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Marion Lennox
A Doctor's Redemption



Marion Lennox

**Gold Coast Angels: A
Doctor's Redemption**

«HarperCollins»

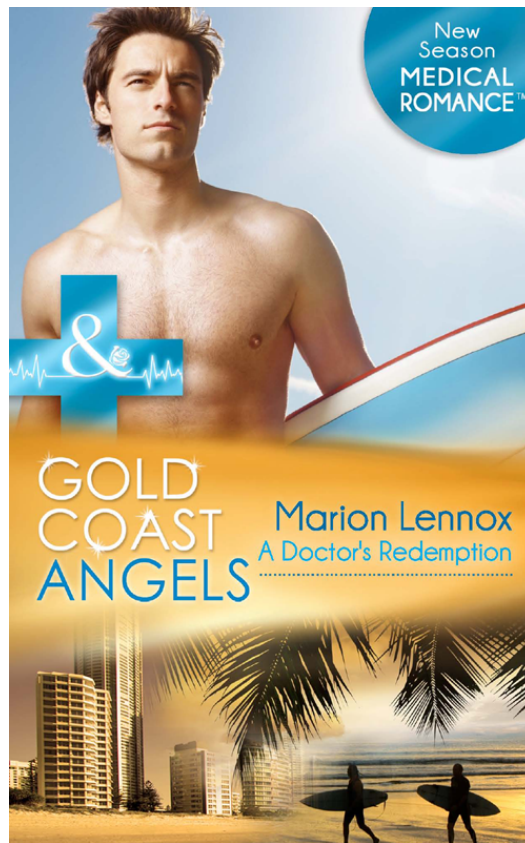
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«HarperCollins»,

Sam Webster lives for three things: his little heart patients, his dog and surfing. Out on the waves this gorgeous lone wolf finds the solace he craves. Until he's interrupted by bubbly new nurse Zoe, who asks him to teach her to surf. Her request is Sam's worst nightmare – but Zoe's lust for life is infectious and tempting...

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Praise

‘Marion Lennox’s RESCUE AT CRADLE LAKE is simply magical, eliciting laughter and tears in equal measure. A keeper.’

—RT *Book Reviews*

‘Best of 2010: A very rewarding read. The characters are believable, the setting is real, and the writing is terrific.’

—Dear *Author* on CHRISTMAS WITH HER BOSS

Dear Reader

It’s autumn as I write this, and the weather’s closing in on Southern Australia where I live, so right now I’m packing my togs and thongs (that’s Aussie-speak for bathing costume and flip-flops) and heading for an extension to my summer. I’m flying up to the Australian Gold Coast. Why not? In Southern Queensland it’s almost perennially summer, the beaches are superb, the surf’s excellent—and there are lots of places that sell drinks with little umbrellas!

I’m sure the characters in Gold Coast City Hospital didn’t have drinks with umbrellas in mind when they applied to work in the hospital we’ve set our stories in. Surely not! Our *Gold Coast Angels* are a dedicated team of young medics, whose every thought must be tuned to the medicine they live and breathe. But we’ve nobly allowed them some down time. We’ve thrown in a little surf, plus a touch of intrigue and drama, and we’ve definitely included romance. A *lot* of romance.

Your four dedicated Aussie authors have thus had a wonderful time playing on the Gold Coast, researching everything we needed to bring you four fantastic romances. But I’ve been away for too long, writing and not sun-soaking. Now there’s a sun lounger with my name on it waiting up north. I can hear it calling. I can hear the surf calling. The Gold Coast’s a wonderful place for lying on the sand and reading romance. Maybe I’ll meet you there. I’ll be the one with the umbrella.

Happy reading!

Marion Lennox

MARION LENNOX is a country girl, born on an Australian dairy farm. She moved on—mostly because the cows just weren’t interested in her stories! Married to a ‘very special doctor’, Marion writes Medical Romances™, as well as Mills & Boon® Romances. (She used a different name for each category for a while—if you’re looking for her past Romances search for author Trisha David as well.) She’s now had well over 90 novels accepted for publication.

In her non-writing life Marion cares for kids, cats, dogs, chooks and goldfish. She travels, she fights her rampant garden (she’s losing) and her house dust (she’s lost). Having spun in circles for the first part of her life, she’s now stepped back from her ‘other’ career, which was teaching statistics at her local university. Finally she’s reprioritised her life, figured out what’s important, and discovered the joys of deep baths, romance and chocolate. Preferably all at the same time!

**Gold Coast Angels:
A Doctor's Redemption
Marion Lennox**



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CHAPTER ONE

WHY DID ACCIDENTS seem to happen in slow motion?

There seemed all the time in the world to yell a warning, to run down the beach and haul the dog out of harm's way, to get the fool driving the beach buggy to change direction, but in reality Zoe Payne had time for nothing.

She'd been sitting admiring the sunset at the spectacular surf beach five minutes' drive from Gold Coast City Hospital. A tangerine hue tinged the white crests of the breaking waves, the warm sea air filled her senses and the scene was breathtakingly lovely.

She'd also been admiring a lone surfer, far out in the waves.

He was good. Very good. The surfable waves were few and far apart, but he had all the patience in the world. He waited for just the right wave, positioned himself before the rising swell with casual ease, then rode seamlessly in before the breaking line of white water.

The scene was poetry in motion, she'd decided, and the surfer wasn't bad either. When the wave brought him close to the shore she saw him up close. He was tall, sun-bleached, ripped, and the way he surfed said he was almost a part of the sea.

But she'd also been watching a dog. The dog was lying partly concealed among the dunes, closer to the shore than the place she sat. She wouldn't have known he was there, but every time the surfer neared the shore the big brown Labrador leaped from its hiding place and surged into the shallows. The surfer came in the extra distance to greet the dog, they exchanged exuberant man-dog hugs, and then the surfer returned to the sea and the dog to its hiding place.

She'd been thinking she'd kind of like to go and talk to the dog. This was her first week at Gold Coast City and she was feeling a bit homesick, but there was something about man and dog that said these two were a team that walked alone.

Only now they weren't alone. Now a beach buggy was screaming down from the road above.

There was no way a beach buggy should be on this beach. There were signs everywhere—protected beach, no bikes, no horses, no cars.

And this wasn't a local fisherman driving quietly down for an evening's fishing. This was a hoon driver, gunning his hired beach buggy—she could see the rental signs—for all he was worth.

He hit the dunes and the buggy became almost airborne.

The dog...

She was on her feet, yelling, running, but her feet wouldn't move fast enough, her voice wouldn't yell loud enough.

Oh, dear God, no!

For the buggy had hit the dune in front of the dog and hurled right over. It crashed down, hit the next dune, was gunned to further power and roared off along the beach, leaving whatever had happened behind it.

