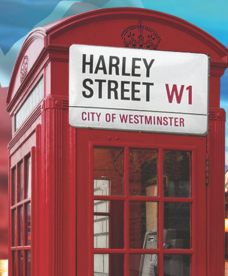




200
HARLEY
STREET

**ALISON
ROBERTS**

The Proud Italian



Alison Roberts
200 Harley Street:
The Proud Italian

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ALISON ROBERTS lives in Christchurch, New Zealand, and has written over sixty Mills & Boon® Medical Romances™.

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When Alison is not writing you'll find her indulging her passion for dancing or spending time with her friends (including Molly the dog) and her daughter Becky, who has grown up to become a brilliant artist. She also loves to travel, hates housework, and considers it a triumph when the flowers outnumber the weeds in her garden.

200 Harley Street: The Proud Italian

Alison Roberts



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Dear Reader

London holds a very special place in my heart. I had my first year of schooling there and I lived in Prince Albert Road, so close to the zoo I could often hear the animals at night. It's always a treat to revisit London, either in person or through the characters in my stories and this one—Rafael and Abbie's story—has been a joy.

I had two passionate people, bound together by their baby daughter but then pushed too far apart by the unbearably tough times they had to go through.

Do you have a mantra that pops up during tough times? I've been known to use "no pain, no gain" or "what doesn't kill you makes you stronger". I'm not so sure about "the end justifies the means" or "you have to break eggs to make an omelette" because the significance of what is lost or broken may not be apparent until it's too late to realise how important it was.

All too often, what gets broken is a relationship that couldn't survive the pain. Repairing that kind of damage to love needs a bit of magic, I think. And what better place to find magic like that than in one of my favourite cities?

Happy reading ☺

With love,

Alison

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CHAPTER ONE

WINNING WAS SUPPOSED to be what mattered.

And it was. The end justified the means, didn't it?

Of course it did. That couldn't be doubted for a heartbeat in this case. The blanket-wrapped bundle in Abbie de Luca's arms was the absolute proof of that. The battle had been hard fought and gruelling enough to have almost destroyed her but she had won.

No. *Ella* had won. Her precious baby, only just a year old, had fought the killer disease of acute lymphoblastic leukaemia at an age where the greatest challenge should have been learning to sit up and take her first steps. The fact that they were being sent back from the only place in the world that had offered the new and radical treatment so that Ella could continue her recuperation at the Lighthouse Children's Hospital in London was proof of having won the battle. It meant she was a huge step closer to going home.

But was the 'home' they'd left behind still there?

For either of them?

Being escorted off the flight from New York before any other passengers and fast-tracked through customs at Heathrow airport like royalty should be making the triumph of winning all the sweeter.

So why did Abbie feel as if she was stepping onto a new

battlefield? One that was only marginally less significant than the life-and-death struggle that had represented most of the three months she had been away with her tiny daughter.

‘There’s an ambulance waiting for you, Mrs de Luca.’ The customs official eyed the wheelchair beside Abbie that the steward from the plane had been pushing. ‘Is this all going with you?’

‘No. It’s going back on the next flight.’ Abbie unwrapped Ella just enough to unhook the electrodes from the monitoring equipment. ‘It was only a precaution. We didn’t even need the oxygen.’ They hadn’t needed a medical escort either. One of the rare positive aspects of having a paediatric surgeon for a mother, although the negative side of knowing too much had outweighed that far too many times already.

Ella stirred in her arms but didn’t wake. Abbie took a moment to check the connections of the central line the baby still had under her collarbone and made sure the syringe driver attached to the tubing hadn’t run out of the drugs that were still a necessary part of treatment. Then she tucked it securely back into the folds of blanket and gave Ella a kiss on the few stray wisps of hair she had somehow retained.

As Ella relaxed back into sleep a tiny hand came up to touch her mother’s cheek, as if she was reassuring herself that she was safe. She was probably smiling, Abbie thought, watching the crinkle deepen around the tightly closed eyes. Shame nobody could see it because of the mask needed to protect the baby from

airborne infections.

The gesture had been enough to melt hearts around her anyway.

‘Aww...’ The burly customs official was smiling. ‘What a wee pet.’

Adorable...’ The steward was blinking hard. ‘I’m so happy she’s going to be all right now, Abbie.’

‘Thanks, Damien.’ Abbie had to swallow the big lump in her own throat. Happy didn’t touch the sides of how she felt about her daughter’s new prognosis. ‘And thanks so much for taking such good care of us on the flight.’

‘It was a privilege. Have you got someone meeting you now?’

Abbie nodded. ‘The ambulance is here. They’re taking us to the Lighthouse. That’s the children’s hospital I work at.’

But the steward was shaking his head. Frowning. ‘No... I meant... You know...’

Abbie did know. He meant someone with a personal attachment. Like Ella’s father?

‘Maybe. It was a bit of a last-minute rush and we weren’t sure we’d get onto this flight. The New York team obviously managed to arrange the transfer but I’m not sure who else knows about it.’

She’d tried to ring Rafael but his phone had gone to his message service. Mr de Luca was in surgery all day, she’d been informed. Could they take a message? No, Abbie had responded. She’d be seeing him soon enough.

Or maybe that should be too soon? She’d walked out on her

marriage to fight this battle. Maybe that was why success wasn't tasting as sweet as it should.

Maybe the price had been too high.

'Abbie...' The man who'd been allowed into this private area of the customs hall and was now striding towards them wasn't an airport official.

'Oh, my...' Damien clearly appreciated the attributes of the tall, sexy newcomer. 'Is that Ella's daddy?'

'No.' Abbie shook her head, bemused. 'He's more like my boss.' And clearly a commanding enough presence, even out of a medical environment, to have had rules broken for him.

The steward was grinning as he started to manoeuvre the wheelchair out of the way. 'Tough job,' he murmured, 'but I guess someone's gotta do it.'

Abbie felt her lips curve as she raised her voice. 'Ethan... what on earth are you doing here?'

'I happened to field a call to Rafael about your arrival time and the ambulance transfer. He's caught up in Theatre so I thought I'd come for the ride and make sure you had a welcoming committee.'

