one thought to tell us, not that it would have made a difference to what you did anyway. His heart's failing. You want to come in or you want me to deal?'

'I'm on my way.'

She woke and he was right beside her. Luke Williams, plastic surgeon. He looked like he'd just seen death.

The on-call room was tiny, one big squishy settee, a television, a coffee table with ancient magazines and nothing else. She'd curled into a corner of the couch and fallen asleep. Until now.

The man beside her wasn't seeing her. He was staring at the blank television screen, gaze unfocused.

She'd never seen a man look so bleak.

'What's wrong?' she breathed, and touched his arm.

He flinched.

'What are you doing here?' His voice was harsh. Breaking. It was emotion that had woken her, she thought. Raw grief, filling the room like a tangible thing.

'I don't get into my boarding house until ten,' she told him. 'So I'm camped out, waiting. But what is it? Jessie?'

'He died,' he said, and all the bleakness in the world was in those two words. 'Cardiac arrest. He had a congenital heart problem and no one thought to tell us. As if we had time to look for records. The admission officer didn't even read the form, she was too upset. We patched him up, we made him look like he might even be okay, and all the time his heart was like a time bomb.'

'There was no choice,' she managed, appalled.

'There was a choice. If I'd known ... I could have taken the flap off, thought about grafts later, concentrated on getting his heart stable first.'

She took a deep breath. What to say?

This man's anguish was raw and real.

A congenital heart problem ...

If Luke had known he might well have decided not to try and save his face, but without that immediate operation Jess would have been left with a lifetime of skin grafts. With a face that wasn't his.

‘What sort of life would he have led?’ she whispered.

‘A life,’ he said flatly. ‘Any life. I can’t bear ...’

And she couldn’t bear it either. She took his hands and tugged him around to face her.

There was more to this than a child dying, she thought. This man must have lost patients before. He couldn’t react like this to all of them. There was some past tragedy here that was being tapped into, she guessed. She had no idea what it was; but she sensed his pain was well nigh unbearable.

‘I killed him,’ he said, and for some reason she wasn’t sure he was talking about Jessie.

‘The dog killed him,’ she said, trying to sound prosaic. ‘You tried to save him.’

‘I should have—’

‘No. Don’t do this.’

He shuddered, and it was a raw and dreadful grief that took over his whole body.

Enough. She pulled him into her arms and held him. And held and held. She simply held him while the shudders racked his body, over and over.

This couldn’t just be about this child, she thought.

Something had broken him.

He was holding her as well now. Simply holding. Taking strength from her. Taking comfort, and giving it back.

A man and a woman, both in limbo.

The events of the past two days had left Lily gutted. Her

mother ... The vicar.... Losing her job. The judgement of the town.

The Ellis women.

She held to comfort, but he was holding her as well and she needed it.

Jessie's death. The trauma of finding what her mother had done, planned to do. Forty-eight hours with little sleep.

If she could give comfort ...

If this was what they both needed ...

He shouldn't be here. He shouldn't be holding this woman.

But he wasn't thinking of now. He was thinking of Jessie, four years old and red-headed.

The past was back with him. Four years ago, walking into their apartment after surgery that had lasted for fourteen hours. Exhausted but jubilant. Calling out to Hannah. 'I'm home. It's over and she'll live. Hannah ...'

Walking into the bedroom

Ectopic pregnancy, the autopsy said. Fourteen weeks pregnant.

By her side, a letter to her mother in Canada.

'Tonight I'm finally telling Luke I'm pregnant. I've been waiting and waiting—I thought a lovely romantic dinner, but there's no chance. He's been so busy it's driving me crazy but now he'll have to make time for us. I want a son. I'm hoping he'll be red-headed like me. I want to call him Jessie.'

Tonight, four years later, he hadn't been able to save a red-

headed boy called Jessie.

The woman in his arms was holding him. She smelled clean, washed, anonymous, clinical.

But more. The scent of faded roses was drifting through, like some afterthought of a lovely perfume. The silken threads of her fair hair were brushing his face.

She was an agency nurse. She didn't know him.

She was warm and real and alive.

He'd come in here to sit, to try and come to terms with what had happened. He had two hours before his morning list started. He needed to get himself under control

Jessie.

Hannah.

They were nothing to do with the woman who was holding him.

She shuddered and he thought, She's as shocked as I am. He tugged away a little and searched her face.