One minute Sam Webster was paddling idly on his board, waiting for the next wave. He was about to call it a day. Surfing after dark was dumb. He knew the risks of night-feeding marine life, and risk-taking was for fools. Besides, the waves were growing fewer, and the current was taking him out. If he couldn't catch a wave soon, he was faced with a ten-minute paddle to get back to shore.

It was time to head back to the beach, take Bonnie home and head for bed.

To sleep? Possibly not. Sam Webster didn't do much sleeping any more, but hard surfing morning and night helped. His job at the hospital was high-powered and demanding. He crammed his days to the point of exhaustion, but still sleep was elusive. Nights weren't his friend.

But Bonnie needed to be home. Where was a wave when you wanted one?

And then...

He heard the beach buggy before he saw it, roaring along the beach road, and then, unbelievably, veering hard across the dunes onto the beach.

The dunes...

'Bonnie!'

He was yelling now, paddling and yelling at the same time, but the tide was turning and he wasn't making headway.

Where was a wave? *Where was a wave?*

The buggy was freewheeling along the beach.

Bonnie!

And then the buggy hit the dune where Bonnie lay.

His eyes were locked on the hollow where Bonnie had dug herself a cool spot to lie. He was willing her to emerge. Willing her to show herself.

Nothing.

A figure was running from the grassy verge above the beach. A woman. He wasn't interested. All he was interested in was Bonnie.

Where was a wave?

For one appalling moment she thought it was dead. The great, chocolate-brown Labrador was lying sprawled on the sand, a pool of blood spreading ominously fast.

She was down on her knees.

'Hey,' she said. 'Hey.' She spoke softly. The last thing she wanted was to terrify the dog even more. The eyes that looked up at her were great pools of fear, shock and pain.

But not aggression. Fear, shock and pain sometimes made even the most placid animals vicious, but Zoe knew instinctively that this dog wouldn't snap.

She was beyond it?

Maybe.

The buggy looked as if it had landed on her hind quarters. Her head, chest and front legs looked relatively unscathed, but her left hind leg...Not unscathed.

There was a gash running almost its length.

So much blood...

She hauled off her shirt, ripping it, bundling part of it into a pad and using the rest to tie the pad so she got maximum pressure, talking to the dog as she did.

'Sorry, girl, I don't want to hurt you, but I need to stop the bleeding.'

Even if she stopped it...The blood on the sand...

She had to get this dog to help. She'd seen patients go into cardiac arrest through blood loss, and this dog was losing so much...

She glanced out to sea. The surfer was frantically paddling, but he was far out and there were no waves behind him.

It'd take him maybe five minutes to reach the beach—and this dog didn't have five minutes.

She'd slowed the blood flow. She hadn't stopped it.

There was a vet's surgery near the hospital. She'd seen it the day she'd arrived, when she'd been making her first exploratory forays, searching for a supermarket. It had a sign on it, 'All Hours, Emergency'.

That's what this was, she thought as she ripped and tied her shirt. Total emergency.

Her car was right by the beach. Could she lift the dog?

She glanced again out at the surfer. He was surely the dog's owner. She should wait.

And give him a dead dog?

There was no choice. She scrawled one word in the sand. She lifted the big dog into her arms, staggering with the weight, and then, despite its weight, she found the strength to run.

It was the longest paddle of Sam's life.

The long, low waves that had been giving him such pleasure all evening had disappeared. The sea looked millpond-smooth but the tide was surging and the current was almost stronger than he could paddle against.

In a normal situation he'd let the current take him along the beach, travelling sideways to the tidal tug and gradually reaching the beach without this fight. But this wasn't a normal situation.

Bonnie.

Emily's dog.

He remembered the day Emily had brought her home. 'Look, Sammy, isn't she adorable? She was in the pet-shop window and I couldn't go past her.'

They had been medical students and dirt poor, living in a one-room university apartment. Having a dog had meant moving house, taking on more rent than they could afford and juggling impossible study hours into caring for an active dog, but Em hadn't thought of that.

She'd seen a puppy and she'd bought it. She hadn't thought of consequences.

Which was why Emily was dead, and all he had left of her was her dog, *his dog*, and his dog had disappeared, carried by a stranger up over the sand dunes to the road beyond and he couldn't see her any more and he was going out of his mind.

And finally, when he reached the beach, things weren't any better.

He dumped his board and ran, but what he found made him feel cold and sick. The hollow where Bonnie had lain was almost awash with blood.

So much blood...How could she survive blood loss like this?

Where was she?

He turned and saw three letters scrawled in the sand, rough, as if done with a foot.

'VET.'

Sensible. Dear God, sensible. But where? Where was the closest vet?

Staring at Bonnie's blood...It was so hard to think.

Think.

There was a vet's surgery near the hospital, the one he normally took Bonnie to. It was the closest. Surely whoever it was knew that.

He was heading up the beach, ripping his wetsuit off as he ran.

So much blood...It was impossible that she would survive.

She had to survive. Without Bonnie he had nothing left.

The veterinary hospital was open and amazingly, wonderfully, a vet came out to meet her. Maybe it was the way she'd spun into the entrance, burning rubber. Medics were clued in to hints like that, she decided, because by the time she was out of her car, a middle-aged guy wearing a clinical coat was there to help her.

'Road trauma,' she said, wasting no words, somehow shifting into medical mode. What she must look like...She'd ripped off her shirt to stop the blood flow. She was wearing a lacy bra and jeans and sandals and she was smeared with blood from the neck down—or even higher, but she wasn't looking. But the vet was looking. He took her arm and hauled her round so he could see her face on, before he even looked at the dog.

'Are you hurt?' he demanded, and she caught herself, realising he needed reassurance. Triage dictated humans before animals, even for a vet, so she needed to waste a few words.

'A buggy hit her on the beach,' she said. 'I saw it happen but, no, I'm not hurt. This is all her blood. She's not my dog—her owner's out surfing but I didn't have time to wait for him to get back in. She's bleeding out from the back leg.'

'Not now she's not,' the vet said, and he was already leaning into the car. He could see the tourniquet she'd fashioned with her shirt and he cast her a glance of approval. 'She's Bonnie,' he said, flipping the name tag on her collar. 'I know her—she's one of the local docs' dogs. Sam Webster. You're not medical yourself, are you?'

'I'm a nurse.'

'Great. I'm the only one here and I'll need help. You up for it?'

'Of course,' she said, but he hadn't waited for a response. He was already carrying the dog through the entrance to his surgery beyond.

CHAPTER TWO

HE'D COME TO the right place. As soon as he pulled into the entrance to the veterinary surgery he could guess Bonnie had been brought here.

An ancient car was parked across the emergency entrance. It looked battered and rusty, it had obviously seen far better days, and right now the back door was swinging wide and all he could see on the back seat was blood.

There were spatters of blood on the ramp. There were spatters of blood leading to the entrance. He felt sick.

He'd got rid of his wetsuit. He was wearing board shorts and nothing else, his feet were bare and so was his chest. He felt exposed, but the feeling was nothing to do with his lack of clothes.