And who could be more appropriate than one of the Hunter brothers, the owners of the prestigious London plastic-and-reconstructive-surgery clinic that employed both of Ella's parents as specialist paediatric surgeons. The clinic that had made it financially possible for Ella to go to the States and undertake the risky, experimental treatment that had been her only hope of a

cure.

‘Does...does Rafael know we’ve come home?’

‘Not yet.’ Ethan’s gaze gave nothing away. ‘The case he’s operating on today is putting him under considerable pressure. I...didn’t want to distract him.’ The hint of a smile was sympathetic. ‘I’ll let him know the moment he comes out, I promise.’

Abbie simply nodded. There was a subtext here. That Rafael would need prior warning before seeing her again? Hearing her voice, even, given that their minimal communication of late had been via text and email? That, without some kind of intermediary, his Italian pride might be enough for him to refuse to see her at all? Maybe their first meeting would involve a solicitor and official documents outlining shared custody agreements for their child. How sad would that be?

‘You’re good to go.’ The customs official stamped their passports and nodded towards someone near the door. ‘Mr Hunter shouldn’t really be in here. They’ll show you out to where the ambulance crew is waiting. Your luggage will be sent by taxi as soon as it’s offloaded.’

Ethan picked up the cabin bag by Abbie’s feet but his gaze rested on the bundle in her arms. ‘You okay? Would you rather I carried Ella?’

Abbie shook her head. ‘I’m good.’

She wasn’t about to hand her baby to someone else to carry, despite her precious burden feeling heavier by the minute. She

was exhausted, that was all. These last few months had taken their toll, physically as well as emotionally, but she couldn't afford to stop being strong.

Not when she was stepping onto a new battlefield.

At least she had an ally. Given what Abbie had heard about his heroic stint in Afghanistan, it was probably overkill in any protection stakes, but there was also the history of the bad blood between the Hunter brothers. If she and Rafael did need an intermediary, someone who was experienced in negotiating the kind of tension that represented the dark side of a loving relationship was ideal.

Not that Ethan gave much away. The slight limp he walked with, which was a legacy of his army days, attracted more than casual stares as they walked to where the ambulance was parked, but he gave no sign of being aware of the curiosity.

And when they were tucked up in the back of the ambulance, on the M4 and heading into the city, he gave no hint that Abbie might be facing any escalating complications in her life.

He and Rafael were friends but they were men. Had they shared anything more personal in the time she'd been away? A late-night card game and plenty of whisky, perhaps, along with commiseration over their disastrous love lives? Maybe Ethan had reminded Rafael that the odds had been stacked against his marriage succeeding anyway. Sure, they'd been very much in love with each other but they'd barely had time to get to know each other properly, had they? They may have chosen to get

married themselves but others would no doubt have viewed it as a shotgun wedding when they'd known that a baby was already on the way.

That baby was still asleep, bless her, now safely cocooned in the baby seat strapped onto the stretcher. Ella and Ethan sat facing her, the ambulance crew happy to sit up front, chatting, knowing that their transfer patient had a privileged level of medical supervision in the back.

The traffic slowed as they joined the flow on the Great West Road. A perfect opportunity to test the water, Abbie thought, but...good grief...she felt ridiculously nervous about it. She knew she couldn't just dive straight in with what was foremost on her mind but, to her dismay, her voice still came out unmistakably shaky.

'H-how are things going at the clinic?'

'Good. Very busy. You would have seen some of the publicity over our latest charity case?'

'Ah...no... Sorry, I'm a bit out of touch. I haven't seen much news for ages. Is it a paediatric case?'

'Yes. A ten-year-old Afghan girl—Anoosheh—who was noticed when her orphanage was evacuated. She got abandoned on the doorstep as a toddler when her disease became more extreme. Now she's got a neurofibromatosis that's the size of a melon and has disfigured half her face to the extent that she was being used as a servant and kept well hidden from any prospective adoptive parents that visited the orphanage. Not only that, she's

probably lost the sight in one eye and is gradually losing patent airways.'

'Oh...poor thing.'

'Today's surgery won't be the last but hopefully the result will be enough to show people that there's a little girl in there who just needs to be loved. There's huge media interest and there's been some offers of adoptive homes in the UK already. I imagine there's a pack of reporters waiting to pounce on Rafael as soon as he's out of Theatre. I'll try and head them off but it's just as well he can cope with that kind of pressure while he's operating.'

'Yes...he's good at that.'

Because he could detach himself from his own emotional involvement and see the bigger picture?

The way he had even when he'd been dealing with the trauma of his own daughter's prognosis?

Abbie's heart was thumping in her chest. She took a deep breath. 'So he's...um...okay, then?'

'Seems to be.' There was a short silence, as though Ethan was debating whether to say anything more, and then he slid a brief, sideways glance at Abbie. 'I don't think I've ever seen anyone try to bury themselves in their work so effectively before. He's taken on every difficult case he could possibly squeeze into his schedule. And then some. I've barely seen him.'

Oh...no confessions of heartbreak over a card session, then. No admitting that he might have made a terrible mistake by issuing the ultimatum that if Abbie insisted on taking Ella to the

States then their marriage was over.

But the argument he'd felt so passionately justified in upholding had been that their daughter's quality of life outweighed its quantity. That they didn't have the right to put her through so much extra suffering when the chances of success were so small.

Surely the fact that it *had* worked was enough to justify her decision to go? Wouldn't Rafael be so thrilled to have the prospect of Ella's long-term survival that that ultimatum was now irrelevant?

Maybe. But there was more to it, wasn't there? He was her husband and a proud man. How much damage to their relationship had she done by refusing to respect his opinion and openly defying him?

And worse than that—much worse—she'd taken a sick baby away from her adoring father. She'd seen the pain in Rafael's eyes as she'd walked away with their daughter in her arms. He hadn't expected to see her alive again. How painful would that have been? He had every right to hate her for that.

Abbie had had Ella in her arms and she'd still cried all the way to New York.