Her sky-blue eyes were rimmed with shadows. Her shock mirrored his. She looked like she, too, was in the midst of a nightmare.

'Lily ...' It was the first time he'd used her name and it felt like ... a question?

'Don't,' she said. 'Just hold me. Please.' And she tugged him back to her.

He should back away.

He didn't. He couldn't. He simply held. And held and held.

A man and a woman—with a need surfacing between them as primeval as time itself.

Stupid. Crazy. Wanton?

It didn't matter. It couldn't matter.

His hands were slipping under her blouse, feeling the warmth of her, the heat. He needed her heat.

Her breasts were moulding to his chest. Skin was meeting skin, and conscious will was slipping. Their bodies were meeting, in a desperate, primitive search for ...

What?

For life?

That was a crazy idea. He was crazy.

It didn't matter.

For now, for this moment, he was kissing her, holding her, wanting her, with a desperation that was so deep, so real that nothing could interfere.

They were only kissing. They were only holding. They were only touching.

No. This was much, much more. This was a man and a woman come together in mutual need, giving, taking ...

Holding desperately to life.

'Luke ...'

'Just hold me,' he ordered, and she did, she did. She held.

Fire to fire. Need to need.

They held—and two minutes later a junior nurse looking for something to read in her coffee break slipped into the room and

saw two entwined bodies.

One passionate embrace.

The girl stared, dumbfounded, as she realised who it was. The solitary Luke Williams. Head of Plastic Surgery. A man who walked alone.

Kissing an agency nurse. Slipping his hands under her blouse.

And, oh, that kiss ...

She gasped in disbelief and backed out, her magazine forgotten.

Who needed magazines when there was much better fodder right through the door? Boy, was this juicy titbit about to fly around the hospital.

CHAPTER THREE

LILY had signed up for four weeks at Sydney Harbour. That was approximately three weeks and six days too long. She knew it the moment she turned up for duty that night. Gossip reached her the moment she crossed the threshold.

From the lady in the florist shop on the ground floor, to the orderlies, to the nurses and interns working in Emergency where she'd been rostered, it seemed they all knew what had happened that morning.

They didn't know her—many of them hadn't even been working last night—but they knew Luke Williams and it seemed the gossip machine was in overdrive.

A mutual offering of comfort had turned to something stronger, and the hospital gossip machine had flamed the story to the next level. Even before she'd walked out this morning she'd realised the news was flying all over the hospital—that she and Luke Williams had indulged in wild sex in the on-call room.

It had taken sheer willpower to walk back into the Harbour tonight—plus the fact that, thanks to her mother, she was broke. She'd agreed to four weeks and if she didn't fulfil her contract she'd have to find another agency. This was the only agency that dealt with acute-care hospitals and she didn't have the money to leave Sydney.

The alternative was to go back home to her mother. And the

vicar.

No way.

So get over it, she told herself. She'd been caught in a clinch with the head of plastic surgery. So what? Who cared what these people talked about? In four weeks she could pick up her pay and move on.

How far did she have to run to escape gossip?

For ever if she brought it with her, she told herself, keeping her chin deliberately high. What had she been thinking, letting Luke hold her as he had? She was just like her mother.

Um ... no. Her mother would never do what she'd done. Her mother would now be declaring to the world that she was in love, and she'd be destroying anything and anyone she needed in order to get what she wanted. Her mother would get her heart broken and launch herself into suicidal depression when it was over.

Lily had simply made one mistake. She'd been emotionally shattered and she'd fallen into the arms of someone who was equally shattered.

There was no need for everyone to look at her sideways.

They did anyway.

'Wow.' Elaine, a woman who'd looked intimidating and severe last night, relaxed enough to greet her with laughter as she appeared at the nurses' station. 'Who's on your list tonight?' Then at Lily's expression her smile softened; becoming friendly. 'Don't look like that. Lots of women in this place would offer to comfort Luke Williams any way they know how. That man is a walking

suit of armour. I don't know how you managed it but his armour was well and truly pierced last night, and thank heaven for it. Maybe now he can move on.'

'Move on?'

'You didn't know?' Obviously things were quiet right now, because the senior nurse was ready to talk. 'Luke's wife died four years ago. She was gorgeous, a redhead with a temper to match. She had an ectopic pregnancy, went into septic shock and died, and Luke didn't even know she was pregnant. Since then it's been like he's built the Great Wall of China around himself. No one gets near. And then you did.'

