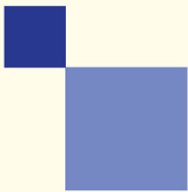


*Medical
Romance™*

JENNIFER TAYLOR

The Family Who Made
Him Whole



Jennifer Taylor

The Family Who Made Him Whole

«HarperCollins»

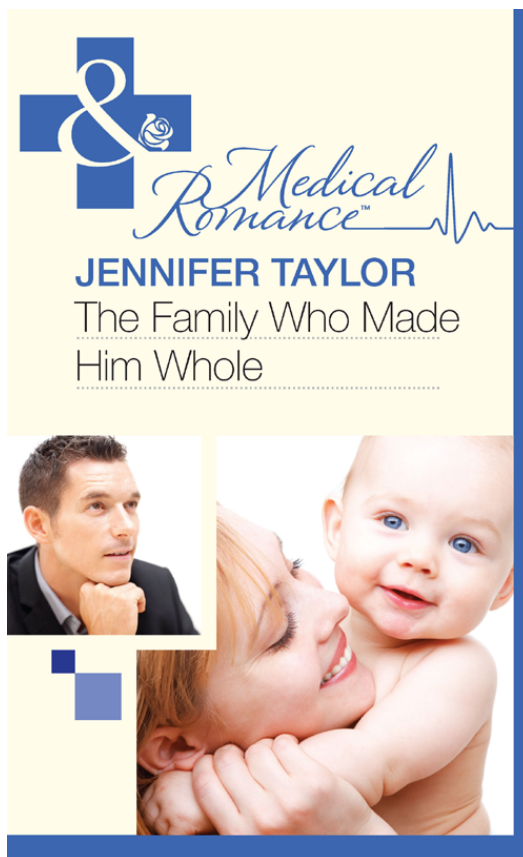
Taylor J.

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Bride's Bay Surgery miniseries Juggling medicine with motherhood leaves little time for romance. But for three single mums Bride's Bay has a magic that lives up to its name. A nomadic lifestyle and short-term flings have served Tom Bradbury well. His aristocratic family, famed for its failed marriages, keeps Tom devotedly single. Until his latest stint as locum GP at Bride's Bay Surgery, where new colleague Hannah Morris and her adorable baby boy make Tom question everything...and think twice about leaving so soon...

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About the Author

JENNIFER TAYLOR lives in the north-west of England, in a small village surrounded by some really beautiful countryside. She has written for several different Mills & Boon® series in the past, but it wasn't until she read her first Medical Romance™ that she truly found her niche. She was so captivated by these heartwarming stories that she set out to write them herself! When she's not writing, or doing research for her latest book, Jennifer's hobbies include reading, gardening, travel, and chatting to friends both on and off-line. She is always delighted to hear from readers, so do visit her website at: www.jennifer-taylor.com

Cursed from an early age with a poor sense of direction and a propensity to read, **ANNIE CLAYDON** spent much of her childhood lost in books. After completing her degree in English Literature, she indulged her love of romantic fiction and spent a long, hot summer writing a book of her own. It was duly rejected and life took over, with a series of U-turns leading in the unlikely direction of a career in computing and information technology. The lure of the printed page proved too much to bear, though, and she now has the perfect outlet for the stories which have always run through her head, writing Medical Romance™ for Mills and Boon. Living in London, a city where getting lost can be a joy, she has no regrets in having taken her time in working her way back to the place that she started from.

Recent titles by Jennifer Taylor:

GINA'S LITTLE SECRET

SMALL TOWN MARRIAGE MIRACLE

THE MIDWIFE'S CHRISTMAS MIRACLE

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Dear Reader

Single mums seem to get a lot of bad press these days, yet in my experience they do a fantastic job of raising their children under very difficult circumstances. My own mother became a single parent after my father died, and I know how hard she worked to give me a happy home life. My latest trilogy, *Bride's Bay Surgery*, focuses on three single mums, Hannah, Emily and Becky, who are committed to do their very best for their children.

In the first book of the series Hannah is determined that she will do all she can for her little boy. She doesn't have time for a relationship, so when she meets Tom Bradbury she is determined to keep him at arm's length. Tom is equally determined not to get involved. His family has a poor track record when it comes to love and marriage, so he has made up his mind to remain single. However, that was before he met Hannah. Meeting her makes him reassess his whole attitude to life!