Get a grip. You're a doctor, he told himself harshly. Let's treat this as a medical emergency.

At this time of night the vet surgery was deserted, apart from a cleaner attacking the floor with a look of disgust. He looked at Sam with even more disgust.

'Sand as well as blood. I've just cleaned this.'

'Where's my dog?'

'If you mean the half-dead Labrador the girl brought in, Doc's got her in Theatre.' He motioned to the swing doors at the end of Reception. 'Girl went in, too. You want to sit down and wait? Hey, you can't go in there. Wait...'

But Sam was gone, striding across the shiny wet floor, through the green baize doors and to what lay beyond.

He stopped as soon as the doors swung wide.

He might be an emotionally-distraught owner, he might be going out of his mind with worry, but Sam Webster was still a doctor. He was a cardiac surgeon, with additional training in paediatric cardiology. The theatres where he operated were so sterile that no bacteria would dare come within fifty feet, and he was trained enough so that barging into an operating theatre and heading straight for the dog on the table wasn't going to happen. So he stood at the door and took in the scene before him.

Bonnie was stretched out on the operating bench. There was already a drip set up in her front leg and a bag of saline hung above. The vet, Doug—he knew this guy, he was the vet who gave Bonnie his yearly shots—was filling a syringe.

There were paddles lying on the floor as if tossed aside.

Paddles.

He had it in one. Catastrophic blood loss. Heart failure.

But the vet was inserting the syringe, the girl at the head of the table was holding Bonnie's head and whispering to her and they wouldn't do that to a dead dog.

Doug glanced up and saw him. 'That'd be right,' he growled. 'Doctor arriving after the hard work's done. Isn't that right, Nurse?' He heard the tension in Doug's voice and he knew Bonnie wasn't out of the woods yet, but he also knew that this girl had got his dog here in time—or maybe not in time, but at least she stood a chance.

If she'd gone into cardiac arrest on the beach...

'How are you at anaesthetics?' Doug snapped, and he forced himself to focus on the question. Medical emergency. How many times had he had the rules drilled into him during training? Take the personal distress out of it until the crisis is over.

'I'm rusty but grounded,' he managed.

'Rusty but grounded is better than nothing. Humans, dogs, what's the difference? I'll give you the doses. I want her under and intubated and Zoe here doesn't have the skills. I've called for back-up but I can't get hold of my partner in time. You want to make yourself useful, scrub and help.'

‘What’s...what’s the situation?’ He was watching Bonnie, but he was also watching the girl—Zoe?—holding Bonnie still. They wouldn’t have had time to knock her out yet, he thought. They’d have been too busy saving her life.

The girl looked...stunning. She was smeared in blood, her chestnut-brown curls were plastered across her face, she was wearing a lace bra and jeans and not much else.

She still looked stunning.

‘Don’t talk,’ she said urgently. ‘Not until you’re scrubbed and can stay with her. She heard you then and she wants to get up.’

That hauled him back into medical mode. He nodded and moved to the sink, fast. He knew the last thing they needed was for Bonnie to struggle, even so much as raise her head.

‘It’s okay, girl, it’s okay.’ In the quiet he heard Zoe’s whisper. She wasn’t so much holding Bonnie down as caressing her down, her face inches from Bonnie’s, her hands folding the great, silky ears.

He had no doubt that this was the woman who’d saved his dog’s life. He’d seen her in the distance, picking Bonnie up and carrying her up the beach. From far out in the surf he hadn’t realised how slight she was. And the blood...If she’d walked into Gold Coast Central’s Emergency Department looking like that she’d have the whole department pushing Code Blue.

He glanced at the floor and saw the remains of her shirt, ripped and twisted into a pad and ties. That explained why she was only wearing a bra.

She’d done this for his dog?

Was she a vet nurse? If so, how lucky was he that she’d been on the beach?

Luck? He glanced again at Bonnie and thought he needed more.

Doug was injecting the anaesthetic. Sam dried, gloved, and took over the intubation. Zoe stood aside to give him room then moved seamlessly into assistance mode.

She was obviously a vet nurse, and a good one. She was watching Doug, anticipating his needs, often pre-empting his curt orders. Swift, sure and competent.

Doug was good, too. He’d met this guy before and thought he was a competent vet in a family vet practice. His work now said that he was more than competent to do whatever was needed.

They worked solidly. With fluid balance restored, Bonnie’s vital signs settled. Doug had all the equipment needed to do a thorough assessment and a full set of X-rays revealed more luck.

Her left hind leg was badly broken and so were a couple of ribs, but apart from the mass of lacerations that seemed the extent of the major damage.

Her blood pressure was steady, which meant major internal bleeding was unlikely. Amazingly, there seemed little more damage.

‘I can plate that leg,’ Doug said curtly. ‘It’s easier than trying to keep her off it for weeks. If you’ll assist...’

Of course he’d assist. Sam was almost starting to hope.

He thought of the buggy crashing down on Bonnie, and he thought this outcome was either luck or a miracle. Either way he was very thankful.

And that this girl had been there as well...

She hardly spoke. She looked white-faced and shocked but her competence was never in question. Doug was a man of few words. He worked and Sam worked with him, and the white-faced girl worked as well.

They needed the full team of three. With Bonnie anaesthetised and seemingly stable, Doug decided to work on to do whatever was necessary.

‘Otherwise I’ll be hauling a team in to do this tomorrow,’ Doug said. ‘That’s two doses of anaesthetic and with both of you here I don’t see why I need to do that.’

Zoe wasn’t asking questions. She must be desperate for a bath and a strong cup of tea with loads of sugar—or something stronger, he thought—but she didn’t falter. Sam hadn’t seen her before, but

he had only been at the Gold Coast for a year. He'd brought Bonnie to the vet twice in that time, for routine things. Two visits were hardly enough to know the staff.

He'd like to be able to tell her to go and have a wash, he thought, but she was needed. She'd scrubbed and gloved and was ignoring the fact that she was only in bra and jeans. She looked shocked and sick, but she was professional and capable.

And she still looked...stunning. It was the only word he could think of to describe her. A bit too thin. Huge eyes. A bit...frail?

Gorgeous.

What would she look like without the gore?

But he only had fragments of time to think about the woman beside him. Most of the time he forgot, too, that he was in board shorts and nothing else.

There was only Bonnie.

This was no simple break. Bonnie's leg would be plated for life.

Sam was no orthopaedic surgeon but he knew enough to be seriously impressed by Doug's skill. The fractured tibia was exposed and Doug took all the time he needed to remove free-floating fragments. He was encircling the remaining fragments with stainless steel, bending the plate to conform to the surface of the bone then drilling to fix bone screws. He checked and checked again, working towards maximum stability, examining placement of every bone fragment to ensure as much natural healing—bone melding to bone—as he could. Finally he started the long process of suturing the leg closed.

Which was just as well, Sam thought. Zoe looked close to the edge.