So Rafael had shut himself away. She'd guessed that by how distant he'd sounded when she'd tried to call him. By how impersonal his email correspondence had rapidly become. He'd buried himself in his work to the extent that when Abbie had reached out in the darkest days, so far away and so lonely and

so desperate for support, the response she'd received had seemed cold and clinical. As if his emotional involvement with both herself and Ella was a thing of the past.

Was it all over?

It wouldn't be fair to try and get any further clues from Ethan.

It was Rafael that Abbie needed to talk to.

Needed to *see*. The longing was getting stronger by the minute, as if her body realised that the distance between them was closing rapidly. She still loved her husband. Yes, they had pushed each other away and there was a lot to forgive on both sides, but the love was still there. It always would be.

Rafael would welcome Ella back into his life, she had no doubt at all about that. But would *she* be welcome?

The prospect of the rift between them never healing was terrifying.

With a huge effort, Abbie tried to find some inner strength. To feel positive. She even managed to find a smile to offer Ethan.

'So what else is happening? Have Leo and Lizzie set a date for the wedding yet?'

'Yes. It's going to be the last Saturday in April.'

'What? Good grief...that's only a couple of weeks away.'

'Tell me about it. A quiet affair might have been easily organised but the kind of splash that goes with a high-society wedding at Claridge's? I'm trying to stay well out of it all.'

Abbie smiled. 'Good luck with that.'

Ethan snorted. 'Yeah... I haven't been entirely successful.'

Lizzie's managed to talk me into being best man. And that means I'll have to come up with some kind of speech.'

'I'm sure you can do it. Even with a tight deadline. But why are they in such a rush?'

Ethan shrugged. 'Guess they didn't want to wait. They're in love.'

There was something in Ethan's tone that made the conversation dry up completely at this point. Abbie didn't know the story behind why the Hunter brothers had been estranged for so many years but, like everyone else associated with the clinic, she was aware of the tension that still lingered between the men. The fact that Lizzie had been the one to persuade Ethan to be best man was evidence that things still weren't easy.

Was that all there was to whatever was remaining unspoken? Was Ethan happy for Leo or did he have doubts that the marriage would succeed? Maybe she and Rafael were being seen as an example of marrying in haste and repenting at leisure.

The lump in Abbie's throat made it too hard to take a new breath. To try and distract herself she leaned over Ella and stroked her baby's cheek softly with her forefinger.

The welling up of love she had for her child wasn't enough to distract her completely. She and Rafael had been in love like that once. Not very long ago, in fact. They should still be in the honeymoon phase of their marriage but look at where they were now.

What should have been a perfect union so quickly blessed with

a beautiful child had been blown apart by a cruel twist of fate.

And now Abbie was returning to where it had all happened.

The pieces of that perfect life were going to be in the same place again.

What remained to be seen was whether it was going to be possible to put them back together again.

A glance through the tinted glass of the ambulance windows showed that they were passing Regent's Park. There were taxis and double-decker buses nose to tail around them. Definitely London. Home. God, it was good to be back. She could even see the big square brick building on the end of Harley Street coming up—a close neighbour of the Hunter Clinic.

Ethan followed her line of vision.

'Have you missed it?'

'So much.' But it felt distant. Like part of previous life. How hard was it going to be to find her way back?

'Are you ready to come back to work? We desperately need you as soon as you can manage and I know that they've been holding their breath to get you back on board at the Lighthouse.'

'I could start tomorrow.'

'Really? That would be terrific. But won't you need time to get Ella settled?'

Abbie's smile was poignant. 'The oncology ward at the Lighthouse is more of a home for Ella than anywhere else. She's spent most of her life in there. And the staff are like a huge collection of aunties and grannies. The sooner we get things back

to normal, the better for both of us, I think.'

For all of us, she amended silently.

Rafael de Luca stripped off his bloodied gloves and dropped them in the bin. Then he pulled at his mask, breaking the strings and bending the wire that strengthened the top hem as he sent it after the gloves.

Finally, he could take a deep breath of unfiltered, fresh-feeling air. Not just because the mask was gone but because the gruelling surgery that had kept him on his feet for so many hours he'd lost count was over.

They'd done well. The team he'd gathered around him to perform this complex operation had been outstanding. In an ideal world they were maybe not exactly who he would have chosen to work so closely with but the choice of his perfect partner had been taken away when Abbie had gone, hadn't it?

The 'dream team,' they'd been known as at the Hunter Clinic. Such perfect partners in the operating theatre, it had seemed inevitable that they would find they were a perfect match outside work hours as well.

Ha...

So much for fate. And so much for a distraction from his modus operandi these days. That momentary flash of recognising what had been missing from his theatre today was as far as he would allow it to go. And that had only happened because he was so incredibly exhausted. His back ached abominably from standing in one position for far too long.

His eyes ached from peering through microscopic lenses for the fine work and a generalised ache in his head from such prolonged and fierce concentration was gaining vigour.

With his gown removed and balled up to join the other disposable items in the bin, Rafael could push open the double doors and exit Theatre. With some time in hand before checking on young Anoosheh in Recovery and no concerned family to go and talk to, he could do what he most wanted and go and stand under a hot shower for a considerable period of time. He needed a shave, too.

There would be reporters anxious to hear how the surgery had gone but nobody would expect him to front up to a camera until he'd had time to clean up properly. And maybe he wouldn't have to do it at all. Rafael could see Ethan Hunter waiting outside Theatre. Far better that the media dealt with the man who was not only one of the owners of the Hunter Clinic but in charge of the charity side of the business and directly responsible for Anoosheh being brought to London for her life-changing surgery.

‘Rafael... How did it go?’

‘Good.’ He nodded his greeting. ‘As good as we could have hoped for. The tumour is gone. She has a titanium plate in her jaw and we’ve reconstructed her nasal passages. There’s more work to be done, of course. When she’s recovered from this.’ The finer work of removing excess scar tissue and repositioning facial features. The kind of work Abbie excelled at.

Letting his breath out in a weary sigh, Rafael rubbed at his

forehead and pinched his temples with a thumb and third finger as he screwed his eyes shut. *Dio*, but he was tired.