I hope you enjoy reading Tom and Hannah's story as much as I enjoyed writing it. If you would like to contact me then please e-mail me at the following address: Jennifertaylor01@aol.com I would love to hear from you.

Best wishes

Jennifer

The Family Who

Made Him Whole

Jennifer Taylor



www.millsandboon.co.uk

For Max, my gorgeous little grandson. The best Christmas present I've ever had.

CHAPTER ONE

‘AND this is my godson, Tom Bradbury. Tom has very kindly been helping out until you arrived. Tom, this is Hannah Morris, my new colleague. I’m sure you must be almost as delighted to see her as I am!’

‘Nice to meet you, Dr Bradbury.’ Hannah pinned a polite smile to her lips when the younger man laughed. She wasn’t going to be drawn into asking why he should be so pleased to see her because she wasn’t interested. She’d had her fair share of tall, dark, handsome men and intended to steer well clear of anyone who fitted that description in the future.

‘It’s good to meet you too, Hannah. But, please, forget the title and call me Tom.’ He held out his hand, leaving her with no option other than to take it.

Hannah felt a quiver of awareness run through her when their palms touched and tensed. She didn’t want to feel anything for this man, yet there was no denying the surge of electricity that was racing along her veins. It was a relief when he released her and turned to Simon Harper, the senior partner in the practice.

‘We don’t stand on ceremony around here, do we, Simon?’

‘Certainly not.’ Simon smiled at her. ‘Most of our patients call us by our first names, so I hope that won’t bother you, my dear. The days when the local GP was considered only second to God in the pecking order are long gone, I’m pleased to say.’

‘Of course not.’ Hannah summoned another smile although she had to admit that the idea of being on such familiar terms with her patients would take some getting used to. She had always preferred to maintain a professional distance and hadn’t encouraged that kind of familiarity, but if that was the way things were done at Bride’s Bay Surgery then she would have to get used to it.

‘I’d stop right there if I were you, Simon. You don’t want to scare her off!’

Hannah stiffened when Tom Bradbury laughed again. He really did have the most attractive laugh, she thought, the richly mellow tones making goose-bumps break out all over her body. She cleared her throat, refusing to dwell on the reason why it’d had such a strange effect on her. ‘There’s no danger of that. Although, admittedly, I’m more used to my patients calling me Dr Morris, I’m sure I shall adapt.’

‘That’s the spirit.’ Simon gave her an approving smile. ‘I knew I was right to pick you for this post, Hannah. You’re going to fit in *perfectly* around here.’

Hannah murmured something although she couldn’t deny that Simon’s unwitting choice of words had touched a nerve. She had always tried to be perfect in everything she did. Right from the time she had been a child, lining up her dolls in perfectly straight rows, she’d had a compulsion to make her life as flawless as possible. She knew what it stemmed from, of course. When she was seven her father had been involved in a serious road accident. She could still remember the horror of wondering if he would survive. The only way she’d been able to cope was by making everything else in her life as perfect as possible. To her mind, if everything was in its proper order then things would turn out right.

Thankfully, her father had recovered; however, the need for order had remained with her as she’d grown up. When she’d met Andrew, and discovered that he had felt the same, it had seemed as though they had been meant to be together. They could each strive for perfection, knowing the other would understand. It was only in this last year that she had realised what a terrible mistake she had made.

‘Hannah?’

Someone touched her on the arm and she jumped, feeling the colour rush to her cheeks when she found Tom Bradbury staring down at her. At over six feet in height he was a lot taller than her and she was suddenly struck by the difference in their stature. He looked so big and solid as he stood

there with a frown drawing his black brows together that she had the craziest urge to lean on him. The past twelve months had been hard and it would be wonderful if someone could take the burden off her for a little while...

‘Are you all right?’ He stepped closer, his blue eyes filled with concern as he peered into her face, and Hannah realised with a start that she had to pull herself together. Tom Bradbury wouldn’t be interested in her problems, neither did she want him to be.

‘I’m fine, thank you.’ She looked around the room. ‘Where’s Simon?’