But they still needed her. She was doing the job of two nurses, assisting, preparing equipment, anticipating every need.

Bonnie was so lucky with her rescue team. The big dog lay under their hands and he thought he couldn't have asked for a more highly-skilled partnership.

He owed this girl so much. If there was back-up he'd stand her down now, but there was no one. She'd already done more than he could ever expect—and he was asking more.

But finally they were done. Doug stepped back from the table and wiped a sleeve over his forehead.

'I reckon she'll make it,' he said softly, and as he said it Sam saw Zoe's eyes close.

She was indeed done. She swayed and he moved instinctively to grab her—this wouldn't be the first time a nurse or doctor passed out after coping with a tense and bloody procedure. But then she had control of herself again, and was shaking him off and moving aside so Doug could remove the breathing tube.

'I...That's great,' she whispered. 'If it's okay with you, I might leave you to it.'

'Yeah, you look like a bomb site,' Doug said bluntly. 'Take her home, Sam, and then come back. Bonnie'll take a while to wake. I won't leave her and you can be back before she needs reassuring.'

'I have my car...' Zoe said.

'I've seen your car and I'm looking at you,' Doug said drily. 'You drive through town looking like that you'll have the entire Gold Coast police force thinking there's been an axe murder. Leave the keys here. I'll park it round the back and you can fetch it tomorrow. Where do you live?'

'The hospital apartments,' she said. 'They're only two blocks away. I can drive.'

'You tell me those legs aren't shaking,' Doug retorted. 'You've done a magnificent job, lass, but now you need help yourself. You have some great staff, Sam. You were damned lucky to have your colleague on the beach.'

'My colleague...?'

'You realise Bonnie arrested?' Doug went on. 'Heart stopped twice. With blood loss like that it's a wonder she made it. A miracle more like. If Zoe hadn't got her here... Well, if she cops a speeding fine for her trip here, I'm thinking you ought to pay it.'

'I'd pay for more,' Sam said, stunned—and confused. 'You're not a vet nurse?'

'I'm a nurse at Gold Coast City,' she managed. 'I'd rather go home by myself.'

A nurse. A human nurse. One of his *colleagues*?

'Take her home, Sam,' Doug told him. 'Now. Take a gown from the back room, Zoe, so you look less like a bomb victim, but go home now. You deserve a medal and if Sam doesn't give you one I'll give you one myself. Go.'

'I'll be giving her a medal,' Sam growled. 'I'll give her a truckload if she'll take it. What you've done...'

'It's okay,' Zoe managed. 'Enough with the medals. Doug's right, I just need to go home.'

She wanted to go home but she didn't want this man to take her.

She wanted, more than anything, to slide behind the wheel of her car, drive back to Gold Coast Central, sneak in the back way and find a bath and bed.

But there was no 'back way', no way to get back into the hospital without attracting attention, and Doug was right, she and her car were a mess.

Sam was taking her home?

He ushered her outside where his Jeep was parked next to her car and she thought...she thought...

This guy was a doctor? A colleague?

He was still only wearing board shorts. Unlike her, though, he didn't look gruesome. He looked like something from the cover of one of the myriad surfing magazines in the local shops.

The Gold Coast was surfing territory, and many surfers here lived for the waves. That's what this guy looked like. He was bronzed, lean, ripped, his brown hair bleached blond by sun and sea, his green eyes crinkled and creased from years of waiting for the perfect wave.

He was a doctor and a surfer.

Where did dog owner come into that?

He grabbed a T-shirt from the back seat of his Jeep and hauled it on. He looked almost normal, she thought, even after what had happened. His dog was fixed and he was ready to move on.

She glanced down at her oversized theatre gown and the bloodied jeans beneath them and something just...cracked.

For hours now she'd been clenching her emotions down while she'd got the job done. She looked at the mess that was her car, her independence, her freedom, she looked down at her disgusting jeans—and control finally broke.

'Let's go,' he said, but she shook her head.

'What were you thinking?' she managed, trying hard to keep her voice low, calm, incisive, clear. 'Leaving her waiting on the beach? Leaving her alone? To be so far out and leave her there... If I hadn't been there she'd be dead. You have a dog like Bonnie and you just desert her. Of all the stupid, crass, negligent, cruel...'

'Do You know how lucky you are to have a dog? Of course you don't. You're a doctor, you're a healthy, fit, surfer boy. You can buy any dog you want, so you just buy her and then you don't care that she loves you, so she lies there and waits and waits. I was watching her—and she adores you, and you abandoned her and it nearly killed her. If I hadn't been there it would have! She nearly died because you didn't care!'

So much for calm, incisive and clear. She was yelling at the top of her lungs, and he was standing there watching, just watching, and she wanted to hit him and she thought for one crazy moment that it'd be justifiable homicide and she could hear the judge say, 'He deserved everything that was coming to him.'

Only, of course, she couldn't hit him. Somehow she had to get herself under control. She hiccuped on a sob and that made her angrier still because she didn't cry, she never cried, and she knew she was being irrational, it was just...it was just...

The last few days had been crazy. She'd spent her whole life in one small community, closeted, cared for. The move here from Adelaide might seem small to some, but for Zoe it was the breaking of chains that had been with her since childhood.

It was the right thing to do, to move on, but, still, the new job, the new workplace, the constant calls from her parents—and from Dean, who still couldn't understand why she'd left—were undermining her determination and making her feel bleak with homesickness.

But she would not give in to Dean. 'You'll come to your senses, Zoe, I know you will. Have your fling but come home soon. All we want to do is look after you.'

Aaagh!

She did not want to go home. She did not want to be looked after.

But neither did she want to yell at this stranger or stand in a theatre gown covering a bra and jeans, looking disgusting and feeling tears well in her eyes and rage overwhelm her, and know that somehow she had to get back into the hospital apartments, past strangers. Plus she'd intended to buy milk on the way home and...and...

And she would do this.

She fumbled under her gown to fetch her car keys. She had to lift the thing but what the heck, this guy had seen her at her worst anyway. She grabbed her car keys from her jeans pocket but Sam lifted them from her hand before she could take a step towards the car.

'We go in my car,' he said in a voice that said he was talking her down, doctor approaching lunatic, and she took a step back at that.

'I'm not crazy. I might have yelled too much but you deserve it.'

'You think I don't know it? I love Bonnie,' he said. 'I deserve everything you throw at me and more, apart from the accusation that I could just buy another dog because I never could. I am deeply, deeply sorry for what happened. The fact that Bonnie has been watching me surf since she was a pup twelve years ago doesn't mean it's okay now. The fact that it's a secluded beach and the guys in the buggy were there illegally doesn't mean it's okay either. Years ago Bonnie would have watched the whole beach. Tonight she just watched me and she paid the price. Zoe, you're upset and you have every right to be but I can't let you go home alone.'

'You can't stop me. It's my car. Get out of the way.'