'I don't usually ...' she managed.

'Nobody gives a toss what you usually do,' Elaine said. 'The fact is that our mighty Dr Williams has been shagged by an agency nurse.'

I did not ...'

'It doesn't matter whether you did or didn't,' Elaine said bluntly. 'Gossip is truth as far as this hospital is concerned, and we're delighted. Let him try and keep his armour after this. A girl with accommodating morals was just what he needed. Now ... we've just got word there's been a boat crash on the harbour, two guys with suspected spinal injuries and a girl with deep facial lacerations expected any minute. I suspect we'll want you in Theatre again. Scrub?'

'I ... Yes.' At least this was a vote of confidence. She'd expected to be treated like a pariah. Here she was being handed

a position of responsibility.

‘You did great last night,’ Elaine said. ‘In more ways than one. But hands off the rest of our male staff, at least until you’re off duty. You’ve done us a favour with our Luke, but let’s not push things too far.’

And that was that.

A girl with accommodating morals ... Everyone was looking at her.

Aaagh.

He’d come close to having sex with an unknown nurse in the on-call room. It was like being a member of the mile-high club, he thought. Sordid and stupid.

Only it hadn’t felt like that at the time.

But that’s how his colleagues were treating it, as a huge joke. Medics had black humour at the best of times. Jessie’s death last night had upset them all and Luke’s out-of-character behaviour was a welcome diversion.

Even Finn commented. ‘About time,’ he growled. ‘Now take her out properly and do it again.’

Huh? He didn’t date. Ever.

He wasn’t starting now.

What had happened? He’d been gutted by the events of the night; he’d found himself in the on-call room simply because he hadn’t had the strength to get back to his apartment without getting some sort of grip on himself, and she’d been there.

He’d lost himself in holding her. She’d felt ...

Amazing. Just amazing. From a night where all he could see was black, he'd been lifted into a world of warmth, and strength and laughter. Yes, even laughter. She'd made a gentle joke as the world intruded, she hadn't let him apologise, she'd slipped away and he'd thought he might not even see her again.

What would have happened if they hadn't been interrupted? He should feel grateful that they had been—they'd both been well out of control. Instead, strangely, he felt an empty regret. And worry for her. The gossip machine in this hospital was ruthless.

When he'd finished his day's list he'd gone back to the agency sheet, checked for her address and found a simple 'To be advised'. So he couldn't find her even if he wanted to. She was an agency nurse. She might not even turn up tonight.

She did.

Evie called him at dusk.

'Your lady's back. She's contracted to us for four weeks. Are you popping into Emergency tonight by any chance?'

Evie was laughing.

'I might,' he conceded.

'To introduce yourself?' Evie was definitely laughing.

'What makes you think I don't know her?' he growled before he could stop himself.

'You know her? I thought this was lust at first sight.'

'Leave it alone,' he told her. 'I'm coming in.'

'The lady's busy,' Evie said. 'We're run off our feet. She goes off duty at six; you can come and take her home.'

They met before that. The woman with lacerations needed someone with real skill if she wasn't to be scarred for life. Once again he found himself in Theatre, with Lily as second scrub.

This wasn't a life-and-death situation. Becky Martin would survive with barely a scar from her drunken joy ride in a powerboat, and the mood in the theatre was a far cry from last night's trauma.

But it was also a far cry from the usual relaxed theatre. Everyone was watching Luke—and Lily. One glance between them and it'd start again.

No. They didn't even have to glance for the gossip to keep going, Luke thought. This hospital used gossip as a means to dispel tension, and what they'd done last night had started a wildfire that only time would extinguish.

Or Lily leaving.

She might. She looked strained and flushed.

She was working with professional competence, anticipating well, displaying skills he valued. Even so, he wasn't sure he wanted her here. He didn't like his staff distracted and they were distracted by her.

That wasn't fair, he thought grimly. She was being judged because she'd tried to comfort him.

His colleagues thought his actions were amusing. They saw her as ... easy.

That was a harsh judgement by any standards.

He put in the last suture, stood back from the table and sighed.

‘Well done, Luke,’ his anaesthetist said. ‘Great job. You deserve a wee rest. I hear the on-call room’s free. Nurse Ellis, maybe you’re free, too?’

‘Leave it,’ he growled, and watched in concern as Lily started to clear.

