



200 HARLEY STREET

**AMY
ANDREWS**
The Tortured
Hero



Amy Andrews

200 Harley Street: The Tortured Hero

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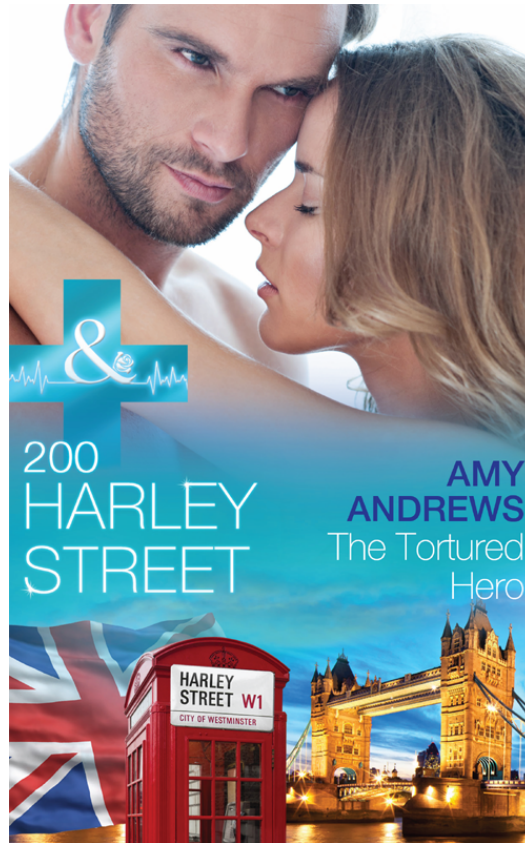
Reunited with his past...Running the Hunter Clinic's charity operation has given surgeon and ex-soldier Ethan Hunter a new lease of life. His reconstructive work with wounded soldiers and civilians helps block out his army traumas. But when Ethan learns that he'll be working alongside beautiful surgeon Olivia Fairchild – the woman whose heart he regretfully broke – he can't help but remember the passion they once shared...and is surprised by the sinfully delicious sparks her touch still ignites...! Is Olivia the only woman to finally provide peace for this long-tortured hero? 200 HARLEY STREET Glamour, intensity, desire – the lives and loves of London's hottest team of surgeons!

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Praise for Amy Andrews:

‘There wasn’t one part in this book where I wanted to stop. Once I’d started it was hard even to read the ending, but once I did it made everything seem right. I am an avid fan of Ms Andrews, and once any reader peruses this book they will be too.’

—*CataRomance.com* on TOP-NOTCH SURGEON, PREGNANT NURSE

‘A wonderfully poignant tale of old passions, second chances and the healing power of love ... an exceptionally realistic romance that will touch your heart.’

—*Contemporary Romance Reviews* on HOW TO MEND A BROKEN HEART

**200 Harley Street:
The Tortured Hero
Amy Andrews**



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Dedication

For Carol, Scarlet, Alison, Lynne, Kate, Annie and Louisa.
It was fun working with you ladies—
let's do it again some time!

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CHAPTER ONE

ETHAN HUNTER NEEDED a drink.

Bad.

After five hours of complicated surgery his legs ached like a bitch and finding the bottom of a bottle was the only sure-fire way to soothe the fiery path of hot talons tearing from thigh to calf.

It was that or painkillers, and Ethan refused to be dependent on drugs.

‘We’re heading to Drake’s, Ethan,’ a voice with a thick Scottish brogue said from behind. ‘Why don’t you join us?’

A sudden silence descended into the male change-room as Ethan turned around to find Jock, the anaesthetist from the surgery, addressing him. He looked around at the four others, who’d all been chatting merrily until now. Clearly none of them were keen on having Ethan join them.

Jock didn’t look particularly enthused either.

Not that he could blame them. The longer the surgery had taken, the more his legs had ached, and the more tense and terse he’d become. Accidentally dropping an instrument had been the last straw, and kicking it childishly across the floor until it clanged against the metallic kickboard of the opposite wall hadn’t exactly been his most professional moment.

He hated prima donna surgeons, but his simmering frustration at his shot concentration *and* the pain had bubbled over at that point.

Even so, he didn’t need or want their *duty* invitation, no matter how much he craved some alcoholic fortification. Ethan was just fine with drinking alone.

In fact, he preferred it.

‘No thanks, Jock,’ he said. ‘I’ve got to get back to the clinic.’

Which was true. There was an important case file he needed to familiarise himself with on Leo’s desk. And some classy fine malt whisky to go with it.

He looked around at his colleagues. ‘Thanks for your help in there, everyone. Good job.’

There was a general murmuring of goodnights and then Ethan was alone. He sank gratefully onto the bench seat just behind him, easing his legs, muscles screaming, out in front of him. He shut his eyes as the pain lessened considerably and sat there for long minutes as the rush of relief anaesthetised the lingering tension in the rest of his body.

It felt so damn good to be off them!

But he couldn’t sit here forever. Work called. He reluctantly opened his eyes and reached for his clothes.

The black cab pulled up in front of the imposing white Victorian facade on Harley Street. Like the many clinics and physician’s offices that called Harley Street home, the Hunter Clinic was as exclusive as the address implied.

Ethan’s father, celebrated plastic surgeon James Hunter, had founded it over three decades ago, and it had gone on to become world-renowned as much for its humanitarian and charity work with civilian and military casualties of war as for its A-list clients.

Thanks largely to his brother Leo.

Certainly not thanks to their father and the scandal that had not only resulted in his premature death through a heart attack but had almost caused the closure of the clinic over a decade ago.

Again, thanks to Leo’s drive and commitment, it had been avoided.

Not that Ethan gave a rat’s about any of that right at this moment. Thinking about his father and his previously rocky relationship with his brother always got things churned up inside, and tonight he was barely coping with standing upright.

Ethan paid the driver and hauled himself out of the back through sheer willpower alone. The only thing that kept him putting one foot in front of the other was the lure of Leo’s whisky.

Ethan grimaced as he limped through the corridors to his brother's office, holding on to the polished wooden handrails for added support. His badly mangled ankle and knee felt ready to give at any second, and the effort it took for his muscles to support them was bringing him out in a sweat.

Ethan wished he hadn't neglected his physio so much, or ignored Lizzie—Leo's wife and his ex-home visit nurse—when she'd scolded him about not using his stick. He hated the damn stick, and the questions it inevitably aroused, and he didn't have time in his busy schedule for the intensive physio required—but at this moment in time he was prepared to embrace both.

Not that it would help him now.

But what *would* help beckoned just beyond Leo's door, and Ethan had never been so glad to get to his brother's office. It had once belonged to his father, and he'd used to hate being summoned here by the *great man* himself, in a rage over some imagined slight or other, as his father had slowly spiralled downwards into alcoholic depression.

Thankfully those days were gone, but it was pleasing to know that a decanter of finest whisky could still be found within the walls of this office—even if it was rarely touched.

The last ten paces to the bookshelves behind Leo's desk were agony, but ultimately worth it as Ethan wrapped his hand around the satisfyingly full decanter. He splashed two fingers of amber liquid into a glass tumbler that sat nearby and threw it straight back.