'Zoe, be sensible. Get in the car, there's a good girl...'

He sounded just like Dean—and she smacked him.

She'd never smacked a man in her life.

She'd never smacked anyone in her life. Or anything. Even in the worst of the bleak days, when the first transplant had failed, when she'd heard the doctors telling her parents to prepare for the worst, she'd hung in there, she'd stayed in control, she hadn't cried, she hadn't kicked the wall, she hadn't lashed out at anything.

Not because she hadn't wanted to but it had always seemed that if she did, if she let go of her relentless control, she'd never get it back. She'd drop into a black and terrifying chasm. She was far better gripping her nails into her palms until they bled and smiling at her parents and pretending she hadn't heard, that things were normal, that life was fine.

And here, now, the first week of her new life, standing in the dusk in a veterinary surgeon's car park, with a doctor from the hospital where she wanted to start her new life...

She'd hit him.

The chasm was there, and she was falling.

She stared at him in horror. The yelling had stopped. There was nothing left in her and she couldn't say a word.

His face stung where her hand had swiped him in an open-palmed slap. The sound of the slap seemed to echo in the still night.

She was staring at him like the hounds of hell were after her.

It didn't take a genius to know this woman didn't normally slap people. Neither did it take a genius to know she was on some sort of precipice. She was teetering on the edge of hysteria. She was hauling herself back, but she was terrified she wasn't going to make it.

What did you do with a woman who'd just slapped you? Walk away, reacting as he'd been taught all his life to react to people who were out of control?

Her eyes were huge in her white face. She was dressed in an oversized theatre gown and blood-splattered jeans and she looked like something out of a war zone.

And he could tell that there were things in this woman's life that lay behind even the appalling events of the last few hours.

She'd hit him and she was looking at him as if she'd shot him. In his private life he avoided emotional contact like the plague. But with this woman... What was it about her?

Walk away? No.

He took her hands in his and he tugged her forward. He folded her into his arms and held her, as he'd not held a woman for years.

She'd slapped him.

He didn't care. He just... held.

One minute she was out-of-control crazy. The next minute she was being hugged.

She was rigid with shock, but maybe rigid was too mild a word for it. She felt like she was frozen.

If she moved... But there was no if. She *couldn't* move. She didn't know who she would be if she moved. She would be some out-of-control creature who screamed and hit...

She had to apologise. She had to pull away and say she was sorry, but her body wouldn't obey. Tremors were starting, shudders that ran all through her. If she pulled away she'd have nothing to hold her. All she could do was let this man—this stranger—keep her close and stop her crumpling.

She was falling into him and he was holding her as she had to be held. She was moulding to him, feeling the warmth and strength of him, feeling the steadiness of his heartbeat, and it was as if in some way he was giving hers back.

She was delusional. Crazy. She needed to pull herself together, but not yet, not yet. For now she could only stand within his arms while the world somehow righted itself, restored itself to order, until she finally found the strength to pull away and face the consequences of what she'd done.

Sam specialised in paediatric cardiology. He treated children and babies with heart problems. In his working life he faced parents on the edge of control—or who had tipped over into an abyss of grief. He never got used to it. He'd learned techniques to keep control of his emotions. To express quiet sympathy, to offer hope when hope was possible, to listen when listening was all he had to give.

But he'd never felt like he did now.

This made no sense. Yes, his dog was hurt. Yes, it had been an appalling evening but if this woman was a trained nurse... For her to collapse like this...

For him to feel like this...

Why? What was it with this woman that was making his heart twist?

He held her and felt her take strength from him. He felt the rigidity ease, felt her slump against him, and he felt her quietly gather herself.

He should move her away but his rigid protection of personal space wasn't working right now. She was so vulnerable... and yet what she'd done, how she'd acted, had taken pure strength. There was no way he could let her down now, and when finally she found the strength to tug away he was aware of a sharp stab of loss.

She hadn't cried. She was still white-faced, but she was dry-eyed and drained.

She shoved her hands through her curls, tucking stray wisps behind her ears, and he felt an almost irresistible urge to help her. To fix a tiny curl that had escaped.

He wasn't an idiot. He'd been slapped once. It behoved a man to stay still and silent, and wait for her to make the first move.

'I...I'm sorry,' she managed at last.

'It's okay,' he told her, striving hard to lighten what was an unbelievably heavy situation. 'I was feeling guilty about Bonnie. Now I can feel virtuously aggrieved at being assaulted.'

'And I get the guilt instead?'

'Exactly,' he said, and tried a smile.

She didn't smile back. She looked up at him, and he thought, whatever had gone before, this woman wasn't one to crumple. There was strength there. Real strength.

'Hitting's never okay,' she said.

'You were swatting flies,' he said. 'And missed.'

She did smile then. It was the merest glimmer but it was still a smile and it made him feel...

Actually, he didn't know how it made him feel. Holding her, watching her...

Why was this woman touching him? Why did he look at her and want to know more?

It was Bonnie, he told himself. It was the emotions of almost losing his dog. That's all it was.

'Let me take you home,' he said carefully, and took a step back, as if she might swipe him again.

The smile appeared again, rueful but there.

'I'm safe,' she told him. 'Unarmed.' She tucked her arms carefully behind her back and he grinned.

'Excellent. Would you accept my very kind offer of a ride home?'

'I'll stain the Jeep.'

'I'm a surfer. I have a ton of towels.'

'I need milk,' she said.

And he thought excellent—practicalities, minutiae were the way to get back on an even keel.

'Because?'

'Because I've run out,' she said. She took a deep breath, steadying herself as she spoke, and he knew she knew minutiae were important.

She'd been in the abyss, too? There seemed such a core recognition, at a level he didn't recognise, that it was an almost physical link.

But she seemed oblivious to it. 'I'm on duty at six tomorrow morning,' she said. 'I have no milk. How can I have coffee with no milk? And how can I start work with no coffee?'

'I see your need,' he said gravely. 'And I'm trained for triage. Priority one, the lady needs milk. Priority two, the lady needs home, wash, sleep. I can cope with milk and home. Can you take it from there?'

It was the right thing to say. Setting limits. Giving her a plan. He'd used this with parents of his patients hovering at the edges of control, and it worked now.

There were no more arguments. She gave him another smile, albeit a weak one, and he led her to his car.

He climbed in beside her, but still he felt strange. Why?

Forget imagined links, he told himself. This was crazy. He didn't do emotional connection. He would not.

Get this night over with, he told himself. Buy the lady some milk and say goodnight.

He drove a great vehicle for surfing. It was no doctor's car, she thought as he threw a heap of towels on the front seat. The Jeep was battered, coated with sand and salt, and liberally sprinkled with Labrador hair. Any qualms she had about spoiling the beauty of one of the sleek, expensive sets of wheels she was used to seeing in most doctors' car parks went right out the window.

Sam wasn't your normal doctor.