‘And the eye?’

Rafael opened his. ‘They think it may still be viable. Time will tell if she can see out of it now that the obstruction is cleared.’

‘Good. That gives me enough to update the media.’

‘*Grazie*.’ Rafael found a smile. ‘I appreciate you doing that. I’m going to hit the shower and then head home.’ He found himself staring at Ethan’s odd expression. ‘What? You want me to face the cameras after all?’

‘No, it’s not that. It’s...’

‘What?’ Rafael’s smile was fading.

‘Abbie,’ Ethan said quietly.

Rafael’s heart skipped a beat and then thudded painfully. Something had happened. To *Ella*? Oh, no...not that. *Si prega di dio*, not that...

‘She’s here, Rafael,’ Ethan said into the stillness. ‘They’re both here. Ella’s been transferred to the paediatric oncology ward here to finish her recuperation.’

Rafael could only keep staring. Why hadn’t he known about this? Why hadn’t Abbie contacted him? Because she couldn’t even bring herself to *talk* to him any more? Was that how things were going to be now?

‘It was a last-minute decision, apparently.’ Ethan wasn’t meeting his gaze any longer. ‘The call came in after you’d started the surgery on Anoosheh. I decided it was better if you

weren't distracted so I took it on myself to go and meet them at the airport. I'm sorry you didn't get the message when it was intended.'

Rafael made a noncommittal sound. This wasn't Ethan's fault. Surely the decision to transfer Ella would have been made days ago. Abbie could have let him know. Or maybe she had... He'd been so focussed on this major surgery that he hadn't checked his personal email in a day or two. He hadn't even checked in with his message service since yesterday.

And what did any of that matter anyway?

They were *here*.

Just a floor or two and a few long corridors away.

The two people who meant more to him than anyone else on this earth were in the building so what the hell was he doing, standing here?

'I have to go,' he snapped. 'I have to see them.'

The relief that a long, hot shower could provide was forgotten. Unnecessary. A new surge of energy coursed through Rafael as he took the stairs rather than wait for a lift. Made him pick up his pace until he was almost running through the corridors in his theatre scrubs and plastic boots, earning startled glances from people who clearly thought he was on the way to an emergency.

It wasn't until he was close to the open doors leading to the paediatric oncology ward that his pace faltered. Seeing Abbie standing in the corridor outside one of the private rooms felt like he'd just run into an invisible wall.

Twelve weeks since he'd seen her.

The woman he'd married. The love of his life. The mother of his child.

But the last time he'd seen her had been when she'd walked away from him, taking their child with her. When she'd refused to bend to his ultimatum and had chosen to go against his wishes, even if it meant the end of their marriage.

When his marriage had ended.

He'd been wrong to issue that ultimatum. Wrong to deny Ella the chance that the treatment had offered. He knew that and the knowledge was a knife that had twisted inside him for weeks now. Ever since the possibility of success had become apparent.

He also knew that Abbie had been through hell on the other side of the Atlantic and he hadn't been there to support her. He'd made her do it alone because he couldn't back down enough to find a way to apologise. Not through an email or text anyway, which had become the only way Abbie had wanted to communicate.

She must hate him for making her go through all that alone.

She hadn't seen him yet. She was looking through the window of the room. Watching to make sure Ella was asleep, perhaps, so that she could go and take enough of a break to have a meal?

She'd lost weight.

The shapely curves of her body that had first caught his eye when they'd started working together at the Lighthouse had all but disappeared. Her jeans looked too big for her legs and even

from this distance he could see how prominent her collarbones were above the scooped neck of her sweater. Even the thick tresses of her glorious, honey-blond hair looked as if they'd lost volume by the way they were lying in a subdued and limp ponytail against the top of her spine.

A spine that looked a little less straight than he remembered in the strong, independent woman he'd fallen in love with and married.

How hard had this all been?

Rafael could feel his heart breaking. His every instinct was to rush forward and gather Abbie into his arms. To hold her against his heart and whisper promises. That everything would be all right. That he would always love her. That he would never allow life to be so hard for her again.

But how could he? The distance between them couldn't be resolved simply by him walking close enough to put his arms around her, and what if she pushed him away? His pride was already in tatters. Had been ever since she'd walked out on him. And, besides, there was only one of those promises that he could make with any certainty.

That he would always love her.

Would that be enough?

Maybe he was about to find out.

He never felt this nervous pushing open the doors to enter Theatre, even when he knew that the challenge was going to be huge.

His mouth never felt this dry.

It was hard to make his voice work. So hard that only a single word came out.

‘Abbie...’

CHAPTER TWO

‘ABBIE...’

She knew it was Rafael well before she turned to face him. It had always been unique, the way he said her name. It wasn’t just the Italian accent or the smooth, deep voice. It was the subtle note of...wonder, almost. Or reverence? As if she was the most wonderful woman on earth and that made her name special, too.

Unique. One of a kind. Like Rafe.

Abbie braced herself, as she turned, for the first sight of her husband in what suddenly seemed a vast amount of time.

Three months.

But, at this moment, it felt like three *years*.

What would she see in his face? The joy of knowing she’d brought his daughter back to him? Anger that had burned away to leave a residue of resentment?

Echoes of the unbearable pain she’d seen before she’d turned her back and defiantly taken Ella away from him?

When she had turned and found herself facing Rafael with only a few feet between them, Abbie had to brace herself all over again.

How could she have forgotten the effect this man had on her? It was so much more than purely physical. More than emotional, even. It was a visceral thing. She was facing the part of her own being that had been torn free.

It stole her breath away. Made her heart stammer and trip.
'Rafe...'

Abbie tried to smile but it wasn't going to happen. Her lips simply wouldn't co-operate. She could only stare, drinking in this first glimpse, anxiously scanning his body and face to try and collect her impressions.

Dear Lord, but he looked so tired. As though he hadn't slept well for weeks. As though he hadn't even shaved for more than a day or two. He hadn't had a haircut for a while either, and... Had he just come straight from his stint in Theatre? Black curls were flattened in places and still looked damp with sweat. Were his scrubs a size larger than he usually wore or had he lost weight?