Searing heat hit the back of his throat and almost instantly tentacles of warmth unfurled outwards from his belly. He poured himself another one and threw that back too, enjoying how the spread of heat pushed back the relentless creep of pain.

A third glass was poured, but before Ethan drank it he picked up both it and the decanter in one hand and reached for the back of the plush leather swivel chair with the other. Leaning heavily against the solid piece of furniture, he dragged it towards him, thankful for the wheels that made it easier, throwing himself down into it, groaning as the weight came off his legs.

He shut his eyes on a deep sigh as screamingly tense muscles found release. Nursing his drink and the decanter against his chest, he flopped his head back into the cushiony leather headrest, tilted the chair backwards and swivelled gently from side to side, enjoying the rush from the twin sensations of heat and relief.

Ethan wasn't sure how long he sat there, idly twisting from side to side, his eyes shut, his tired muscles almost jelly now they'd been given permission to relax. He just knew it felt good to be non-weight-bearing.

Bliss. Ecstasy. Paradise.

But he *was* here for a reason—apart from the damn good whisky. He dragged his eyes open, knowing he couldn't put it off any longer. Finally acknowledging that was exactly what he *was* doing.

On Leo's desk there was a chart. The chart of a child with a terribly disfiguring condition that Ethan could help.

He could change little Ama's life.

He *would* change her life.

But Ama's case was complicated in more ways than one. Her condition was complex and would require multiple surgeries to correct.

But that wasn't the issue. Ethan thrived on complex.

It was the strings attached to the case that were the problem. Big, fat strings involving someone from his past and the unholy mess he'd made in his selfish, juvenile need to hurt his brother.

Olivia Fairchild.

Olivia's charity Fair Go was sponsoring Ama and her mother and an interpreter to travel from sub-Saharan Africa to London and the Hunter Clinic, for surgery and rehabilitation.

And she would be here—tomorrow.

Olivia who'd loved him. And he'd thrown it in her face by using her to get back at Leo. Flaunting her in front of his brother, knowing how much Leo had fallen for her, taunting him with the woman he couldn't have.

Olivia had been heartbroken when she'd realised. The look in her eyes that terrible, fateful day ... He shuddered thinking about it now. The huge row he and Leo had got into, not knowing Olivia was listening to every ugly word. Him admitting that he was only interested in the sexy Aussie doc because Leo wanted her for himself.

It hadn't been true—not really. At the beginning, maybe, but not at that point. He'd enjoyed her company and there'd been something about her that had made him forget all his *stuff* when he was in her arms. The darkness that had been with him from his teenage years. The anguish over his mother's premature death. His dysfunctional relationship with his father. All had been lifted whenever she'd held him close.

But the damage had been done and his betrayal, his hurting her, had been unforgivable. *Toxic*. That was the word she'd used to describe his and Leo's relationship just before she'd fled back to Australia. And she'd been right. It had been toxic. And a lot of that had been on him.

But it wasn't any longer.

He'd been so angry and self-destructive back then. Angry at his mother for dying and the ensuing scandal over her infidelities, angry at his father for being weak and taking the easy, boozy way out after Francesca's death, and angrier at Leo for playing protector.

Protecting James from himself instead of confronting him over the inept drunk he'd become. And protecting Ethan from his father's wildly fluctuating mental state—from deep depression to manic rage—denying Ethan the opportunity to vent all his anger, frustration and loss.

Ethan cringed as he thought about what a bastard he'd been. He'd taken what he'd wanted with no regard for Olivia's feelings. Just stringing her along, thumbing his nose at her love, knowing how much Leo had had to grit his teeth every time he'd seen them together.

He'd thought himself so far above love back then—that he was immune to it. What a fool! It had taken a small, fierce, passionate firecracker of a woman from a foreign war-torn land to teach him how wrong he'd been. Maybe that was his punishment for Olivia?

Learning what love really meant and having it cruelly snatched away.

Ethan took a deep swallow of his drink, beating back memories of Aaliyah. He didn't need *that* guilt on top of his Olivia guilt tonight.

No whisky bottle would be safe.

Olivia ...

Had she forgiven him? Did he even deserve her forgiveness?

He hoped so.

Or at least that they could put the past behind them. Because not only would he be seeing her tomorrow but he'd be working with her too. As a paediatric reconstructive surgeon, Olivia had been given clearance by Leo not only to assist in Ama's surgeries but to scrub in on any of the Hunter Clinic's cases during her stay in London.

The humanitarian side of the clinic, which was Ethan's baby, worked with charities from all round the world—Olivia's charity being just one. Consequently it had a reasonably robust operating schedule—many of the cases were kids. There would be plenty of opportunities for Olivia to keep her skills up to date while she juggled her hosting responsibilities for Ama.

And Ethan knew having another pair of hands—skilled hands—would allow them to do so much more.

But team work was critical.

He couldn't change what had happened in the past, and he was pretty damn sure she wouldn't want to rehash it either, but he could treat her with the respect she deserved going forward.

He took another sip of his whisky as the questions circled round and round his brain. Questions he didn't have answers for. Questions that could drive him nuts.

That could drive him to the bottom of Leo's decanter.

But he'd come too close to being his father, to taking the easy way out, a while back—he wasn't going there again.

He sighed and reached for the heavy walnut desk, grabbing hold and dragging the chair closer, trying to use his legs as little as possible. And there it was, right on the edge in the middle of the desk, Ama's chart.

Ethan placed the decanter and his glass on the table and pushed all thoughts of Olivia aside as he opened the chart and started to read.

Olivia Fairchild was late. She checked her watch for the hundredth time as she paid the taxi driver. The cool October evening, a far cry from the heat of Africa, closed in around her as the taxi took off and she turned to face the familiar building on Harley Street.

Late or not, she took a moment to collect herself and clear her throat of the emotion that she'd been battling on the cab-ride. She blinked back stupid tears. Getting Ama and her mother settled into their room at the Lighthouse Children's Hospital had been more emotional than she'd expected. She felt flustered and off-kilter rather than cool and professional, which was what she'd hoped to be when she came face to face with her past.

But Ama had got to her tonight—just as she had from day one. She'd been so apprehensive of her strange new world, and so distressed when her mother had left the room with the interpreter to attend to some paperwork, that Olivia had felt completely out of her depth.

For nine years Ama had known nothing other than a small village in sub-Saharan Africa where she'd been closeted away, not allowed to go to school or play with the other kids because of her disfiguring condition.

London must be terrifying.

Olivia, who had spent a lot of the past six weeks building a rapport with Ama, had tried her best to comfort the girl, but sometimes only mother-love would do and Ama had cried and cried until her mother returned.

And, oh, the way she'd clung had been gut-wrenching!

Olivia had been able to feel the frantic beat of Ama's heart through her painfully skinny ribs as the little girl had held onto her for dear life. And Olivia had clung right back, rocking her slightly, shushing her gently, feeling so inadequate in the face of the girl's anguish.

It had reminded her of the day she'd found Ama and her mother, both wailing and crying in the street, clinging to each other as two men engaged in a heated discussion had grabbed at them, trying to pull them apart. She hadn't been able to bear it.