‘He’s gone through to the house to make some coffee, or, hopefully, he’s gone to ask Ros to make it for us.’ Tom smiled and she was relieved to see that his face held nothing more than the sort of polite interest one showed to a stranger. ‘A word of advice here from one who knows: if Simon offers to make you a cup of coffee, refuse. His coffee is enough to make strong men weep!’

An unwilling smile curved Hannah’s mouth. ‘It can’t be that bad, surely?’

‘Oh, it is. Trust me.’ Tom chuckled. ‘Simon may be a brilliant doctor, adored by all his patients, but his coffee is in a league of its own. If you value your health then make sure you get to the kettle before him!’

His blue eyes held hers fast for a moment before he turned and headed towards the door and it was only then that Hannah realised she had stopped breathing. She took a quick breath and then a second for good measure before she followed him. It was the newness of it all, she assured herself as he led the way along the corridor towards the house. The fact that this was her first day in a new job, the first day of her new life, in fact. She was bound to feel on edge and keyed up...

He pushed open a door, waiting politely for her to precede him, and Hannah sucked in her breath when her shoulder brushed his chest as she passed. Maybe it was understandable that she should feel nervous when she had needed to make so many changes to her life of late, but did that really explain why her blood pressure had shot up several degrees and her pulse was racing?

She sighed as she stepped into an attractive country-style kitchen because she knew what the answer was even if she didn’t like it. The reason her heart was racing and her blood pressure was soaring was standing right behind her. Tom Bradbury was to blame. He and he alone had made her feel all those things. Admittedly, it was a surprise to find herself responding this way, but she mustn’t let it throw her. Maybe she *did* find him attractive but that was all it was—pure physical attraction, nothing more. After all, she had just escaped from one disastrous relationship and she certainly didn’t intend to find herself caught up in another one!

Tom took the cup of coffee Ros offered him and walked over to the window. It was the middle of May and the sun was glinting off the sea. It was the kind of glorious Devon day that always made him glad to be alive but for some reason he was less aware of his surroundings at that moment than he was of the woman behind him.

He took a sip of his coffee and turned, letting his gaze rest on the figure seated at the table. Hannah Morris was pretty in a restrained kind of way with that pale, fine skin and that rich auburn hair that fell softly to her shoulders. Her eyes were green, a deep sea green—he’d noticed that before—framed by thick black lashes that he would swear hadn’t been enhanced by even a trace of mascara. In fact, now that he thought about it, she was wearing very little make-up, just a touch of gloss on her lips and maybe, although he couldn’t be sure, a hint of blusher on her cheeks.

Tom took a larger swallow of his coffee, somewhat surprised that he had taken such an interest in Simon’s new colleague. Although his godfather had told him about Hannah Morris when he had decided to offer her the job, Tom was aware that he hadn’t really been listening. All he could recall was that she was thirty-one years old and had worked at a large practice on the outskirts of London for the past few years. What else Simon had divulged had gone in one ear and out of the other and all of a sudden he wished that he’d paid more attention. There was something about Dr Morris that intrigued him, and it wasn’t just the fact that it had been a long time since he’d reacted *that* strongly when he had touched a woman’s hand!

The thought caused him more than a little discomfort so it was a relief when Ros appeared at his side. ‘Penny for them.’ She smiled up at him, her face breaking into the warmly caring smile that had made Tom wish on more than one occasion when he’d been growing up that she had been his mother instead of the more glamorous Tessa.

‘I’m not sure they’re worth a penny even with the current rate of inflation,’ he observed dryly, then changed the subject. ‘Glad to see you got to the coffee pot before Simon.’

‘Oh, no fear of that. I had the coffee on the go by the time he appeared.’ Ros laughed but he could tell that she wasn’t fooled by his airy dismissal of her question. Ros knew him far too well, a fact he must bear in mind when his thoughts were tempted to wander again.

As though unable to resist, his gaze moved back to Hannah and he felt a shudder run through him when he discovered that she was watching him. Just for a moment their eyes met before she looked away but it was long enough. Tom took another gulp of coffee, hoping it would quell the tremor that had been triggered inside him, but no such luck. He could feel it working its way down his body and inwardly groaned.

He didn’t do this kind of thing! He didn’t respond so instantly to a woman, certainly never felt as though he had suddenly found himself with one foot on an emotional roller-coaster that was about to speed off. He liked women, enjoyed their company, but the key word in that statement was *women*.