Yes. He looked exhausted. And wary but not angry.

He looked...

Wonderful.

Tall and commanding and every bit as gorgeous as the first time she had laid eyes on him. Despite everything, Abbie could feel a curl of sensation deep in her abdomen as her body responded to being this close to him, but this overwhelming awareness wasn't anything as simple as physical attraction.

They knew each other so well. On so many levels. They made up two halves of a whole.

They *loved* each other.

At least, they had.

If only Rafael would smile. Or step closer. Hold his arms open so that she could fall into an embrace that would magically erase

the pain they'd caused each other and make everything all right again.

But he wasn't moving. He seemed to be staring back at her with a mirror image of her intense scrutiny of him.

'How are you, Abbie?'

'I'm...' The word 'fine' tried to form on her lips but it wasn't true. Abbie didn't feel fine at all. She felt overwhelmed and unsure. 'I'm...okay. A bit tired. It's been a big day.'

A big twelve weeks.

A traumatic journey that she'd had to take *alone*. Abbie swallowed hard as she felt the hurt coalesce into the shape of the painful rock inside her chest that she'd lived with for so long now. 'And you? How are you, Rafe?'

'I'm...also okay... I think.' The familiar gesture as Rafael raked his hair with his fingers made the rock shift a little and sent a painful shaft through Abbie's heart. He was as overwhelmed as she was with this reunion. Unsure of what to say. Or do. 'I... wasn't expecting this. It's...'

'Sudden, I know.' This was weird. To feel the hurt this man had caused her and yet to feel so much compassion for him at the same time. 'I would have let you know sooner but it...just happened.'

He didn't believe her and Abbie could understand that. The possibility of sending Ella back to her home town to continue her recuperation had only been talked about in the last few days. She was still fragile. How much organisation had been needed to

send a sick baby to another country?

‘They only started to make enquiries first thing this morning. And things just fell into place. There was space available on a flight and a bed here at the Lighthouse and they didn’t have to arrange a medical escort. And...when her results came through later, looking so good, Dr Goldstein just looked at me and smiled and he said...he said, “How ‘bout it, Mom? Would you like to go home today?” And...’

And Abbie’s voice was shaking now. Could she tell him that the first thing she’d thought at that point had been how badly she’d wanted to see *him* again? That the picture in her head of Rafael holding his baby daughter again and seeing how much better she looked had filled her heart with so much longing that it had felt like it might burst?

No. She couldn’t tell him because he had started speaking himself. She had to stop saying anything. Rafael had to repeat his question.

‘What results? What were the tests?’

Did it matter? This was a doctor talking, not a father. Was he still that distant? This was what had caused their separation in the first place, wasn’t it? The way he could remove himself from the emotional involvement of being a parent. To step back and see the bigger picture through a professional lens. To decide that the quality of what would be a very short life was more important than the desperation to keep your own child alive as long as humanly possible.

‘They took a bone-marrow biopsy yesterday. And bloods. We already knew she’d got through the dangerous cytokine release syndrome that the treatment caused. What we didn’t know was whether the T cell therapy was really working.’

‘And...’ It looked as though Rafael was having to swallow a large lump in his throat, judging by the way the muscles in his jaw and neck were working. ‘It’s looking good?’

That was more like it. The doctor would want the exact figures. A copy of the test results, like the one Abbie had ready for him in her bag. But for a father? Knowing that the results were *good* would be enough to create such a wash of relief and hope for the future that the numbers were irrelevant.

Abbie nodded. It took a moment to trust her voice. ‘She still needs protection for her immune system and she’ll need another bone-marrow biopsy at the three-month mark but...’ She took a deep breath as she blinked back tears. ‘It’s looking good, Rafe. As good as I hoped it would. The treatment’s worked.’

As good as *she’d* hoped?

The choice of pronoun pushed him away. Just as Rafael had been about to pull Abbie into his arms so that they could celebrate this miraculous milestone together as Ella’s parents.

To rush into the room they were standing outside and see for himself that Ella wasn’t the critically ill baby she’d been the last time he’d seen her.

But it was true. He deserved to be dismissed as having been one of the hopeful parents. As soon as Abbie had heard about

the experimental treatment that took T cells from the blood and reengineered them in a laboratory so that they could be put back into the body to find and kill the cancerous leukaemia cells, the hope had been born on her side.

All Rafael had been able to see had been how experimental the treatment was. That the success rates with adults had not been consistent and it had *never* been tried in a baby. That the risks were enormous and going through with the treatment would only cause so much more suffering that would probably still end in Ella's death. And he'd been right. The new T cells had caused an illness that had come within a heartbeat of killing Ella. She'd hovered between life and death in a paediatric intensive-care unit for weeks.

And *he* should have been there but he hadn't been able to bring himself to travel so far in order to watch his baby die. And, yes... even though it shamed him to admit it, part of what had kept him here had been that it seemed like a fitting punishment for Abbie for taking his beloved child away from him.

So much pain. On both sides.

What would Abbie do if he tried to take her in his arms right now? Push him away? Flinch?

He couldn't bear it if that happened.

But somehow he had to try and find a way to bridge this awful gap between them.

'It's been so long, Abbie. So...*hard*...'

So hard. It had been a nightmare ever since their precious

baby had hit the headlines at becoming one of the rare cases of ALL being diagnosed at such an early age. Gruelling months of chemotherapy that had failed to produce remission, let alone a cure. And having them both disappear from his life had only plunged him deeper into his personal hell, especially in the wake of the fights over whether it was the right thing to do.

Missing his wife every day but being so angry at the way she'd made things so much worse. Missing his child with an ache that had gone even deeper than his bones. Sleepless nights and days waiting for the phone call that would deliver the dreaded news that the battle had been lost. Days when a fierce focus on his work had been the only thing that had kept him sane.

He heard the way Abbie's breath left her lungs in an incredulous huff. The pain he could see in her eyes hit him like a physical blow.

'How would you know, Rafe? You weren't *there*.'

Would they ever be able to get past this?

'I'm here now.' His voice sounded as raw as it felt. 'Isn't that enough?'