A passing car hooted, bringing her back to the here and now, and Olivia shivered as the Hunter Clinic came back into focus. She took a deep breath, steeling herself to enter.

Her heart pounded as she mounted the stairs and pushed through the heavy doors. After-hours the clinic was hushed and deserted and she took a moment to absorb it all. Except for the stark whiteness of the updated décor, visible even in the darkened interior, it looked the same as she remembered—exclusive, luxurious, old money. It smelled the same. It *felt* the same.

And yet it didn't. It was familiar ... yet not.

Maybe it was because *she* was different? Not the same starry-eyed Olivia who had trusted her heart to the Hunter boys only to be used in their toxic games and have it crushed into the dirt.

Older. Wiser.

Stronger.

It was warm inside and she undid the toggles on her duffle coat as her boot heels tapped on the exquisite grey and black marble floor on her way to Leo's office. It felt like a lifetime ago now since she'd walked these corridors on her frequent trips to see Ethan.

Ethan.

Olivia's heart skipped a beat as her stride faltered.

No. She would not think about him tonight. She wasn't here to see Ethan. She was here to see Leo.

Ethan would come tomorrow. And tomorrow would be soon enough.

Despite only the most subdued light, coming from lamps placed in discreet alcoves, her feet took her to Leo's office without any real direction from her brain. Once there she didn't stop to give herself time to think or doubt, she just reached up to knock on the door, surprised when it swung silently open under the weight of her closed hand.

For a moment, peering into the sumptuous darkened office, with just a desk lamp illuminating the room, she thought the man sitting at the desk, head bent over a chart, looked like Leo and she smiled.

'Leo,' she called from the doorway, her voice hushed as seemed appropriate in the quietness of the deserted building.

Ethan, who'd been too intent to register the knock, looked up as his brother's name spilled from Olivia's lips, and even a decade down the track he still felt the impact of that mouth.

Wide and sexy, forming a natural pout that had always fascinated him. A mouth he'd kissed.

He'd *missed*.

It was a startling realisation for a man who'd felt dead inside for the past year. And he wasn't sure he liked it.

What the hell was she doing here? Didn't her flight arrive early tomorrow morning?

'Olivia,' he acknowledged, watching as her eyes, always two huge chocolate pools shimmering with emotional intensity, grew even rounder.

He should stand—innate good manners dictated that he should—but his legs felt about as supportive as wet noodles and he didn't trust them. Thankfully Olivia seemed too stunned to call him on it.

Olivia blinked as all the oxygen in the room was sucked right out. 'Oh ...'

Ethan. Not Leo. *Ethan.* Her heart pounded in time to the drumming of his name through her brain.

Ethan. Ethan. Ethan.

'I'm sorry, I know I'm late, but ...' She nervously checked her watch. 'I'm supposed to be meeting Leo here.'

Ethan hadn't been sure what they'd say to each other when he and Olivia came face to face again. They'd spoken twice on the phone about the case, which had been brisk and professional, but he'd thought it would be different when they were looking at each other. That old hurts might have fizzled out.

Evidently not, judging by the wariness in Olivia's startled gaze.

Her first words were not warm and welcoming. There was no *let bygones be bygones* about her demeanour. She hadn't smiled for *him* as she had when she'd mistaken him for Leo. And, perversely, it bugged him.

There was a wariness, a distance in her gaze. As if they were strangers instead of ex-lovers. And a part of him wanted to snatch her up, taste that pouty mouth again, remind her how good they'd been together.

If only he could get up without falling flat on his face!

'He's at home,' Ethan said abruptly, angry at the direction of his thoughts.

For God's sake, he was lucky she hadn't slapped him in the face. Clearly he wasn't thinking straight. *Clearly* he was just too damn tired to be facing ghosts tonight.

Olivia frowned. 'Oh ...'

But ... she'd called Leo the moment they'd landed and they'd arranged it. She delved around inside her bag for her mobile phone, pulling it out. Immediately she noticed two missed calls and a text—all from Leo.

Apologies. Something came up. Get Ethan up to speed and you can catch me up tomorrow.

'Something came up,' Olivia said, looking from the phone to Ethan as she relayed the text.

Ethan grunted as a rather unpleasant thought occurred to him. Leo had texted him during surgery, asking him to familiarise himself with Ama's chart—*on his desk*—before the morning. Had Leo set this up so he and Olivia could get their first meeting over and done with in private—to give them room and privacy to clear the air?

His relationship with his brother was the best it had been in years, but he didn't appreciate being manipulated like this.

'I bet it did,' Ethan said dryly.

Olivia put her phone back in her bag. 'He wants me to get you up to speed.'

Ethan had sometimes forgotten, just looking at her, that Olivia was Australian. Her flawless peaches and cream complexion seemed eminently English, and it was only when she opened her mouth and the flat Aussie drawl came out that he remembered. That and the opal ring she still wore on the middle finger of her right hand—a gift from her parents for her eighteenth birthday.

'No time like the present,' he agreed grimly.

If Leo *had* set them up then it would be foolish not to use the time wisely.

'Come in.' He gestured, suddenly realising she was still standing just inside the doorway. 'Take a seat.' He indicated with his head for her to take the one on the other side of Leo's desk.

Her movements seemed awkward and unsure as she drew closer. She certainly didn't seem to be in any hurry to reach her destination, and he waited impatiently for her to take her seat, his gaze drifting to the way the denim of her jeans clung to legs still as slender as he remembered.

As she drew level his gaze moved up. Her red turtle-necked skivvy was mostly hidden by the thick navy jacket she was wearing, but it did emphasise the length of her neck to perfection. A neck he'd explored in intimate detail.

Olivia was conscious of his gaze on her as she moved into the room. Heat flared in her belly as she remembered the way he used to look at her—all intensity and wicked, wicked purpose.

Before he broke her heart.

She was thankful for the thick wool of her coat hiding nipples suddenly taking on a mind of their own.

She didn't have time for recalcitrant nipples.

They were two professionals, working together for the good of a patient. Yes, they had history, but if they kept things collegial, if they kept their focus on Ama, they'd be fine.

She was here to do a job and then get the hell out of Dodge.

She'd been burned by this man before. And fire had already claimed too much of what she'd loved.

Olivia sat, glancing briefly around at Leo's office. It didn't appear to have changed much since the days when it had belonged to his father. All dark and masculine—a stark contrast to the bright modern white outside.

Her gaze returned to Ethan and for long moments they just looked at each other. His lids were half shuttered; his gaze was totally guarded. He looked so ... *distant* and she shivered.

He picked up the nearby whisky decanter and splashed some into a glass, silently asking her with a raising of his eyebrow if she wanted any. She shook her head, surprised to see him drinking, knowing how much he'd despised his father for his weakness where the amber liquid was concerned.

Keep it professional, Liv.

'You've changed,' she blurted out.

And it was nothing to do with the drinking. Ethan's eyes were the same deep brown as hers, but he had those amazing golden flecks in them that used to *glow* with fire and passion. He'd been so angry back then that they'd flashed and flared all the time as he'd struggled with his demons—his father's alcoholism, his mother's death and what he'd perceived as his brother's molly-coddling.