He liked them in the plural. When he dated he always made it clear that he was happy for his date to see other men, as he would be seeing other women. However, he knew without the shadow of a doubt that Hannah Morris wasn’t a plural type of woman. She would expect any man she dated to be strictly faithful and if there was one thing he couldn’t guarantee it was that kind of commitment.

‘So what do you think of Simon’s new protégé?’

Tom dragged his thoughts back into line as he turned to Ros, although he had to admit that he was more than a little stunned by the way he was behaving. He had known Hannah Morris for less than ten minutes and yet here he was, pondering the weighty matter of his own shortcomings. ‘She seems very nice.’

‘Nice!’ Ros hooted. ‘Is that the best you can come up with, Tom? She’s *nice*?’

‘Well, I’ve hardly had a chance to get to know her,’ he countered, a shade defensively.

‘Maybe not, but it’s not like you to be so slow.’ Ros’s eyes were filled with laughter as she looked at him. ‘Usually, you have a woman summed up and categorised in less time than this.’

‘Categorised? I’m not sure I know what you mean,’ he said stiffly.

‘Oh, come on! Of course you do. I’ve watched you growing up, don’t forget. I’ve seen the effect you have on the female half of the population and watched you in action, too.’ Ross chuckled. ‘I’m not sure if you use some sort of scoring system but women seem to fall into one of two categories where you’re concerned. They’re either fair game or strictly off limits. What I can’t work out is which category Hannah comes into.’

‘So what are you two muttering about?’ Simon came over to refill his cup and smiled at them. ‘You look as though you’re plotting some sort of mischief.’

‘Mischief?’ Ros took the cup off him. ‘It’s a long time since I could be accused of causing any mischief!’

Tom moved away while Ros topped up her husband’s cup, relieved to have been let off the hook. He frowned as he turned to stare out of the window again. Was Ros right? Did he view women in such a calculating way? He hated to think that he did, yet he knew in his heart it was true.

Since his first—and only!—ill-fated foray into love, he had been determined not to leave behind a trail of destruction like his parents had done. Although he enjoyed dating, definitely enjoyed sex, he didn’t do the rest and he never would. There would be no happily-ever-after for him. No wife and family gathered around the hearth waiting for his return. He preferred his life to be free of such complications and that way nobody would get hurt, neither him nor some poor unsuspecting woman who’d had the misfortune to fall in love with him.

He glanced round when someone laughed, felt the hair on the back of his neck lift when he realised it was Hannah. In that second he knew that although he may have managed to avoid commitment in the past, he might find it harder to do so in the future. There was just something about Hannah Morris that drew him, something he could neither explain nor reason away. He could only thank his lucky stars that he was leaving. By this time next week, he would be on his way to Paris and he would make sure it was a long time before he came back!

Hannah spooned a little more sugar into her cup as she listened to the affectionate banter between Simon and his wife. It was obvious how fond they were of each other and she couldn't prevent the sudden pang of envy that rose up inside her. She had hoped that she and Andrew would have that kind of a relationship, but it hadn't happened. There had always been a certain distance between them even though they had appeared to have had so much in common. It was funny how you could think you knew someone and be proved so wrong.

'More coffee, my dear?'

Simon reached across the table for her cup but she shook her head. 'No, thank you.' She turned and smiled at Ros. 'It was delicious but I'll be buzzing if I have any more.'

'I know what you mean.' Ros smiled back. A pretty woman in her fifties with light brown hair that curled around her face, she exuded an air of calm that was very soothing. 'I have to limit myself to no more than three cups a day otherwise I'm high as a kite on all the caffeine!'

Hannah laughed when Ros pulled a rueful face. She glanced round when a movement caught her eye and felt herself tense when she realised that Tom Bradbury was watching her again. It had happened several times now; she had glanced up and found him staring at her and she wasn't sure what to make of it. Was it just the fact that she was new or was there something more behind his interest?

She hurriedly dismissed the thought, refusing to go down that route. She wasn't looking for romance. She just wanted to be left alone to create a new life for herself and her son. Charlie was all that mattered, his happiness was her main concern. Everything else was inconsequential.

'Simon told me that you have a little boy, Hannah. What's his name and how old is he?'