Abbie just stared at him for the longest time. He could see her lips tremble as her hands gripped the opposite arms, crossed over her breasts as if she was defending her heart.

'No,' she whispered. 'I don't think it is.' She took a ragged, inward breath. 'We...needed you, Rafe. And you...you weren't there.'

Dio, but this was hard. Did they have to go through it all again?

Every impassioned fight? He'd never felt this tired in his life.

'You know why.'

'Yes.' Abbie's voice was tight. 'I know *why*. But I still don't *understand*. How could you not be there if you really love someone?' There were tears on her face now but Rafael couldn't move to brush them away. He'd lost the right to offer comfort because he'd caused the pain.

'You weren't there,' Abbie said again. 'For me *or* Ella. And... and it was *awful*, Rafe... You have no idea...

'That's not true.' He couldn't help the hard edge that made the words clipped. But it seemed like they did have to go over the old ground just to get to a place where they could talk to each other again. 'I have a very good idea. That's why I didn't want you to go. To put Ella through that.'

Flashes of pain from other, long-ago cases were never far away. Especially cases like little Freddie.... Years ago, now, but it was still an effort to push the memory of that particular little boy away. Rafael had started in paediatric oncology determined to beat death for those innocent children but he'd learned the hard way that there had to be limits. That fighting *too* hard could only make things worse for everyone involved. Including the surgeon. He'd had to leave the specialty in the end because the toll it had taken on him personally had been too great.

'And if I hadn't, we wouldn't be here now. Ella wouldn't still be alive.'

'No...' The word was a weary sigh.

This was also true. And suddenly nothing else mattered. Ella was still alive. She was in the room right beside him. He couldn't stay out here a moment longer. Taking a step closer to the door brought him a step closer to Abbie, but she moved a little. And now Rafael could see through the window of the room.

He could see *Ella*.

Sitting in a cot and playing happily with a toy.

A toy he recognised. Called Ears. A soft pink rabbit with disproportionately long legs and ears. A silly toy he'd bought when she'd first been sick and been admitted here, which had fast become her 'cuddly.'

Ella was holding Ears in one hand as she knelt in the cot and then pulled herself up using the side of the cot. He could see the nasal prongs supplying oxygen taped to her face and one arm was bandaged, keeping the IV line that went to the port beneath her collarbone safe from being tugged. It didn't stop her getting to her feet, though.

Dio... she was strong enough to stand?

It didn't stop Ears being dropped over the side of the cot either, but Ella didn't burst into instant tears, like most children her age would. She just looked down at the floor and then up, perfectly confident that help would not be far away.

And then Rafael could really see her face for the first time. Those big, dark eyes were looking straight at him.

For a long, long moment they stared at each other. Rafael could remember the first time he'd held this baby and the

overwhelming need to protect her. He could remember the feel of her downy skin. The smell of her when she'd been freshly bathed and fed. The sound of her voice when she'd been learning her own baby language.

But would she remember anything at all about him?

It seemed that she did. Her eyes got even bigger and those rosebud lips curled and curved into a smile. And Ella held up her little arms, which was enough to make her lose her balance and sit down on her padded bottom with a thump, but she was still smiling.

Still holding out her arms to her father.

And nothing else mattered.

Without even another glance at Abbie, Rafael rushed into the room.

Abbie stood and watched through the window.

It had been only a few minutes since she'd been doing exactly this, watching to see if Ella would be happy for a few minutes while she went to... What had she been going to do? Go to the bathroom? Make a coffee in the staffroom?

Whatever her intention had been, she'd forgotten it the moment she'd heard Rafael call her name and she'd had to brace herself for their reunion.

And now it was over.

They'd seen each other again. They'd talked.

But had anything been resolved?

If anything, Abbie felt more unsure than before.

Slow tears were leaking from her eyes and rolling down the side of her nose as she watched Rafael gather up his daughter into his arms and press his cheek against the top of her head. He had his eyes closed so he couldn't see that she was watching. And...oh, God...did he have tears tracing the edge of *his* nose, too? No... Rafael would never cry. But if he ever did, his face would look exactly the way it did right now.

The love he had for his daughter was almost as palpable as the wall Abbie had to reach out and touch for support.

He'd never expected to be able to hold her again, had he?

Or to see her smile. To hear that noise she made when she was really happy—a kind of cross between cooing and giggling that sounded like water going out of a sink.

Being a plughole, they'd called it. *Ella's being a plughole*, they'd tell each other and then they'd both hold each other's gaze and smile because they knew it was such a happy noise and it had been such a rare thing amongst the pain and sickness. Those poignant smiles and the silent communication of eye contact had been moments of connection that had given them strength to go on. That had made them feel that sharing this heartbreaking journey was making their relationship stronger. But, in the end, like it did so often with this kind of unimaginable stress, it had torn them apart.

Yes. Rafael still adored his daughter. She could see him rocking her now and hear his voice as he spoke rapidly in Italian. She caught the word *fiorella*. Ella's proper name. His little

flower. And he was singing now. Softly. Still in Italian. Stroking the odd patches of wispy hair on Ella's head so gently. It was one of the things she loved about this man, that he could be so passionate. So demonstrative.

And for a moment when he'd been out here with her, he'd looked as if he still loved *her* like that, too.

Just before he'd stupidly said how *hard* it had been for him.

He hadn't been there. Hadn't sat for countless hours amongst the bank of monitors in the intensive-care unit, wondering if each breath Ella took would be her last.

Maybe she shouldn't have taken the bait and reignited the old conflict but...it still *hurt*, dammit.

It wasn't going to just go away by itself.

Being together in the same place wasn't enough because it felt like there was no common ground between them.

Or if there was, the only person inhabiting it was a baby called Ella.

CHAPTER THREE

‘I CAN’T BELIEVE you’re starting back at work so soon.’ Ella’s nurse for today, Melanie, was watching Abbie spoon morsels of breakfast into her daughter’s mouth. ‘You’ve only just set foot back in the country.’