The junior nurse was sniggering.

He needed to talk to her, he thought. He needed to apologise.

Not in the on-call room.

He was due to sleep. Lily was on duty all night. He’d come in at change-over, he decided. He’d see her then.

Not in the on-call room.

Luke disappeared and she could get on with her night’s work. Which was just as well. The guy was distracting, to say the least, and the staff reaction was well nigh unbearable. With him gone she could lose herself in what needed to be done.

She felt mortified. She was also feeling ... ill? Her stomach cramps were getting worse, and now there was nausea on top of them.

She’d left Lighthouse Cove to get rid of the tension that was making her sick. In two days here, she’d only created more tension.

‘You’re looking pale,’ Elaine said in passing. ‘You’d better not be coming down with gastro. Half this hospital’s had it, but I thought we were past the worst. Are you feeling okay?’

‘I’m just tired,’ Lily said. ‘I’ve had a hard ...’ She caught Elaine’s gaze and stopped. ‘I mean ...’

‘No, no, I understand,’ Elaine said, grinning. ‘You and Luke ... I’d imagine he can be very tiring. But according to Dr Blain, who heard it from Dr Lockheart, word is you already know him. Is that right? Why did you make me tell you about him if you’re old friends?’

‘I—’

‘I know he keeps to himself, but if he pairs up with someone who does the same thing we’re in real trouble,’ Elaine said. ‘Apparently he’s coming to take you home at six. If you make it that long.’ Her eyes narrowed. ‘You’re looking sick as a dog. Tell you what, you stick round the nurses’ station until handover and finish the paperwork there. If you’re coming down with gastro, we don’t want you near patients.’

‘I’m just tired—and I don’t need anyone to take me home.’

‘It’s not anyone, it’s Luke Williams. Paperwork for you, my girl, and then let your lover take you home to bed.’

Lily had felt bad before. She tackled her paperwork feeling infinitely worse.

Luke found her in the locker room, preparing to leave.

He could have gone the whole four weeks of her contract without seeing her again, he thought. With the gastro outbreak almost over, staff levels were nearly back to normal. He could easily arrange for her not to be rostered to Theatre with him.

He could pretend the encounter had never happened.

Finn used women to forget, Luke thought. Maybe he could, too.

Only ... there was something about Lily that made him think it hadn't been a casual embrace. That her need had been almost as great as his.

A lesser man wouldn't need to ask why, but for some reason this didn't feel like a simple matter of honour. It was how she'd made him feel. It had been the generosity of her body, the smile behind her eyes, the touch of her ...

He'd remember it, he thought, and he honoured her for it.

And she was being labelled because of it. The least he could do was thank her and apologise.

He opened the locker-room door and she turned to face him. She looked white faced. A bit unsteady on her feet. Wobbling?

He crossed the room in four long strides to reach her. Gripped her shoulders. Steadied her.

'Hey ...'

'It's ... it's okay,' she said, and hauled away to plonk herself down on the wooden bench. 'I'm just having a queasy moment.'

'You're not pregnant, are you?'

She gave him a look that would have withered lesser men. It was the look he deserved.

What had made him say that? Of all the ridiculous ...

'We didn't make it that far, Superman,' she retorted. 'You don't get pregnant by kissing, no matter how hot you think you are.'

'I'm sorry,' he said, with feeling. 'That was dumb. Plus offensive. But you're ill.'

'I suspect,' she said with as much dignity as she could muster,

‘that I’m coming down with this blasted gastroenteritis that half this hospital seems to have suffered. You should have a huge skull and crossbones on the entrance with a sign saying “Abandon hope all ye who enter here”.’

‘Or abandon the contents of your stomach.’

‘Don’t,’ she begged. ‘Go away.’

‘Let me take you home.’

She glared. ‘Tell me you don’t have a car with leather upholstery and I might be interested.’

‘I do,’ he admitted. ‘But we can go via Emergency and get a supply of sick bags. I had it last week so I won’t get infected.’

‘You might have infected me.’

‘Then that’d be yet another thing I need to apologise for,’ he said grimly, and took her elbows, propelling her up. ‘We’ll organise you a shot of metoclopramide for the nausea. Then we’ll take some paper bags and take you home and to bed.’

‘No.’

‘No?’

‘I mean, yes, please,’ she said with as much dignity as she could muster. ‘Only I need to spend ten minutes in the bathroom first.’