Hannah roused herself when Ros spoke. 'His name's Charlie and he's nine months old.'

'And into everything, I bet!' Ros laughed as she turned to her husband. 'Remember when our two were that age? You needed eyes in the back of your head. They're twins and that made it worse, of course, but I wouldn't have believed the havoc they could cause if I hadn't seen it for myself.'

Hannah smiled, trying not to let Ros see that the remark had hit a nerve. Sadly, Charlie couldn't get up to very much mischief. He had been born with talipes—club feet—and at the moment his legs were encased in casts, which severely restricted his movement. Although he was a happy, intelligent little boy, he wasn't able to do a lot of the things a child his age normally did. Still, she consoled herself, once the casts came off the situation should improve, and if they hadn't worked there was a good chance that a second operation would solve the problem.

'Do your children still live in Bride's Bay?' she asked, changing the subject because the thought of her son needing further surgery made her feel a little panicky.

'I wish!' Ros sighed. 'Daniel is a research botanist. He's in Borneo at the moment, tracking down a plant which the locals claim has healing powers. And Becky moved to New Zealand with her husband a couple of years ago. She's just had a baby, a little girl called Millie, and as you can imagine we're dying to see her.'

'We'll get over there as soon as we can,' Simon assured her, patting her hand.

'I know, darling, but I don't want to wait, that's the problem. Babies grow so quickly and I just feel that we're missing out on so much...' Ros stopped and gasped. 'Why didn't I think of it before! I mean, this would be the ideal time, wouldn't it? Tom knows the ins and outs of running the practice almost as well as you do, and now that Hannah is here, we're fully staffed.'

She turned beseechingly to Hannah. 'If you and Tom would hold the fort, it means that Simon and I can go and visit our first grandchild!'

CHAPTER TWO

‘PLEASE take a seat, Mrs Granger.’

Hannah waited while the woman made herself comfortable. It was almost lunchtime and Barbara Granger was her last patient. The morning had been surprisingly busy. She’d not had a minute to herself, in fact, and suddenly found herself wondering if she should have accepted Tom Bradbury’s offer to split her list. It would have made far more sense to ease herself in gently, yet she’d felt strangely reluctant to accept his help. Something had warned her that once she did, it might be difficult to stop.

The thought was so ridiculous that she was hard pressed not to show her disgust. Tom Bradbury meant nothing to her. He was just someone she would be working with for a short while, although, if Ros had her way, it might be longer than either of them had anticipated. The idea was disquieting and she had to make a conscious effort not to dwell on it as she smiled at the woman seated across the desk.

‘I’m Hannah Morris, the new doctor.’

‘Nice to meet you, dear.’ Barbara Granger smiled back. ‘I’m sure you’ll be very happy here. Bride’s Bay is such a lovely little town—everyone is very friendly, as you’ll soon discover. Margery worked here for over ten years and we were all very sorry when she decided to leave.’

‘I’m sure she will be missed,’ Hannah agreed. Every patient she had seen had commented on how sad they’d been when Simon’s previous partner had left. It had made her realise what an integral part of the town the practice was. After working in London, where patients rarely formed a close attachment to their doctor, it was good to know that she was now a valued part of the community.

‘Yes, she will. But folk have to do what’s best for them, don’t they.’ Barbara settled her handbag on her knees. ‘I know how much Margery missed her family. Her two sisters live in Edinburgh and it will be lovely for her to be able to spend more time with them.’

‘It will indeed. Now, what was it you wanted to see me about, Mrs Granger?’ Hannah gently steered the conversation back to the reason for the visit. ‘Is something worrying you?’

‘Yes, although it’s not about me. It’s my Peter, you see. He’s going into hospital soon and he’s in a right state about it.’

‘Is Peter your husband?’ Hannah asked gently, wondering about the ethics of discussing the matter. Patient confidentiality was a key issue and she wouldn’t want to cross any boundaries.

‘No, my son.’ Barbara sighed. ‘Peter has Down’s syndrome. I should have explained that to you before I began.’

‘It’s quite all right,’ Hannah assured her. ‘I take it that you are his main carer?’

‘I was until last year when he got a place in an assisted living facility in the centre of town.’ Barbara pulled a face. ‘Such a horrible name. Calling it a facility makes it sound like some sort of institution but it’s nothing like that. The local council converted one of the houses near the post office so it could be used by people with disabilities like my Peter’s, and it’s very homely. He loves it there.’