He didn't look your normal doctor either. He was sand-and salt-stained as well, with his sun-bleached hair and crinkled eyes telling her that surfing was something he did all the time, as much a part of him as his medicine must be.

But he was a doctor, and a good one, she suspected. She'd seen his skill at stitching. She'd also heard the transition from personal to professional as he'd coped with her emotional outburst.

Though there'd been personal in there as well. There'd been raw emotion as he'd seen Bonnie—and there'd been something more than professional care as he'd held her.

Well, she'd saved his dog.

She was trying to get a handle on it. She was trying to fit the evening's events into the impersonal. Nurse saves doctor's dog, nurse angry at doctor for leaving dog on beach, nurse hits doctor, doctor hugs nurse.

It didn't quite fit.

'I'm normally quite sane,' she ventured as he pulled up outside a convenience store.

'Me, too.' He grinned. 'Mostly. What sort of milk?'

'White.'

His grin widened. 'What, no unpasteurised, low-fat, high-calcium, no permeate added...'

'Oi,' she said. 'White.'

He chuckled and went to buy it. She watched him go, lean, lithe, tanned, muscled legs, board shorts, T-shirt, salt-stiff hair—everything about him screaming surfer.

He was pin-up material, she thought suddenly. He was the type of guy whose picture she'd have pinned on her wall when she'd been fifteen.

She'd pinned these sorts of pictures all over her wall when she'd been a kid. Her parents had had a board they'd brought in to her various hospital wards to make her feel at home. She'd had pictures of surfing all over it. She would lie and watch the images of lean bodies catching perfect waves and dream...

But then Sam was back with her milk and she had to haul herself back to the here and now.

'My purse is in my car,' she said, suddenly horrified.

'I'll fix it,' he said. 'You'll get it back tonight.'

She knew he would. *I'll fix it.*

She actually didn't like it all that much. Other people fixing stuff for her...

She had to get a grip here. Getting her purse and paying for her milk were not enough to start a war over.

She subsided while he drove the short distance to the hospital apartment car park. The parking space he drove into indicated it belonged to 'Mr Sam Webster. Paediatric Cardiology'.

Mr. That meant he was a surgeon.

Paediatric cardiology. Clever.

She glanced across at him and tried to meld the two images together—the specialist surgeons she'd worked with before and the surfer guy beside her.

'I clean up okay,' he said, and it felt weird that he'd guessed her thoughts. 'I make it a rule never to wear board shorts when consulting. Hey, Callie!'

A woman was pulling in beside them—Dr Callie Richards, neonatal specialist. Zoe had met this woman during the week and was already seriously impressed. Callie was maybe five years older than Zoe but a world apart in medical experience. In life experience, too, Zoe had thought. She'd seemed smart, confident, kind—the sort of colleague you didn't want to meet when you were looking...like she was looking now. She'd also seemed aloof.

But Sam was greeting her warmly, calling her over.

'Callie, could you spare us a few minutes?' he called. 'We've had a bit of a traumatic time. Bonnie was hit by a car.'

'Bonnie!' Callie's face stilled in shock and Zoe realised she knew the dog. Maybe the whole hospital knew Bonnie, she decided, thinking back to those trusting Labrador eyes. Bonnie was the sort of dog who made friends.

'We think she'll be okay,' Sam said hurriedly, responding to the shock on Callie's face, 'but I need to get back to the vet's. This is Zoe...' He looked a query at Zoe. 'Zoe...'

'Payne,' Zoe said. She was on the opposite side of the Jeep from Sam and Callie, and knowing how she looked she was reluctant to move.

'I know Zoe,' Callie said, smiling at her. 'New this week? From Adelaide?'

That was impressive. One brief meeting in the wards, doctor and nurse, and Callie had it.

'Yeah, well, she's had a baptism by fire,' Sam said grimly. 'I was out in the surf when Bonnie was hit, and she saved her life. We've just spent two hours operating and Zoe rocks. But now she's covered in gore and she's got a bit of delayed shock. I don't want to leave her but I need—'

'To get back to Bonnie—of course you do.' And Callie moved into caretaker mode, just like that. 'Go, Sam, I'll take care of Zoe.'

'I don't need—'

'Let Sam go and then we'll discuss it,' Callie said, and Zoe hauled herself together—again—and gave a rueful smile. Sam handed Callie Zoe's milk, as Zoe climbed out of the Jeep. Then, he was gone.

Callie was brisk, efficient and not about to listen to quibbles. She ushered Zoe into the lift and when it stopped on the first floor to admit a couple of nurses she held up her hand to stop them coming in.

'Closed for cleaning,' she said, and grinned and motioned to Zoe. 'Or it should be. Catch the next lift, ladies.'

The lift closed smoothly and they were alone again.

When they reached the apartment Zoe realised her keys were in her purse. No problem—one phone call and Callie had the caretaker there, and he didn't ask questions either. There was something about Callie that precluded questions.

Or argument. Zoe gave up, let herself be steered into the bathroom, stood for ten minutes under a steaming shower and emerged in her bathrobe, gloriously clean. Two plates of toast and eggs were on her kitchen counter with two steaming mugs of tea, and Callie was sitting over them looking as if this was completely normal, like they were flatmates and it was Callie's turn to cook.

'I hope you don't mind,' she said. 'But I'm starving, and there's nothing in my apartment. I was going to ring for pizza but you have enough to share.'

Zoe smiled and slid into a chair and thought she should protest but she was all protested out.

And the toast smelled great. She hadn't realised she was hungry. They ate in what seemed companionable silence. Zoe cradled her tea, her world righted itself somehow and when finally Callie asked questions she was ready to answer.

'How's Bonnie?' she asked first, and Zoe thought she was right in her surmise that Bonnie was a beloved presence in this hospital.

'She has a fractured leg, now plated. Lots of lacerations and two broken ribs, but Doug—the vet—seems confident that she'll be okay.'

'Thank God for that,' Callie said. 'Half the hospital would break its collective heart if she died—not to mention our Sam. Those two are inseparable.'

'He left her on the beach,' Zoe said carefully, trying not to sound judgemental, 'while he surfed. She was hit by a dune buggy.'

Callie closed her eyes. 'Damn. But that beach is closed to anything but foot traffic.'

'You know where we were?'

'Sam always surfs at the Spit at the Seaway. The surf's great, dogs are permitted off leash and it's the safest place for Bonnie.'

'He still shouldn't have left her,' Zoe said stubbornly, and Callie shrugged and started making more tea.

'Okay, I'll give you some back story,' she said. 'You need to get used to this hospital, by the way. Everyone knows everything about everybody. If you want things kept private, forget it. I don't

normally add to it, but tonight you've earned it. Bonnie was Sam's fiancée's dog. According to reports, Emily was wild, passionate and more than a little foolhardy. She surfed every night—they both did. With Bonnie. When Emily bought her as a pup Sam tried to talk her into exercising her and then leaving her in the car while they surfed, but Bonnie was Emily's dog and Emily simply refused.