But she'd also seen them glow and flash at other times too. At work when he was totally absorbed in a surgery. And in bed ...

There was no glow tonight. Just a dull glimpse of what had been. It was as if it had been snuffed out. Suffocated.

What had happened to turn those gorgeous flashing eyes so damn bleak? And his perfect chiselled face so damn gaunt? His severe haircut didn't help. Nor did the weary lines around his eyes. Not to mention that he needed a shave. His shaggy regrowth looked more salt than pepper at the grand old age of thirty-five.

Was he suffering some kind of PTSD from being blown half to hell during his last tour?

'You haven't,' he said, interrupting her reverie.

It was Olivia's turn to snort. 'Yes, I have.'

She'd been through more than her fair share of heartbreak these past ten years, and although she'd come through it stronger it had changed her utterly.

Ethan paused slightly, then acknowledged the truth of it with a nod. She was right. She was more reserved, less carefree. Her gaze was not as open, was more ... *distant*.

Had that been his unforgivable actions or just getting older? Life in general?

Or had something else caused the coolness in her eyes?

'I just don't need to resort to whisky to prove it.'

Ethan felt the accusation hit him in the chest with all the power of a sledgehammer.

He threw back the contents of the glass and slammed it down on the desktop. 'It's been a long day, Olivia,' he said, his jaw so tight it felt as if it was going to crumble from the pressure. 'Surgery is over and I'm off duty. A few glasses of Scotland's best isn't going to hurt.'

Olivia had never been one to beat around the bush and she wasn't about to start now. Clearly something was eating at Ethan—something had snuffed out the light. And, whilst she might not know what it was, she sure as hell knew whisky wasn't the answer.

'I'm sure that's exactly how your father started out.'

CHAPTER TWO

ETHAN'S HEART POUNDED a furious tattoo in his chest. Having his father shoved in his face was always a red rag to a bull, but pure overproof rage surged through his system at her matter-of-fact taunt. If anyone knew the location of his soft underbelly it was Olivia. And she'd never been afraid to call him on his crap.

It was the *Australian way*, she'd assured him all those years ago.

He gripped the edge of the desk and lurched to his feet, too angry even to register the limp protest of gelatinous muscles. 'Go to hell, Olivia,' he snapped.

Her words stung. They stung hard. Because they'd found their mark so accurately. After he'd been discharged from the hospital in Germany and returned to the UK to recuperate from his injuries he *had* drunk way too much.

Trying to block out the pain and the dreams and the guilt.

Leo's email had saved him. The offer to come back to the clinic and head up its humanitarian programme had been just the right bait to wave in front of him and he'd reached for it like a drowning man, knowing that he was treading the same slippery slope his father had trod before he'd slipped away altogether.

But he wasn't that guy any more. And it infuriated him to be pigeonholed after a few minutes' reacquaintance.

She had no freaking idea what he'd been through.

Olivia stood too, refusing to have him standing over her, trying to intimidate her with his height and breadth and sheer masculine presence—which he still had in spades despite his more mature looks.

So, she'd annoyed him—*good!*

Maybe it would make him realise that sitting alone in an office at nine o'clock at night with a decanter full of whisky wasn't the answer to whatever was eating him.

'I'll follow you down, shall I?' she enquired calmly.

Ethan pressed his closed fists into the hard wood of the desktop and prayed for patience. He didn't need her judgement—he could do that plenty on his own.

'I think you can bring me up to speed in the morning,' he said through clenched teeth. He was too tired for this crap. 'I'm going home. See yourself out.'

At least going home was his plan, but by the time he'd taken a few paces the adrenaline from his surge of anger had worn off and the message from his quad muscles that they were too fatigued to hold him upright had finally broken through the righteous indignation swamping his brain.

His legs buckled.

Olivia leapt forward in alarm as Ethan wobbled and then toppled sideways, reaching out for the desk wildly in an attempt to stop himself from falling on his butt. She grabbed hold of his arm and between her and the desk they saved him from being a rather inelegant crumpled heap on the expensive Turkish rug.

'What the hell, Ethan?' she said as he leaned heavily against her, struggling for balance. 'How much *have* you had to drink?' she asked.

Ethan sucked air in and out between his teeth as his muscles protested. 'Not the booze,' he choked out, one hand reaching for a screaming thigh muscle. 'It's my damn legs.'

Olivia believed him. He definitely wasn't drunk. His words weren't slurred and he didn't stink of alcohol. In fact, with her nose damn near the vicinity of his throat, she could say for sure that he smelled the way he always had—of utter hedonism. Total crack for the olfactory system. It swamped over her now in a sweet pheromone cloud, and her body responded accordingly.

Honestly, the man was waging chemical warfare on her body and he didn't even know it, thanks to whatever was going on with his legs.

'Here, come on,' she said, staggering under the weight of him a little as she slung his arm over her shoulder. 'Over to the lounge.'

Ethan didn't have much of a choice. His thighs were trembling now from the effort of just standing and he felt as weak as a kitten. She led and he followed, and he felt about as potent and virile as a postage stamp.

'I'm fine,' he said as soon as they were near enough to the couch to reach for it. 'Let go.'

Olivia eased away as he flopped down onto the firm leather of the elegant Chesterfield and gave a relieved groan, his hands automatically reaching for his thigh muscles, his eyes shutting, his head flopping back as he kneaded up and down their length. She knelt down in front of him, his knees either side of her shoulders, resting back on her haunches, and waited for him to recover.

It took a few minutes for the creases in his face to start to iron out a little. 'What happened?' she asked quietly.

His hands stopped their massaging briefly before starting up again.

'Is it from when you were injured during your last tour?' she prompted, when it didn't look as if he was about to answer her any time soon.

His eyes flicked open and Olivia was struck again by how dull and lifeless they looked. No spark. No glitter.

'How did you know?'

She gave him a half-smile, trying to lighten the mood. 'We *do* have newspapers in Australia, you know. And this new-fangled thing called the worldwide web—which, you know, even goes all the way to Australia.' Her smile died on her lips when it was apparent he wasn't going to join her. 'You'll be amazed at what you can find on it,' she murmured.

Ethan pulled his head off the cushioned comfort of the lounge and pierced her with his gaze. Her honey-brown hair fell in wavy disorder around her face and he remembered vividly how it had felt spread out across his chest.

'You kept tabs on me?'

Olivia sucked in a breath as his low, gravelly voice swept hot fingers along the muscles deep inside her. And was that a flare bursting to life in those golden flecks?

'No,' she said, annoyed that even tired and in pain he could think such a thing.

Clearly his ego hadn't been injured.

'I haven't spent the past decade *pinning* over you, Ethan Hunter, if that's what you think,' she clarified, her voice snippy even to her own ears. 'I researched the clinic online when I was looking at partnering with you guys. The newspaper articles about how you evacuated an entire hospital that was being heavily shelled showed up in the search.'

Ethan dropped his head back again and shut his eyes against the annoyance in hers and the echo of memories. He'd been meaning to check up on her over the years, but military life had been full-on and there'd always been an excuse not to.

And then he'd met Aaliyah.