‘I just want to get back to normal.’ Abbie’s smile was a bit of an effort. Getting Ella back to London had been a huge step closer to getting back to a normal life but she had no real idea what ‘normal’ was going to be from now on.

She caught an escaping dollop of porridge with the edge of the plastic spoon and waited until Ella opened her mouth so she could pop it back where it belonged. ‘And I’ve had far too much time away already,’ she added. ‘You know what they say, Mel. “Use it or lose it.”’

Melanie looked up from the drugs she was preparing for Ella’s syringe driver. ‘You won’t go straight back into full time, though, will you?’

Abbie’s headshake was swift. There was no way she could suddenly cope with that kind of punishing schedule—the long surgery hours at the Lighthouse, outpatient clinics, ward rounds and the travel time and consultations at the Hunter Clinic. A schedule that Rafael had apparently ramped up to an unthinkable level while she’d been away. No work–life balance there but she could understand escaping like that. And her own life had been

just as one-sided. For a very long time.

‘I haven’t been genuinely full-time for ages,’ she said aloud. ‘We started scaling things down when I got to about six months pregnant and then things got even more disrupted after Ella was born, of course.’

Melanie’s nod was sympathetic. She clicked the syringe into the driver. ‘You must be missing your work, too. You don’t get to be as good as you are if you don’t really love what you’re doing. Are you in Theatre today?’

‘No. It’s just an outpatient clinic this morning. They’re easing me in gently.’

‘That’s good.’ Melanie was making an exaggerated happy face at Ella. ‘You done yet, chicken? Ready to have a wash and get dressed and face the day?’

Abbie wiped Ella’s face with a damp cloth. ‘I think we both are.’ With a final cuddle she handed Ella to Melanie. ‘Be good, sweetheart. I’ll be back as soon as I can.’

Setting off to the Lighthouse’s outpatient department, she realised how nervous she was feeling. Maybe it was because she was out of her jeans for the first time in ages and wearing clothes more appropriate for her job. A neat blouse tucked into a long, swirly skirt that reached the top of her boots. An unbuttoned white coat as a jacket. The bright name badge that had a cute flower with a smiley face for a centre that told the world she was ‘Doctor Abbie.’

Or maybe it was because people would be bringing their

precious children to her to have decisions made about potentially major surgery. She would have to weigh up the risks versus benefits for other people's children when she was so acutely aware of how it felt to be a parent herself. What the repercussions of those risks might be.

Oh, for heaven's sake, Abbie scolded herself. 'It's only an outpatient clinic. Hardly life or death.'

There was an expectation, however, that she would start again with the really high-pressure work as soon as possible and get up to reasonable speed so that she wouldn't lose the skills that had won her such a prestigious position in the first place. The expectation wasn't just coming from the Hunter brothers or the head of the paediatric surgical department at the Lighthouse Children's Hospital.

It was coming from Abbie herself and that was why she'd told Ethan that she would start again so soon.

The passion that had led her into this career represented a part of herself that she had no intention of losing. First and foremost, it was who she was. Being a wife and a mother might be just as important but that part of her couldn't survive in isolation. Not happily, anyway, and if she wasn't happy she couldn't do her best. *Be her best.*

This nervousness that made her stomach churn was very unfamiliar, though. Disconcerting. It was only an outpatient clinic she was heading for, she reminded herself again. One of her favourite parts of her job, where she could spend time with

young patients and their families, either exploring the possible routes they could take to make a positive difference in their lives or checking up on progress and getting the satisfaction of seeing that difference.

Why was she so nervous?

Because she felt rusty from being away from the action for too long? Those kinds of nerves might be expected when she was back in Theatre with a scalpel in her hand but they would be welcome then because she'd know they would keep her focussed and would evaporate as her confidence returned.

This was different. This was the first time she would be working with Rafael since she'd accepted the ultimatum that meant their marriage was over. Would working together make things better or worse? Could it break through the polite distance they'd ended up in last night before Rafael had excused himself to do a post-operative check on his most recent patient?

Apparently not.

Rafael had arrived before Abbie and, against the background of a crowded waiting room, he was sorting files with the clinic's nurse manager, Nicky. Like Abbie, he was wearing an unbuttoned white coat over his professional uniform of tidy trousers and a neat shirt and tie. He had a name badge on his pocket, too. Nothing as frivolous as a smiling flower, though. His was a far more dignified standard issue with the tiny lighthouse logo and his full name.

Abbie hadn't even offered to get him a fun badge when she'd

had her own made. She'd always known the limits to which his pride would let him bend.

Or she'd thought she'd known. Until it had come to the crunch.

Both Rafael and the nurse manager looked up as Abbie approached.

'Abbie.' Nicky's smile was welcoming. 'It's so good to see you. I was delighted to hear that you'd be sharing the clinic this morning. I'll bet your registrar was delighted as well.'

Rafael's smile wasn't nearly as welcoming as Nicky's but at least it *was* a smile. One that was at odds with the wary look in his eyes. Surely Rafael wasn't nervous about working with *her* again? No...

She'd never known him to be nervous about anything. Excited, certainly, like he'd been when they'd seen the stripes on the pregnancy test stick that had meant they were on the way to becoming parents. Fearful, maybe, like he'd been when they'd been waiting for those first test results to come back and explain why their newborn baby was failing to thrive in such a dramatic fashion. And angry, definitely, like he'd been when she'd refused to accept his decision that enough was enough when it came to putting Ella through any more misery.

But nervous? This was disconcerting. Abbie had to force herself to return Nicky's smile of welcome.

'I did hear that you've been incredibly busy. It's lovely to see you, too, Nicky.'

'And I hear that Ella's doing well. That's such good news.'

‘It certainly is.’ Abbie slid a sideways glance at Rafael but he seemed absorbed in the list of patients. He eased a set of patient notes out of a pile and put it to one side.

‘How long before you can take her home?’

Rafael’s head jerked up at this query and Abbie could feel the intensity of his glance and it felt...accusing? This wasn’t something they’d had a chance to talk about last night. How could they, when Abbie wasn’t even sure whether she *had* a home to take Ella back to?