'So now Bonnie's in her declining years but what she loves most in the world is lying on the beach at dusk, waiting for Sam to come in. If Sam leaves her at home, or in the Jeep, she'll howl until the world thinks she's being massacred. For months she howled because she missed Emily and Sam decided he couldn't take her beach away from her as well.'

'So... what happened to Emily?' Zoe asked.

'Killed by carelessness,' Callie retorted. 'Not that Sam will admit it, but there it is. They went down to the beach to surf but the waves were dumpers, crashing too close to shore. Sam knew it, they both knew it, but Emily went out anyway. Word is that she simply did what she wanted. She was clever and bright and she twisted the world round her finger.'

'That night she and Sam had words. Sam took Bonnie for a walk along the beach to let off steam and Emily took her board out, got dumped and broke her neck. To this day Sam thinks he should have picked her up and carted her off the beach by force, but I guess it's like telling Bonnie she can't stay on the beach on her own. Immoveable object means unimaginable force. One of them has to give.'

'Oh,' Zoe said in a small voice, and Callie gave her a swift, appraising glance.

'Let me guess—you gave Sam a lecture?'

'I... might have.'

'And that red mark on his face? The mark that looks suspiciously like finger marks?'

'Oh... ' She felt herself blush from the toes up.

'It'll settle,' Callie said, grinning widely. 'They don't usually bruise with the fingermarks still showing. And I promise I won't tell.'

'How do you know... about the fingermarks?' Zoe managed, and Callie's smile died. There was a moment's awkward pause and then Callie seemed to relent. She shrugged.

'I worked in a women's refuge for a while,' she said curtly in a voice that told Zoe not to go there. 'I was getting over a mistake myself. But I wouldn't worry. You saved Sam's dog, and I suspect even if the world knew you'd hit him he'd consider it a small price. Do you want to sleep in tomorrow? I can alter your shifts.'

She was changing the subject, Zoe thought, steering away from the personal, and she thought there were things behind this woman's competent facade...

As there were things behind Sam's surfer image.

She should think about sleeping in. She tried for a whole two seconds, but the warmth, the food, the effects of the evening's fright suddenly coalesced into one vast fog of weariness. It was like the blinds were coming down whether she willed them or not.

'I'll be fine for tomorrow,' she managed. 'But I do need to sleep.'

'I'll tuck you in,' Callie said cheerfully. 'Bedroom. Come.'

'I don't need tucking in,' she said, affronted.

'Remind me to ask when I want to know what you need,' Callie retorted. 'I'm thinking Sam Webster is going to ring me from the vet's to find out how you are and I'm telling him I've tucked you into bed, whether you wanted it or not.'

By midnight Doug was sufficiently happy with Bonnie to order Sam home.

'I'll be checking on her hourly. I'll sleep when I'm relieved in the morning but I suspect you have work tomorrow. Right? So, home. Bed.'

Bonnie was sleeping soundly, heavily sedated. Sam fondled her soft ears but she didn't respond, too busy sleeping.

Doug was right.

He headed out to the car park. Doug had locked Zoe's car but it still blocked the entrance.

He needed to retrieve her purse, and he might as well move it before handing the keys back to Doug.

It took him three minutes to get it started and Doug came out to help. They shifted it and then stood looking at it in disgust, not only because it was blood-soaked.

‘She’s driven that thing from Adelaide,’ Sam said at last. ‘How?’

‘Blind faith,’ Doug said. ‘Some wrecking yard must have paid her to cart it away.’

It was structurally sound, Sam thought, but only just. Once upon a time it had been a little blue sedan, but its original panels had been replaced with whatever anyone could find. Some were painted bright orange with anti-rust. Some looked like they’d been attacked by a sledgehammer.

When running, the car sounded like a wheezing camel. Even the drive from entrance to car park was bumpy.

‘There’s a roadworthy sticker on the front,’ Doug said. ‘You reckon that’s because she needs to prove it to the cops half a dozen times a day?’ He grinned. ‘Never mind, it did its job. It got your dog here in time. Girl and car both need a medal.’

‘Yeah,’ Sam said absently. ‘I need to fix this.’

He bade Doug goodnight and headed back to his Jeep. It was a grubby surfer truck but compared to Zoe’s it was luxurious.

He should go back to the hospital. Friday was a normal working day. In eight hours he’d be on the wards.

Zoe would be there in six.

Zoe...

His head was doing strange things.

He climbed into his truck and headed where he always headed when he needed to clear his mind.

The beach was deserted. A full moon hung in a cloudless sky. His board lay where he’d dumped it hours ago. Just as well the tide had been going out, he thought, but, then, he’d been granted a miracle and a surfboard would have been a small price to pay for Bonnie’s life.

He needed to pay...something.

The hoons in the beach buggy would pay. Zoe had got a clear view of them, the hire-car logo, even part of the number plate. Doug had already made a call to the cops.

But Zoe?

What was it about her that twisted something inside him?

‘Maybe the fact that she saved your dog?’ he said drily, out loud. ‘Maybe that’d make anyone seem special.’

But there was something about her...

A heroic run with a dog far too big for her. An anger that he’d deserved.

But more. What?

Where were his thoughts taking him?

He was trying hard to haul them back on track. Sam Webster was a man who walked alone. He’d had one disastrous relationship. He’d loved Emily, but he hadn’t been able to protect her from herself. She’d died because of it, leaving him gutted and guilty and alone.

That night replayed in his head, over and over. Emily had had a stressful day in the wards and had come home to a letter saying she’d missed a promotion. Her mood had been foul as they’d headed to the beach. There’d been a storm and the surf had been unpredictable. He’d suggested a close-to-shore swim instead of their usual surf, but Emily had been coldly determined.

‘The surf’s fine. Sure, it’s dumping but we’re experienced enough to know which waves to leave alone. I’ve had enough people telling me what I can’t do today. Surf with me, Sam, or leave me be.’

He let her be. He was fed up. In truth he’d been growing more and more fed up with Emily’s erratic mood swings and her insistence that everything be done her way. He watched Emily for a

while but she'd gone far out, waiting for the perfect wave, so he and Bonnie headed along the beach to walk out their wait.

They turned just as Emily lost patience and caught a wave she must have known was dangerous.

He remembered yelling. He remembered seeing Emily rise, catching the beginning of the curving swell, and he remembered seeing her look towards the beach, towards him. She waved and her wave was almost triumphant.

And then the wave sucked her high, curled and tossed her onto the sandbank with a force that even today made him shudder.

Enough. Don't think about it. That had been five years ago. Surely the memory should have faded by now. And what was he doing, thinking of it tonight?

Because he'd met Zoe?

This was crazy. Where his thoughts were taking him was just plain weird. She was just another woman and there were plenty of women in his life. Half his colleagues were female. He had his mother, his sisters, his workmates, and for years their position in his life had been carefully compartmentalised.