Olivia watched him a little longer, the kneading of his long fingers hypnotic. Part of her wanted to take over—the Olivia of ten years ago would have.

This Olivia curled her hands into fists by her sides and said, 'What are your injuries?'

Ethan sighed, lifting his head off the lounge again. 'Legs shot to hell. Right knee and ankle torn up by shrapnel.'

'Have they been reconstructed?'

He nodded. 'As best they could. They're never going to be the same again, though.'

‘Do you have some kind of physio regime, because your legs don’t seem to be very strong. I’d have thought you’d need some kind of a walking aid—a stick or something?’ She frowned, thinking back to the articles she’d read. ‘It’s been about a year, right?’

Ethan grunted. ‘Yes,’ he said tersely. ‘And, yes, I have a regime.’

It took Olivia a second or two to realise she’d asked the wrong question. ‘Do you *follow* it?’ She folded her arms. ‘Religiously?’

Ethan glared at her. God, she sounded like Lizzie. And Leo. And a lot of well-meaning other people who didn’t have a freaking clue about the realities of his injuries.

‘It’s none of your damn business,’ he growled.

‘It *is* my damn business if you’re going to collapse on the floor in the middle of operating on Ama.’

Ethan bristled at the implication, and at the unflinching demand he saw in her eyes. She was calling him on his professionalism and leaving him in no doubt that she was holding him to account. It rankled. But still, it was preferable to the pity he usually saw reflected in other people’s eyes.

The *poor you* look that got under his skin like an army of marching ants.

She didn’t seem to give a damn about the fact of his injuries or even how he’d got them—just that he could do his job. She was being a doctor. And it was in equal parts satisfying and irritating

‘I’m not going to be collapsing on anyone,’ he snapped. ‘I just stood for an extraordinary amount of time today.’

‘Which shouldn’t matter if you’d been diligent with your physio,’ Olivia said.

She knew Ethan. She knew he wouldn’t respond to her empathy. God knew, the empathy and protection Leo had tried to force upon him all those years ago had driven a huge wedge between the brothers and she’d been just one of the casualties.

She knew he wouldn’t let her massage his legs or talk about what had happened. But, having worked out in the field herself, in places no one should have to live, she did know that military men responded best to tough love.

‘I’ve been a little busy trying to establish the humanitarian side of the clinic,’ he snapped. ‘I do what I can when I can.’

Olivia drummed her fingers against her biceps. ‘Well, it looks like it’s not enough. You should be stronger than this by now.’

Ethan knew she was right, but ... it *had* been an unusual day. He let his head flop back again.

He needed to make time to get stronger in his legs. He’d gone from two months in hospital and multiple surgeries to home and feeling sorry for himself to throwing everything he had into his new role at the Hunter Clinic—none of which had been conducive to the hard yards he needed to do.

As Olivia watched he seemed to melt into the couch, exhaustion in every line of his body, and part of her wanted to lay her cheek on his nearby knee and just sit with him in silence. She was surprised to feel such tenderness for him after what had happened. But then the heat in her belly had been a surprise too, after all these years.

She nudged his knee with her shoulder. ‘*Have* you got a stick you should be using?’

Ethan lifted a hand off his thigh and massaged his forehead with it. He wished she’d just be quiet, already—she was like Jiminy freaking Cricket. ‘Yes ...’ he said on a sigh.

‘And the reason you don’t appear to have it with you is ...?’

Ethan lifted his head. ‘I hate the damn thing,’ he muttered.

Olivia raised an eyebrow. Did he realise how much he sounded like a petulant child? ‘Does it affect your tough guy image, Ethan? I wouldn’t have thought you so vain.’

Ethan snorted. Did she *really* think this was about vanity? ‘No, it’s just ...’ He shook his head, shut his eyes, rested his head back again as he realised he was about to admit the truth. ‘It ... invites conversations I just don’t want to have.’

The heaviness in his voice reached right inside her gut and squeezed. *Hard*. She knew all too well how hard rehashing things could be—talking about stuff that sometimes you just didn't want to talk about. Especially with people who had no connection to you.

So many people had wanted to talk to her after what had happened to her parents, had wanted to reminisce, lament, vent. And she'd spent an awful lot of time avoiding them.

Without thinking about it she slid a hand onto his knee. The fine wool of his trousers was soft against her palm, the contours of his knee hard.

'Ethan ...'

Ethan lifted his head again as her touch caused a riot of sensations up his aching leg. *Good* sensations. She was barely touching him at all, but still it felt as if she'd injected pop rocks into his thigh. He looked at her neat fingernails and remembered how good they'd felt on other parts of his body. How *good* they'd been together. How much they'd sizzled.

How insatiable they'd been.

His reasons for being with Olivia might not have been exactly altruistic, but they'd been amazingly compatible in the bedroom.

Which reminded him how long it had been since he'd been with a woman. A year.

Not since Aaliyah.

He dragged his eyes off her hand and looked up. Their gazes locked. The worst thing about her touch was how familiar it felt. Here in this clinic, with this woman from his past looking at him with patience and compassion, it would be so easy to grab hold and travel back to a time when he'd been able to lose himself in her and have everything else fade to black.

But it felt ... disloyal. To Aaliyah. And he despised himself just a little bit more.

'Just go, Olivia.'

Go before I kiss you. Before I haul you up on the couch beside me. Before I beg you to stay.

Before I use you one more time.

Olivia's belly clenched at the flare of heat that fired Ethan's dull gaze. She'd seen that look before. She knew what it meant. She knew what he wanted. Her breath grew thick in her throat as things south of her waistband stirred and strained, demanding she respond in the most primal way.

His nostrils flared as the silence stretched between them and she could feel the coiled intensity of his muscles. He wanted her. She could see that. Hell, half an hour in his company and she wanted him too.

But, unlike last time, she wanted *all* of him. She wanted his story and his sadness and his shadows. And she wasn't going to settle for scraps. For some quick roll in the hay while he made love to her with dead eyes. Because having sex with Ethan had never been a onetime thing for her and she needed to protect herself better than last time.

She was here for Ama. And then she was leaving.

She was not having sex with Ethan Hunter.

Olivia pushed herself shakily to her feet. She was standing between his knees now and an image of her straddling him played in glorious Technicolor inside her head.

She took a step back. 'Are you—?' She cleared her throat of its sudden wobble. 'Are you heading home soon?'

Ethan shook his head. He probably hadn't been very capable of standing prior to Olivia touching him; he for damn sure wasn't now. 'I'll sleep here tonight.'

Olivia nodded. It seemed best, considering walking had been a monumental effort. 'Are you ... will you be okay?'

'Dandy,' he said sarcastically, annoyed at her distant propriety—a far cry from the heat of the look they'd just exchanged.

Olivia ignored his terseness. 'What time do you want to meet in the morning?' she asked.

'Be here at nine.' His tone was dismissive and he hoped she got the message—*get the hell out*.

Olivia got the message. It rankled, but she didn't want to get into anything more with him tonight. It seemed their incendiary attraction still simmered and she didn't trust that the line between angry and passionate wouldn't blur and they wouldn't do something they'd *both* regret in the morning.