They didn’t speak on the way to the address she’d given him. She didn’t lose her dignity, but he could see she was holding onto it with every shred of effort she could muster. One shot of metoclopramide was barely holding it.

She wasn’t what she’d seemed. Questions were crowding in, but his medical training told him that breaking her concentration

would be unwise. So he focused on driving, found the address, pulled up in front of a boarding house that looked as if it had seen better days and watched in astonishment as she struggled out of the car.

‘You don’t live here?’

‘No,’ she said, closing the car door with care, as if it was a really tricky task. ‘I’m staying here. Thank you for bringing me home.’ And she headed for the gate.

He was out of the car, through the gate, stopping her.

‘Don’t stop me,’ she pleaded. ‘I need ...’

‘I know this place,’ he said. ‘When I was an intern we averaged one drug overdose a week from this dump.’

She was trying to shove past him, looking increasingly desperate. ‘It’s only until payday. It has a bathroom. Please ...’

She was nothing to do with him, he told himself. This was none of his business. He’d brought her home. He’d done what he had to do.

But ... she’d held him. She’d stopped his grief from stripping him raw.

She’d lightened his life.

That had to be an overstatement, he told himself. One crazy impulse did not mean emotional change. She’d simply been there when he’d needed her, had responded to his need, had maybe used him to assuage her own needs.

Her own needs were pretty apparent now. She’d broken from him and was doubled over behind a scrubby hedge. The garden

was filthy.

Questions.

She was a skilled theatre nurse from a town he remembered as being quiet and beautiful.

His colleagues had her labelled as wanton.

She'd held him.

Whatever she was, he couldn't leave her here.

She was crouched, trembling, in the filthy garden, sweaty and sick, and he knew he had no choice.

He waited for the spasms to cease. Then, giving her no chance to argue, he stooped and lifted her into his arms and carried her back to his car. He deposited her back into the passenger seat before she knew what he was doing.

'What's your room number?' he demanded.

'T-twelve.' She could barely speak. 'But—'

'Give me your key.'

'I don't ...'

He took her purse from her limp grasp and retrieved the key.

'Don't argue and don't move,' he said, and headed for the house.

She didn't go anywhere. How could she? That last episode had left her wanting to do nothing so much as to lie down and die. Her bed in the boarding house was lumpy and none too clean, but it was a bed and right now she wanted it more than anything else in the world. Only her legs didn't feel like they'd take her anywhere.

After the week she'd had, it needed only this. Of all the stupid hospitals she had to temp in, it had to be Sydney Harbour Hospital during a gastro epidemic.

She wanted to die.

Why was she sitting in Luke's car?

It was too hard to do anything else.

She closed her eyes and he was back again, carrying her suitcase. That got through ... sort of. 'What ...?' She was trying to get her thoughts in order. She wasn't succeeding.

'You're not staying here,' Luke said grimly. 'This place is drug bust central.' Then his face sort of ... changed. He slid into the driver's seat and pushed up her uniform sleeves.

She got that. No matter that she was dying ... *he thought she was a crackhead?*

Enough. There were some things up with which a girl did not put. Or something. She wasn't making sense even to herself, but as he tried to check her pupils she found the strength to haul back her hand and slap him. Straight across his cheek with all the strength she could muster. Which wasn't actually very much. He recoiled but not far, then caught her hands in his before she could do it again.

'Just checking,' he said, mildly.

'I drink champagne every time I get a pay rise,' she managed through gritted teeth. 'I'm addicted to romance novels and chocolate. I once got a speeding ticket and a parking fine all in the one month. Evil doesn't begin to describe me—*but I don't do*

drugs. She tried, very badly, not to sob, as she hauled her hands away from his and fumbled for the door catch.

‘No.’ He leaned over and tugged the door closed, took her shoulders and twisted her to face him. ‘I’m sorry.’

‘Me, too. Let me out.’

‘I’m taking you home.’

‘I am home.’

‘My home.’

‘You don’t want a junkie at home.’

‘You’re not a junkie,’ he said wearily. ‘I’ve seen enough to know I’ve mortally offended you. Can I start making amends?’

‘There’s no need ...’ But her stomach wasn’t up to arguing. Another cramp hit and she doubled over.

He handed her a paper bag but she didn’t need it. There was nothing left.