Zoe...the way he was feeling...it didn't fit.

Maybe it was because he owed her, he decided. He did owe her, big time, and Sam Webster always paid his debts.

Her car was a wreck.

Excellent. His mind cleared. He had a way to pay his debt and move on.

And he needed to move on, because for some reason it felt really important that he stop thinking about Zoe Payne. He needed to pay the debt and get her out of his mind.

CHAPTER THREE

ZOE SLEPT FITFULLY, waking during the night to flashbacks—to dune buggies crashing down, to Sam's haunted face, to the thoughts of the mess in her car. She slept enough to function, however. Uniformed and professional, she hit the wards with determined cheer—and found she was a minor celebrity.

She'd been at Gold Coast City for almost a week. Her new colleagues had been friendly enough but she still felt very much an outsider. This morning, though, Ros, the ward clerk, met her with a beaming smile and practically boomed her welcome.

'Here she is, our Zoe the lifesaver. You've saved our Bonnie!'

'*Our Bonnie?*' she said faintly.

'Everyone in the hospital loves Bonnie,' Ros told her. 'When she's not surfing with Sam, she comes in as a companion dog. We use her for the oldies or for distressed kids. If Sam tells her to stay with a needy patient she treats them as her new best friend until Sam comes to pick her up again. I can't tell you how many patients she's calmed and comforted. And the hoons nearly killed her.'

Her face lost its beam and creased in distress. 'Of all the...well, never mind, we heard the cops have already charged them. The report from the vet half an hour ago said Bonnie's on the mend, and Sam says to tell you he left your purse downstairs in the safe in Admin for you to collect when you go off duty. How lucky was it that you were there? Callie says you saved her.'

'I was glad to help,' Zoe muttered, embarrassed, and headed to changeover fast, only to be met with more congratulations and thanks.

It went on all day. She was tired, she was still feeling fragile, but by the time her shift ended she seemed to be best friends with everyone in the hospital.

At three she was done. Yay, Friday. The weekend stretched before her, and even fatigue didn't stop it seeming endless with possibilities. Her first weekend here. Her first time alone.

It felt fantastic.

She walked down to Admin to collect her purse, and hummed as she hit the lifts. Last night had been horrible, but the outcome looked good. This job seemed great. She'd been rostered onto the paediatric ward for older kids. She'd been run off her feet all day—which she loved—and somehow what had happened last night seemed to have made her accepted as a part of the Gold Coast team faster than she'd thought possible.

She had an almost irresistible urge to ring Dean and gloat.

How childish was that? She grinned, the doors of the lift opened at the administration floor—and Sam Webster was waiting for her.

Sort of.

This was a different Sam Webster.

Last night he'd looked every inch a surfer. Now he looked every inch a cardiologist.

He must have been consulting rather than operating, she thought, dazed. He was wearing the most beautiful suit—Italian, she thought, and then wondered wryly what she would know about Italian suits. But the sleek, blue, pinstriped suit looked like it was moulded to him. His shirt was crisp, white, expensive-looking, and the only hint that he worked with kids was the elephants embroidered on his blue silk tie.

This was an image that would give frantic parents reassurance that they were in the hands of the best.

He looked the best.

Why was she standing here, gawking, when she should be doing, saying...something?

She managed a smile and moved forward, squashing the dumb, irrational wish that she wasn't in her nursing pants and baggy top, that her hair was free and not hauled into a practical work knot, that she had some decent make-up on—and she didn't look like she'd just come off a long, hard shift.

'Hi,' she managed. 'They tell me Bonnie's still good. Actually, everyone tells me Bonnie's still good. I hadn't realised she was a celebrity.'

'She has good friends,' he said, smiling at her in such a way that her heart did a crazy twist. 'She made a new very good friend last night. Callie told me your shift finished at three. I came down to make sure you got your purse.'

'I'm getting it now,' she said, uselessly, and then couldn't think of anything else to say.

He had a faint mark on his cheek. Callie was right, the fingermarks had faded, but the bruise was still there. It made her want to crawl under the floor and stay there.

'It doesn't hurt,' he said, and grinned, and she flushed. How did he know what she was thinking?

'I'm sorry.'

'Sorry that it doesn't hurt?'

'Of course not.' Her chin tilted a bit and she regained her bearings. If he was going to tease...

'I've fixed your car,' he told her, and his grin faded but the faint, teasing mischief was still behind his eyes. 'Come and see.'

'It's not at the vet's?'

'The least I could do was bring it back here. Grab your purse and I'll show you where.' Then, as she still hesitated—what was it with this man that had her disconcerted?—he smiled at the girl at the desk, who handed over her purse, having obviously been listening to every word of their conversation, and he ushered her out to the car park.

That made her feel even more disconcerted. He was so...*gorgeous*. She was in her nurse's uniform.

People were glancing at them, smiling at Sam, smiling at her as if she was somehow attached to Sam. It felt weird.

'You didn't have to fix my car,' she told him as he led her across the car park. 'How did you get it done so fast?'

'What do you do when you're faced with a laundry basket full of dirty shirts and you need a clean shirt straight away?' he asked.

'I...' Uh-oh. What she suddenly suspected was dumb—wasn't it? Surely.

'You buy a new one,' he told her, confirming her lunatic thought in five words. 'Or, in your case, a good second-hand one because I thought a brand-new one might be a bit over the top.' And he stopped and motioned to a small white sedan parked right next to where they were standing. It was the same model as hers, only about twenty years younger. It was about a hundred years less battered.

'It's two years old,' he told her, 'but it's a take-a-little-old-lady-to-church-on-Sunday vehicle. The local dealer had a son born with a mitral valve disorder. I'm still running routine checks on Dan's son after successful surgery, but he's doing brilliantly, and Dan's assured me this vehicle is almost as good as his kid's heart.'

'*You bought me a car?*'

'I need to thank you,' he said gently. 'You saved my dog's life. Doug and I could barely get your car started last night and we thought it'd cost more to clean than you'd get for it if you sold it. I'm a surgeon and a well-qualified one at that. I'm not married. I have no kids. All I have is my dog. Thanks to your actions last night I still have her. I can easily afford to do this, and I hope you'll accept with pleasure.'

She stared at the car. It was little and white and clean. It looked a very nice car. It looked very dependable.

It looked sensible.

She thought back to the bucket of bolts she'd driven from Adelaide. She thought of all the times she'd had to stop.

She'd bought a mechanic's manual in Adelaide before she'd left and she'd studied it with one of her sisters' boyfriends. She'd spent half the time she'd taken to get here sitting on the roadside studying that book or ringing her sister's boyfriend and having him talk her through what she needed to do.

She looked again at the little white car.

I hope you'll accept with pleasure.

Why not? She had no doubt this guy could afford to buy her a car. It'd be years before she could afford one this good—and she *had* saved his dog.

'But it's not my car,' she heard herself say, before the sensible side of her could do any more sensible thinking.

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