She turned on her heel and headed towards the desk, where her bag had been dumped when Ethan had fallen. She reached for it, her gaze falling on the decanter of whisky. She snatched it up. It could leave with her as well.

Out of sight, out of mind.

'You don't have to take it,' he said derisively from behind her. 'Even if I was capable of hauling my butt off this couch, I'm done with drinking tonight.'

Olivia turned, slinging the straps of her handbag over her shoulder. 'Consider this as my way of delivering you from temptation.' And with that she headed for the door.

Ethan tracked her progress, her clinging jeans, the swish of her honey-brown hair down the back of her coat way too fascinating for his own peace of mind.

A surge of what felt like good old-fashioned lust swept through his system.

He didn't feel very delivered at all.

Ethan was woken by a hard shake to his shoulder who knew how many hours later? Except where there had been darkness there was now light. *Way too much light.*

Daylight streamed like glory from heaven through the open slats of the dark wooden blinds dressing the window under which the chesterfield sat, piercing like needles into his eyeballs.

'Ugh,' he groaned, shutting his eyes tight. 'Somebody turn down the sun.'

'What the hell are you doing here?' Leo demanded, ignoring his brother's protests as he yanked up the blind, causing a tsunami of sunlight.

Ethan groaned louder. 'It was late,' he said, shielding his eyes. 'I crashed here.'

'I should start charging you rent,' Leo muttered.

Ethan cracked an eyelid open to find his brother lounging against the far arm of the couch. He squinted at his watch. It was six-thirty in the morning. 'Lizzie kick you out of bed?'

Leo grinned, which was way too much for Ethan at this hour of the morning. 'She's not sleeping very well,—has to keep getting up to go to the bathroom. I'm trying to give her as much room as possible.'

Ethan was pleased his brother had found love, but such happiness was a bit hard to take—especially hard on the heels of his less than stellar reunion with Olivia. He sat and swung his legs over the edge of the couch, pleased to feel the strength back in his quads.

'You look like hell,' Leo said cheerfully.

'Gee ... thanks.' Compared to last night he felt like a million dollars.

'You going to head home or shower here?'

Ethan ran his hands through his hair. 'I'll use your bathroom.' He always kept spare clothes in his office, and a private bathroom was one of the perks of being the director—or related to him anyway.

Ethan owned the clinic jointly with his brother, but had gladly ceded control to him when he'd decided to leave everything tainted with the Hunter name behind and put his medical degree to good use in the army. Leo had been angry that he was skipping out on his family responsibilities, especially with the clinic in such trouble after his father's scandal, and had spent the next ten years trying to involve his younger brother in the day-to-day running of the clinic.

But Ethan hadn't cared. He'd not wanted any part of lipo and boob jobs on a bunch of movie stars. He'd been doing *real* work and Leo could do whatever the hell he liked to salvage the professional and financial reputation of the once renowned Hunter Clinic.

And then he'd been blown all to hell and Leo had made him an offer he couldn't refuse. An offer he'd desperately needed to stop him from sliding into an abyss of self-pity.

Leo pushed up off the arm. 'When you're done I'll buy you breakfast.'

Three quarters of an hour later they were sitting inside a nearby café, tucking into a traditional English breakfast. They were both on their second cup of coffee.

‘So. You saw Olivia last night, I take it?’

Ethan looked up from his plate. ‘Yes. Nicely orchestrated,’ he said with derision.

Completely unabashed, Leo said, ‘How did that go?’

‘How do you think it went?’

‘Not as well as I’d hoped, by the sounds of it.’

‘Let’s just say I wasn’t in the best shape when she arrived. She pretty much accused me of being one step away from the old man and then chewed my ear off about not doing my physio.’

Leo laughed. ‘Still the same blunt old Olivia, huh?’

Ethan grunted, then took a sip of his coffee. ‘She is and she isn’t. There’s a ... reserve about her ... she’s not her usual vivacious self.’

‘Maybe that’s just being around you?’

Ethan contemplated his brother’s observation. *Maybe it was.* Anyway ... it didn’t go well. She has your decanter of whisky too, by the way.’

Leo laughed harder. ‘Did you discuss the case at all?’

Ethan shook his head. ‘She’s coming to your office at nine to brief us both.’

Leo quirked an eyebrow at his brother. ‘Am I to be an intermediary?’

Ethan looked at his older brother. His tone was light but their history with Olivia Fairchild was complex. And, apart from one aborted attempt on the day of Leo’s wedding, Ethan had never really apologised for his behaviour where that was concerned. He’d not only hurt Olivia but he’d also hurt Leo—deliberately.

Because he could.

He put his coffee cup down in its saucer. ‘No. Of course not. About that ... about Olivia ... about what happened between all of us—’

‘Don’t worry about it,’ Leo interrupted. ‘Water under the bridge.’

‘No.’ Ethan shook his head. ‘I was out of line.’

‘Yes, you were.’ Leo grinned. ‘But ... I knew deep down she never really liked me—not in that way. She certainly never gave me any reason to think there was anything other than friendship on her behalf. But ... she was so gorgeous ... my ego got in the way.’

Gorgeous. Yes, Leo was right. Olivia had been vivacious, sparkling, witty. Quick with a laugh and a snappy one-liner.

And utterly gorgeous.

‘That doesn’t make my behaviour any less reprehensible. You were right. I was using her to get at you and I’m sorry. I was pretty self-destructive there for a while, huh?’

Leo shrugged. ‘Losing Mum was hard on you.’

‘And not on you?’

‘Ethan ... we’ve made our peace. We *both* did things wrong and I don’t expect you to spend the rest of your life apologising for something that happened a long time ago which we’ve put behind us.’

He paused and pierced his brother with a look that Ethan had come to know as his clinic director look.

‘And I’m not the one you need to apologise to. That’s what you were supposed to be doing last night.’

Ethan grimaced. ‘Yeah. That didn’t happen.’ He glanced at his brother, who held his gaze with unwavering intensity. ‘She refused to accept my apology last time. What makes you think she will now?’

‘It’s been a long time,’ Leo said. ‘And she’s never struck me as being someone to hold a grudge.’

‘It was pretty unforgivable.’

Leo nodded in agreement. ‘You need to make it right, though. You’ll be working with her again over the next few months. You have to clear the air.’

Ethan knew Leo was right. Once upon a time that would have rankled, as everything about his brother’s authority and over-protectiveness had rankled. But he’d done a lot of growing up and recognised good advice when he heard it. ‘I know.’

There was silence for the next few minutes as they finished their breakfast. Leo put his utensils down on his plate and looked at his brother. ‘I thought you and her might ...’

Ethan glanced up from his breakfast. The possibility of he and Olivia glimmered for a moment. Her touch on his leg last night was almost tangible again, the way they’d been together settling around him in a fine mist he could almost taste.

But then memories of another woman—a woman he’d loved, a woman he’d left to die—pushed into the possibilities, beating them back, drowning them in a tide of guilt.

Aaliyah.

Ethan threw his napkin on his plate. ‘Let’s go.’