‘That sounds like a wonderful idea,’ Hannah said enthusiastically. ‘Your son has his independence, yet there are people around who can offer support if he needs it.’

‘Exactly. Oh, I wasn’t sure if he should go when Simon first suggested it. His dad left soon after Peter was born. He couldn’t handle the thought of having a handicapped child, you see, so I’ve looked after Peter by myself. It’s always been just the two of us and I was worried in case it was too much for him, but he’s come on in leaps and bounds, as it turns out.’

‘You must be so relieved,’ Hannah agreed quietly. As the single mother of a child who needed extra care, she understood how difficult it must have been for Barbara. Maybe it was different when both parents were involved; at least they could discuss any issues and reach a decision together. However, it was much harder when you were solely responsible for your child’s welfare, as she’d discovered.

She knew how she'd agonised over Charlie's treatment, spending many a sleepless night worrying about what it entailed. It would have helped enormously if she'd had someone to talk it over with but, like Barbara Granger, she'd been on her own. It must have taken a lot of courage to allow her son to leave home, Hannah thought admiringly as she smiled at her.

'So why is Peter going into hospital?'

'He needs an operation on one of the valves in his heart. As I'm sure you know, dear, a lot of people with Down's have heart problems, so it isn't the first time Peter has needed treatment. It was fine while he was a child—I was able to stay in the hospital with him. But now he's nineteen and classed as an adult that isn't possible. He's getting very anxious about it, which is why I thought I'd have a word with you.'

Hannah frowned. 'I understand your concerns, Mrs Granger, although I'm not sure what I can do to help. Can you leave it with me? I'll speak to Simon and see what he suggests.'

'Of course.' Barbara stood up. 'Just give me a call when you've worked something out or, better still, pop in for a coffee if you're passing. I live right next door to the nursery and you can always call in after you've dropped off your little boy. Lovely little chap. Let's hope they can sort out that problem with his feet, eh?'

Barbara bade her a cheery goodbye, obviously finding nothing unusual about the fact that she knew so much about Hannah's private life. Hannah shook her head as she gathered up the notes she had used. She had been in the town for just two days and already it seemed that everyone knew all about her!

'Was that Barbara Granger I saw leaving?'

Hannah jumped when a deep voice addressed her from the doorway. She looked up, trying to quell the racing of her heart when she saw Tom standing there. He had shed his jacket and rolled up the sleeves of his pale blue shirt so that his tanned forearms were bare. He looked so big and overwhelmingly male that her mouth went dry. She may not be in the market for another relationship but she would need to be dead from the neck up *and* down not to be aware of him! It was only when she saw one dark brow lift that she realised he was waiting for her to answer.

'It was. Apparently, her son is going into hospital soon and he's getting very stressed about it,' she said, shuffling the notes into a pile.

'Something to do with Peter's heart, I take it?' Tom came into the room and stopped beside the desk. Hannah continued her shuffling, although for some reason her normally deft fingers seemed to have all turned to thumbs.

'Mmm. He needs an operation to repair one of the valves.' The pile of notes suddenly disintegrated into an untidy heap and she clamped her lips together in annoyance. Picking up the top few folders, she tried again then jumped when a large hand appeared in front of her.

'Here, give me half and I'll help you carry them through to the office.'

Tom didn't wait for her to comply with his offer as he scooped up half of the buff envelopes and Hannah had to bite down even harder to stem the retort that was trying to escape. She didn't need his help, but short of making a scene there was little she could do.

She trailed after him, aware that she was in danger of making a mountain out of the proverbial molehill. Tom was just trying to be helpful and it was stupid to see it as a threat. She knew it was true yet it was difficult to accept it. She really didn't want to be beholden to him for anything.

He plonked the notes into a tray then stood aside while she deposited hers on top. 'Lizzie will sort them out when she gets back from lunch,' he assured her, resting one lean hip against the edge of the desk.

'It might help if I put them into some kind of order,' Hannah murmured, taking a couple of folders off the pile.

‘There’s no need. Lizzie is a whiz with the filing. She’ll have them sorted in no time.’ He took the folders off her and dropped them back into the tray, leaving her gasping at his high-handedness. However, he seemed oblivious as he returned the conversation to what they had been discussing.