He waited for the spasms to cease, then magically produced moist wipes. ‘Paper bags and wipes from Emergency,’ he said softly as he cupped her chin in one hand and washed her face. She was so limp she couldn’t argue. ‘You get parking tickets. I steal wipes. Criminals both. You want to do a Thelma and Louise and run for the border?’

‘I ... No.’

‘Thought not,’ he said, and fastened her seat belt for her. ‘Let’s find you an alternative.’

His surgical list started at eight and he made it only fifteen minutes late. This morning was his private list, cosmetic surgery.

The woman he was treating had travelled overseas to get cheek implants, a reshaped nose and liposuction for her thighs. She'd got what she'd paid for and she hadn't paid much. She'd ended up with a perforation of the nasal septum, a nasal obstruction and nasal deformity. One of her cheek implants had slipped, which meant her face was weirdly lopsided and her thighs were ... undulating. She had lumps and bumps all over the place.

He wasn't working on her legs this morning. He'd remove the cheek implants first—he wasn't the least sure of their quality and the last thing she needed was one to burst. Then he needed to focus on revision rhinoplasty and repair of the septal perforation.

She'd need further procedures and he couldn't be sure she'd look as good as she had when she'd started.

Cosmetic surgery could sometimes be brilliant, restoring self-image, but this time it had been a disaster.

The surgery he'd had as a child had been brilliant.

Luke's childhood had been made miserable by a massive port wine birthmark almost covering one side of his face. His parents, cold and emotionally detached, had decreed it was simply 'character building', but when he'd been fourteen his uncle had stepped in.

'I've arranged the best plastic surgeon I can afford,' he'd told his father. 'The kid's getting that off his face whether you like it or not.'

His uncle was a bachelor, taciturn, unsentimental, refusing thanks. He and the plastic surgeon he'd found had changed

Luke's life and had set him on the path he was on now.

His uncle's farm had been lifesaving as well. It still was. Even though his uncle was as emotionally distant as the rest of his family, his farm had been a retreat from the world.

He hadn't been to the farm for two weeks now and he was missing it. Maybe he could take off for a few days. Leave his apartment to Lily. Whoever Lily was.

Not a junkie. An unanswered question.

Don't get close.

'So tell me about your lady of the night.' Finn's voice from the doorway to his office made him start. Dammit, he should be used to it. He wasn't. 'My what?'

'Your one-night stand. Or your one-morning stand. You planning to make it two mornings?'

'Leave it,' he growled. He thought of Lily as he'd left her, huddled in his bed, so sick she could hardly acknowledge he was leaving. He'd stayed with her for an hour and made sure the retching had stopped. He'd left her with fluids, and he knew all she needed was sleep, but still he'd hated leaving her.

And somehow ... for some reason he hated this hospital thinking she was ... his one-night stand.

Sydney Harbour Hospital. It should read Sydney Scandal Central, he thought. Any hint of gossip was through the place in minutes. A team of skilled medics working long hours under intense pressure, in teams where they were thrown together in emotionally charged scenarios over and over, made for a hotbed

of scandal. Up until now he hadn't added to it.

It drove him crazy, though, the fact that he was being watched all the time. 'When's our aloof Dr Williams going to crack and prove he's human?'

He was aware he was a target; he was aware there were bets—first woman to break his icy barricade. Even a couple of the gay guys had tried.

The gossips would be relentless now, he thought. A one-night stand ... They wouldn't stop.

And Lily? She'd signed up for four weeks' work and she was labelled from this moment forth.

She was in his bed. They'd find that out in about two seconds flat. Other medics lived in his apartment block, Kirribilli Views. Hell, his cleaning lady was due in there this afternoon. By the time she'd finished dusting, the news would be all over Sydney.

'She's not a one-night stand,' he found himself saying, before he even knew he intended saying it. 'I already told Dr Lockheart that. I've known Lily for years.'

'Years?' Finn raised his brows in disbelief. Finn Kennedy made stronger doctors than Luke nervous, Luke thought. The man just had to raise one of those supercilious eyebrows and minions were supposed to quake.

But Luke was still thinking of Lily retching. This was no time for quaking. Or for disbelief.

'Why do you think she's here?' he demanded. 'We wanted to see if we could make a go of it.'

‘You were checking her records.’

‘I was making sure they’d got her address right. We used a boarding-house address as cover, intending to keep our relationship private a bit longer.’

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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