CHAPTER THREE

RUNNING EARLY THIS time, Olivia smiled at Leo as she walked into his office an hour later. She'd always had a soft spot for the incredibly hard-working elder Hunter brother and it hadn't been killed by time, distance or past wrongs. Yes, she'd told them their relationship was toxic but that hadn't really been Leo's fault.

Leo had been caught in the middle between his father and his brother and had practically killed himself to do right by both of them.

It was Ethan's bitterness that had been the true destructive force.

She thrust the whisky decanter she'd hauled all the way back in the taxi at him as she neared. 'I relieved Ethan of this last night.'

'Yes, he mentioned it.' Leo grinned taking it from her and then sweeping her into a huge hug.

'I can't believe it's been ten years,' he said as he pulled back. 'How have you been?'

Olivia gave her standard reply. 'Fine.' Because the truth was less than fine, and she refused to give it power over her. 'But now ... what about you? Not only married but a baby on the way? I have to meet this girl!'

Easily deflected, Leo chatted for ten minutes about Lizzie and babies and their life together and Olivia was heartened to hear that Leo had found the happiness he'd always deserved. She'd valued and enjoyed his friendship and had been saddened by its becoming another casualty of Ethan's destructive streak.

If she'd only been smarter she would have chosen the older Hunter brother. But the heart wanted what the heart wanted, and from the moment she'd laid eyes on Ethan she'd been officially off the market!

She'd fallen hard for his good looks, charm and intelligence. Yes, he'd been angry, and hurting too, but he'd oozed undeniable potential from every cell in his being. She'd just known that one day he would do great things.

And that had been pretty damn irresistible.

But she would have resisted had she known she was going to cause an even bigger rift between the two brothers. She'd thought she'd be able to help them reconnect, to heal the cracks in their relationship that had been gutting to watch.

Her tender heart had been touched by the suffering they'd endured—their mother's death and the scandalous details of her life that had come to light after, and their father's messy slide into the bottle. Coming from a background that placed family above *everything*, she hadn't been able to bear the thought of what the Hunter boys must have been through growing up and she'd desperately wanted to help.

She'd wanted to show Ethan, and Leo by extension, how wonderful a loving relationship—like the one her parents had—could be. And to bring them back to each other.

But Ethan had been on a different page and she hadn't got the memo.

The light chatter stopped as soon as Ethan entered the room. Olivia was relieved to see him looking much more human this morning. Back to his usual level of *ooh la la* in a suit and tie. He'd hadn't shaved, but the lines around his eyes had disappeared. His gait was strong and sure even with the slight limp as he strode towards the desk.

She'd lain awake half the night thinking about their reunion and the state of his health. He seemed even more messed up than he had been a decade ago. Lucky for her, life had hardened her sappy little heart over the years, and the urge to fix Ethan Hunter had withered and died a long time ago. He was a big boy who could take care of himself.

Leo looked from one to the other as she and Ethan stood awkwardly in front of his desk. 'Let's get down to it, shall we?' he suggested.

‘Yes,’ they both said in unison, and then glanced guiltily at each other before simultaneously looking away.

Leo sighed. ‘Take a seat,’ he said, indicating the chairs opposite him, and Olivia wasn’t sure whose butt was on whose respective chair faster—hers or Ethan’s.

Clearly Ethan was keen to get this over with.

Good.

That made two of them.

Ethan strode into the Lighthouse Children’s Hospital just prior to lunch. He’d walked from Harley Street. Last night the thought of walking any distance had been beyond him, but he usually walked from the clinic to the Lighthouse, and also to Princess Catherine’s Hospital, time permitting.

The Hunter Clinic and its team of surgeons had operating privileges at both hospitals and neither was far to walk. Still, after Olivia’s dressing-down last night he was using his stick, even if he did have plans to abandon it just prior to seeing his patients.

Olivia had accused him of vanity last night and he’d set her straight on that. Drawing attention to himself, to his injuries, wasn’t something he was keen on. But it was more than that. A surgeon with a walking stick just sent the wrong kind of message. Especially in the world of plastics and reconstructive surgery. Patients wondered about a surgeon who couldn’t heal himself.

Leaving his stick in one of the empty offices, he did his rounds. Being a visiting surgeon, he didn’t have any junior doctors to accompany him but always made sure one of the nursing staff on each ward did. Nothing annoyed the nurses more than a doctor coming in and making changes to treatment and then leaving again without informing them.

And Ethan had learned a long time ago never to upset the nursing staff. That nurses were a vital part of the medical team—the interface between the doctor and the patient.

And you annoyed them at your own peril.

He prided himself on having good relationships with the nursing staff wherever he went, and at the Lighthouse particularly.

He left Ama to last. There was a lot that needed to be done before she went to Theatre next week and he wanted to have a clean plate today so he could focus solely on her. Plus Olivia was with her, and for some reason he was unaccountably nervous. It was obvious from her briefing this morning that this case was dear to her and he found himself not wanting to disappoint her.

He’d done that once already and was desperate to make amends.

He made his way to Ama’s room by himself, assuring Ama’s nurse, who was busy with another of her patients, that he would keep her up to date with the tests and procedures he was ordering. He heard laughter as he approached—Olivia’s laughter. With her petite frame she looked as if she’d have one of those light and tinkly girly laughs, but it was surprisingly deep and throaty and it always came out at full roar—coming not just from her belly but from her heart.

He remembered it well from back when she used to smile at him, when she used to laugh.

It evoked powerful memories of a turbulent time in his life. A time when her laughter had helped ease a lot of his frustrations.

She had her back to the door when he pulled up and he lounged against the frame, observing her for long moments. She was sitting on the bed opposite a little girl who sat cross-legged in the lap of an older woman. Their skin was as dark and burnished as the finest ebony.

Ama and her mother, he assumed. Although he could only see them in profile and therefore the defect, which he knew to be quite significant, wasn’t showing, given that it was the other side of Ama’s face. He also noted the colourful headscarf that Ama wore draped over her affected side, obscuring it completely.

Looked at from this vantage point, Ama looked perfectly normal. But he’d seen the pictures—NOMA had ravaged the right side of her face, leaving her terribly disfigured.

A chequerboard sat between them and they were engrossed in a lively game. A third person—a young woman with skin more of a mocha colouring—sat on a chair beside the bed, also involved, switching between English and an unfamiliar language and laughing as Ama made a run of the board.

‘Ama, you are getting much too good at this,’ Olivia said, and laughed that full throaty laugh again.

The woman in the chair spoke to Ama in what he presumed was her own language and the girl giggled, her eyes sparkling in absolute delight.

Ethan was struck by how intimate the cosy little circle appeared. They all seemed very comfortable in each other’s company. Ama’s mother was looking at Olivia as if she was some kind of saint and Ama was smiling so big at Olivia, her eyes sparkling so brightly, it was like the sun shining.

Olivia passed over a red chequer piece to Ama and Ama laughed again, the whites of her eyes flashing as she held on to Olivia’s hand for long moments before accepting the spoils and crowning her victorious piece.

Ama said something in her own tongue and the woman Ethan assumed was the translator said, ‘Ama thinks she’s winning.’

Olivia laughed again, and even with the distance between them, it whispered against his skin.