‘Peter is a lovely fellow. Although he has Down’s, he’s quite a high achiever. He works at The Ship Inn, collecting the empty glasses and, occasionally, waiting on in the dining room if it’s busy.’

‘Really!’ Hannah exclaimed in surprise.

‘Yes. That’s the joy of a place like Bride’s Bay. Folk look out for one another and do all they can to help. Mitch Johnson, who runs the pub, took Peter on last winter and it’s worked out really well for everyone.’

‘That’s wonderful. I had no idea people were so supportive. Where I worked before, there were plans to build a unit for people with disabilities like Peter’s but the local residents objected and it didn’t go ahead.’

‘Sadly, that happens all too often. I’d put it down to ignorance if I didn’t have a nasty suspicion that it was more a fear of it having an impact on property prices than anything else.’ Tom shrugged when she looked at him. ‘If you live next to one of those units, you could find that the value of your home drops.’

‘I’m sure you’re right.’ Hannah was surprised by how disgusted he sounded. She wouldn’t have summed him up as someone with strong altruistic leanings, although why she should have made that assumption it was impossible to say. She hurried on, not wanting to dwell on the thought that she might have been unfair to him. ‘Anyway, I was going to have a word with Simon to see what he could suggest. It sounds as though Peter needs some reassurance.’

‘The hospital has just instigated a scheme whereby vulnerable adults are given a tour of the areas they’ll be using during their stay.’ Tom straightened and went over to the filing cabinet. ‘They sent us a leaflet only last week if I can find it... Ah! Here it is.’

He handed her the leaflet and Hannah sucked in her breath when their hands brushed. She murmured her thanks as she took it over to the window to read, although for a few seconds the words seemed to dance before her eyes. She had to stop this nonsense, had to stop reacting whenever Tom touched her. It was ridiculous to be this responsive to a man she barely knew.

The thought steadied her. She skimmed through the leaflet and nodded. ‘This sounds ideal. I’m sure Peter will feel a lot happier if he knows exactly where he’s going.’

‘Precisely.’ Tom followed her across the room, bending so that he could point out a paragraph that was particularly relevant. ‘They will even introduce him to the members of staff who’ll be looking after him. That’s probably more important than anything else. If Peter knows the nurses and doctors, etcetera, he’ll be less likely to worry.’

‘I’m sure you’re right,’ Hannah agreed tersely, anxious to put a little distance between them. She went to step back then realised that Tom had beaten her to it and already moved away. He smiled at her but she couldn’t fail to see the wariness in his eyes.

‘If I were you, I’d give them a call right away, Hannah. The sooner you get it organised the better.’

‘Of course,’ she murmured, wondering why he appeared so on edge. He’d probably realised that he’d been crowding her, she decided, impinging on her personal space. However, logical though it sounded, she wasn’t convinced it was the answer and it bothered her. ‘I’ll do it now, so long as you don’t think Simon will mind.’

‘Of course he won’t mind. He’s gone out on a call but, believe me, he would never have taken you on if he didn’t have faith in your judgement.’

‘That’s good to know.’

Hannah headed for the door, relieved to make her escape. Being around Tom seemed to confuse her for some reason and she didn’t appreciate feeling this way. She liked order in her life, not

uncertainty, although she was trying not to be as rigid in her outlook as she'd used to be. As she had discovered when she'd been expecting Charlie, not everything went according to plan.

The thought still had the power to hurt. She couldn't help feeling guilty about the way she had tried so hard to structure every aspect of her life. If *she'd* been more flexible then Andrew might not have been so uncompromising too, she thought for the umpteenth time, then sighed when she realised how unlikely that was.

'So how do you feel about us holding the fort while Simon and Ros visit their daughter?'

'I suppose it would make sense,' Hannah said, pausing reluctantly.

'But?' He gave a short laugh. 'There was a definite "but" in there if I'm not mistaken.'

'Was there?' He was far too astute, she realised with a sinking heart. She summoned a smile, keen to convince him that she wasn't the least bit worried by the thought of them working together. 'I suppose I'm a little concerned at the thought of being so new to the practice. It takes a while to find your feet and I wouldn't like to make any major blunders.'