‘Um...it’ll be a few weeks, I think. We need to see how things go. Certainly no decision will be made until she’s had her T cells checked at the three-month mark.’

Which gave them some breathing space at least. Time to sort out where they were as far as their marriage went. Or how they might share Ella’s parenting in the future.

The noise level in the waiting room was increasing. A scuffle had broken out near the toy box and more than one child was crying. A woman carrying a well-wrapped baby was standing near the door and looking as if she would prefer to turn around and go out again. Her partner was trying to persuade her to take a seat. Nicky surveyed the scene and squared her shoulders.

‘We’d better get this show on the road. I’ll get the first patients into the consulting rooms. I’ve put you in Room 3, Abbie.’

‘Cheers.’

As Nicky moved away, it felt as if Abbie and Rafael were almost alone, sandwiched between the waiting-room chaos and

the rest of the staff, who were busy organising the rooms for the consultations and tests that were scheduled.

‘Hi...’ Abbie offered a smile. ‘You okay?’

‘I’m fine.’ Rafael smiled back. Another polite smile. ‘And you? That chair in Ella’s room can’t be that comfortable to sleep in.’

‘I’m used to it. I’ve been sleeping in one of those chairs for so long now that a bed will probably feel weird.’

And there it was again. A slap in the face. A reminder of where she’d been for the last three months. An echo of the awkward moment last night when Rafael had asked if she would come home to sleep and she’d said that changing something that big in Ella’s routine was out of the question just yet.

‘How is she this morning?’

‘Good. She ate a little stewed apple and porridge for breakfast. It’s great that she already knows so many of the nurses on the ward. She’s got Melanie today and I don’t think she even noticed me leaving to come here.’

‘I’ll get up and see her as soon as we’ve finished here. I... wasn’t sure whether to disturb your early-morning routine.’

Keeping his distance? Abbie stifled a sigh. ‘She’s your daughter, Rafe. You can spend as much time with her as you want.’

His nod was almost curt. He reached for a pile of notes and slid them along the counter. ‘Here are your patients for this morning.’

It wasn’t rocket science to see that her pile was much smaller than his. Or that the names on the list had been divided far more

equally. Abbie raised her eyebrows. Rafael shrugged.

‘I’ve added some cases to my list. It’s your first morning back, Abbie. I wanted to make things a little easier for you.’

Abbie stared at him. ‘If I didn’t think I could cope, I wouldn’t be here.’

The words came out a little more vehemently than she’d intended but it was bad enough feeling nervous about her own performance. She didn’t need other people doubting her abilities.

He mirrored her raised eyebrows and gave another one of those subtle shrugs that was part of what kept people so aware of his birthplace. *As you wish*, it said. *It’s of no importance to me.*

Except it had been of importance or he wouldn’t have done it. And it was a generous gesture when he probably had too much to do today anyway. Maybe she should compromise. Abbie scanned the list rapidly.

‘I’d like to keep this little girl.’ She tapped the list. ‘Grade-three microtia. That’s one of my favourite things to do.’

Rafael knew that. He’d been in Theatre with her more than once as she’d tackled the delicate surgery to create an ear from the birth deformity that had left nothing more than a peanut-shaped blob as an outer ear. Life-changing surgery for a child who was being teased at school, and this little girl was seven years old.

‘And this one...’ She pulled another set of notes from the pile. ‘Seven-month-old ready for repair of his cleft lip and palate. Oh...it’s Angus. I remember us seeing him for his first

consultation. That's another one I'd love to do...'

Her voice trailed away. The sometimes massive surgery needed to correct this kind of birth defect was a procedure that both she and Rafael were known to be exceptionally good at. Together. Rafael's skill at shifting bones and moulding features in conjunction with her ability to join tiny blood vessels and nerves and then suture to leave almost invisible scars had made them a team that people came from all over the country to consult via the Hunter Clinic.

Would she want to do it by herself?

'Maybe I'll leave this one for you.' Abbie couldn't bring herself to look up at Rafael. 'I'll take Harriet back, though. I've been wondering how those burn scars are settling. She must be due for her next surgery.'

Rafael simply nodded, took the first set of notes from his pile and headed to the first consulting room. Abbie took her first set and went past his door to Room 3. Separate lists. Separate rooms. Separate operating theatres even? Was this how it was going to be from now on?

Even when they'd seen different patients in the past, they'd always been popping into each other's rooms to get a second opinion or simply brainstorm a case. This felt wrong but it was also a relief. Perhaps they needed time to get used to working together again. Or maybe they actually needed to find out if they *could* work together when their personal lives were in such disarray. Being too close too soon could well mean that it would

never happen.

There was no reason why they couldn't define some professional boundaries and make it work. Was there?

Apparently there was. The message Abbie got later that day, asking her to attend a meeting at the Hunter Clinic, had all the undertones of a 'Please explain.'

'Urgent message, Mr de Luca.'

'What is it, Nicole?' The expression on the young woman's face suggested that his secretary was anxious. She was right behind him as he kept moving into his office.

'A meeting at the Hunter Clinic at five p.m. With Leo and Ethan Hunter. In Leo's office. Gwen said she's checked your calendar and you're available, so...'

The sentence was left hanging but Nicole might as well have finished it. The unsaid words were that no excuses would be acceptable short of the direst emergency.

'Did she say what it was about?'

'No. Shall I order a cab for you?'

'I suppose you'll have to,' Rafael growled. He didn't have any consultations booked at the exclusive Hunter Clinic that he could think of so he had no idea why it was suddenly so important to meet with the Hunter brothers this afternoon, and if he did have a space on his calendar, he'd much rather be spending that time with Ella.

Now he'd barely have time to eat the sandwich he'd just bought on the run for a late lunch. He dropped the plastic triangular

package on his desk, along with the other purchase he'd made in the gift shop beside the café.

‘Oh, what’s that?’ Nicole’s face lit up with a wide smile. ‘It’s gorgeous.’ She reached out to pick up the huge teddy bear that was wearing a sparkly pink tutu and had pink ballet shoes on its feet. She hugged the bear. ‘I love it. It’s so soft and squishy. And *huge*

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