‘Oh, does she, now?’ Olivia said with mock indignation. ‘We’ll see how easy it is for her to win when I’m tickling her,’ she announced, raising her hands and wiggling her fingers in Ama’s direction before launching a tickle attack on a giggling, squealing Ama.

The chequerboard was upended, but nobody seemed to mind as general pandemonium ensued.

Ethan was struck by the genuine connection between Olivia and Ama and her mother. There was nothing forced or stilted—just an easy familiarity. But there was also an unspoken trust in their byplay, and Ethan knew how hard Olivia would have had to work to gain that trust. To take them out of their own country, away from everything they knew and trusted, and bring them to a strange place with strange people and strange customs.

But most of all it was just a joy to see the return of the Olivia he’d once known. Last night she’d fluctuated from reserved to distant to tense, and this morning she’d been polite and professional. Hell, even when she’d been angry with him there’d been an aloofness that he’d never seen in her before.

But this was the Olivia of old. The one who got way too close to her patients. Who’d spend time at the end of a very long intern shift playing games or reading books to the kids in her charge, or stopping in at the shop to buy a favourite snack or a goofy toy for a child in her care.

Their bosses had frowned upon it, and he had teased her about it endlessly, but it was what made Olivia so good at what she did—she wasn’t just their doctor, she was their friend.

That had, of course, led to tears on occasions. Every death or negative outcome she’d taken to heart. She’d considered herself a partner in a patient’s journey and she’d felt it deeply when things went wrong.

Many a time he’d been a shoulder for her to cry on.

And he’d been worried last night, when she’d looked at him with such reserve and distance, that the old Olivia was gone forever. That maybe he’d been responsible for killing her off.

He was glad to see he hadn’t.

She might have developed a harder shell, but it was good to know that she still had her gooey centre. It wasn’t a particularly smart trait, or conducive to longevity in the profession, but as someone who also became a little too invested in the lives of the people he operated on Ethan recognised, on a subliminal level, that Olivia Fairchild was a kindred spirit.

It was why he’d chosen the army and humanitarian work over the more lucrative field of cosmetic surgery, unlike his father.

Because people mattered.

Ethan took a steadying breath and walked into the room. ‘This looks like fun,’ he said.

Olivia started at the sound of his voice and Ama, who took her cues in this strange new world from Olivia, shrank into her mother's arms, quickly pulling the headscarf covering the right side of her face closer, patting it, checking its position.

'Ethan,' Olivia said, scrambling off the bed. 'I thought you weren't going to be here until after lunch.' She turned quickly to Ama and smiled at the girl, who was still a bundle of nerves. 'It's okay,' she assured her, and Dali, the interpreter, repeated the assurances to Ama and her mother in their own language. 'This is the doctor I was telling you about. Dr Ethan.'

Ethan smiled as Ama peeked out at him from her mother's shoulder. 'Very pleased to meet you, Ama,' he said, bowing slightly.

The girl's gaze darted to Olivia, and Olivia nodded and smiled again. She moved closer to Ethan, conscious of his tall breadth in her peripheral vision, trying to divorce herself from the sexual pull of him as she placed her hand on his forearm. 'We are old friends,' she said to Ama. 'We did our training together, here at this hospital.'

Ethan nodded. 'We sure did. Olivia used to tell us stories about having a pet kangaroo at home in Australia.'

That elicited a small smile from Ama and Olivia gave Ethan a grateful squeeze on the arm before she dropped her hand. Ethan's bedside manner had always been fantastic, but it had been a long time since she'd been familiar with his doctoring skills. A lot of surgeons tended not to be very good with their people skills.

Olivia introduced Ethan to Dali and to Ril, Ama's mother. He was at his charming best, but she was still nervous as to how he was going to go forward with Ama. Olivia knew he needed to see her face, but she also knew he needed to approach it very carefully.

'You like chequers?' Ethan said to Ama.

She gave a slight nod after Dali had translated.

'Do you mind if I watch while you and Olivia play?'

Ama looked at her mother, as the interpreter translated, and then at Olivia, who smiled. Very slightly she nodded her head.

'Excellent,' he said, smiling down at Ama.

Ethan drew up a chair opposite Dali on the same side of the bed. It was the side of Ama's defect and he was hoping that she'd become engrossed enough in the game to drop the fabric so he could get a good look. He was going to need a much closer examination before he operated, but for today he had to build some trust and he was happy to stay hands-off.

Two hours later Ethan knew a lot more than any photo could tell him about Ama's defect. Sure enough the girl had forgotten about trying to shield her face from him after about fifteen minutes, and he'd been able to get a much more thorough feel for the mechanics of what he was dealing with as the scarf slackened.

The extent of the destruction of her facial tissue and the functional impairment of her mouth and jaw were clinically challenging. He was going to need extensive imaging, but he was sure it was going to involve maxilla and palate losses as well.

It was shocking to look at. Ama essentially had a huge hole in the right side of her face, exposing the inside of her mouth, her jaw and nasal cavity. It was all the more shocking because it was a perfectly treatable condition caught early enough.

He knew from Olivia's briefing and studying Ama's chart that her NOMA had started the way it always did—with a simple mouth ulcer when she'd been four years old. But poor nutrition and poor oral hygiene had led to the ulcer developing quickly into full-blown NOMA. Her cheek had begun to swell and over the course of a few days it had developed blackish furrows as the gangrene set in. It had festered over weeks, forming horrible scabs. When the scabs had finally fallen away, she'd had a gaping hole in her face.

But Ama was one of the lucky ones—she'd survived. Ninety per cent of sufferers—usually children—didn't.

Just looking at Ama as she played chequers with Olivia swamped Ethan with a sense of hopelessness. NOMA *was* the face of poverty in poor, underdeveloped countries. And young children living in such extreme conditions where malnutrition was rife were at the highest risk.

He glanced at Olivia. The jacket she'd worn this morning to the debrief had long been discarded and her pencil skirt had rucked up her thighs slightly as she sat on the bed with her legs tucked up to one side. Her long-sleeved blouse fell softly against her breasts and was rolled up to the elbows. The top three buttons, which had been primly fastened all the way to the collar this morning, were now undone and gaping occasionally to reveal flashes of cleavage.

She looked perfectly at home and one hundred per cent unaffected by Ama's facial deformity as she played chequers. As if Ama was just another of her patients. But he knew Olivia's gooey centre well, and he knew she would be distressed by what this little girl had been through and the suffering she must face on a daily basis.

She glanced at him then and it was confirmed. Her gaze was a melted puddle of warm chocolate and it was begging him for help. To *do* something. To *fix* it.

And in that moment he'd have fixed it with his own bare hands if it had been within his power.

Instead he smiled at her and nodded.

He stood and smiled down at Ama and her mother. 'I'm going to get some tests organised,' he said, nodding reassuringly. 'They'll do them after lunch and Olivia will be with you the whole time, right?' he said, glancing at Olivia who had scrambled off the bed and was standing next to him.

'Right,' Olivia said, also smiling and nodding at Ama. 'I'm just going outside with Ethan for a moment,' she said. 'I won't be long.' She narrowed her eyes and wagged her finger playfully at Ama. 'Don't you cheat.'

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