'I'm sure you're far too professional to commit any blunders.'

He returned her smile but once again she could see the wariness in his eyes. It struck her all of a sudden that if she had a problem with Tom then he had a problem with her too. The thought was unsettling because she didn't want there to be *any* issues between them, nothing to make either of them more aware of the other, and she hurried on. 'Let's hope so. Anyway, what about you? Would you be able to delay taking up your new job?'

'Yes, I expect so.' He shrugged. 'Benedict—he's the director of the clinic I'm going to work at—is a friend from way back. I'm sure he would agree to let me start a few weeks later if I explained the situation to him.'

'In that case, there doesn't appear to be a problem.' She gave a light laugh, determined to nip things in the bud. Maybe she *did* find him attractive but so what? She was a grown woman, a mother as well, and she wasn't going to allow herself to get carried away! 'If Ros and Simon do decide to go, I'm sure we'll cope.'

'I'm sure we will too,' Tom murmured. He glanced round when the phone rang, hating the fact that he felt so relieved to be interrupted. He knew it was ridiculous to be so aware of her, but he couldn't seem to stop. Even learning that she was a mother—a definite no-no in his book—hadn't dampened his interest. As soon as he was near her, common sense flew right out of the window.

It was a worrying thought and Tom knew that he needed to take it on board. Normally, he was the one who called the shots, the one who was always in control, but not this time, it seemed. He needed to get himself back on track and there was no time like the present. He smiled coolly at her, hoping that she couldn't tell how on edge he felt. 'I'd better get that.'

'Of course.'

She didn't say anything else before she left the room so there was no basis for thinking that she was as relieved as he was to put an end to the conversation. Tom lifted the receiver to his ear and listened while the caller explained that the dog had eaten his prescription. It was the sort of anecdote he normally relished, but he found it difficult to concentrate that day. Was Hannah as confused by her feelings as he was by his?

'Are you still there, Doctor?'

'I... um... yes.'

Tom dragged his mind back to the missing prescription and told the caller to come into the surgery and collect another one. He printed it out and left it in the tray then headed out to the corridor. He had to stop thinking about Hannah all the time. If it did turn out that they would be working together for longer than expected then he needed to put things into perspective. It shouldn't be difficult. He just had to remember that he was incapable of being faithful to *any* woman. He was genetically programmed to play the field like generations of his family had done before him. So long

as he remembered that, everything would be fine, but if he ever imagined that he could break the cycle...

He cut off that thought. He couldn't change who he was, couldn't erase his heritage, the bad bits or the good. He had tried to do so once before and had failed miserably, and he certainly wasn't going to try it again. No matter how tempted he was, he wouldn't get involved with Hannah, especially when there was a child on the scene.

Children needed stability more than anything else. They needed people who would stay around while they were growing up and he couldn't promise to do that. Oh, he might *think* he could but, if push came to shove, would he? Could he? Or would the family genes rise to the fore and he'd turn out exactly like the rest of them—incapable of making a commitment and sticking to it?

Tom squared his shoulders. It was a risk he wasn't prepared to take. No matter how attracted he was to Hannah, she was off limits.

CHAPTER THREE

IT WAS just gone six when Hannah arrived at the nursery to collect Charlie. Simon had insisted that she and Tom should split her evening list, which meant she had managed to get away earlier than expected. Now, as she rang the bell, she found herself wondering why she had been so reluctant to let Tom help her. After all, the world hadn't come to an end because he had seen some patients for her!

'Oh, hi, Hannah. Come on in. Charlie's in the playroom—we can't get him out of the sand tray. He loves it!'

Lucy Burrows, one of the nursery nurses, laughed as she opened the door. Hannah briskly dismissed the thought that she had overreacted as she followed Lucy inside. The sooner she accepted that Tom was just someone she worked with the better. Now, as she paused in the doorway and watched Charlie giggling happily, she was overwhelmed with relief.

Taking Charlie away from everything he knew had been a gamble. Children thrived on stability and she'd been afraid that the move would unsettle him, but so far everything seemed to be working out surprisingly well. He seemed to have settled into the tiny cottage she had rented down by the harbour and he seemed equally happy here at the nursery. After what they had been through in the past year, it was hard to believe that their lives might be changing for the better. If only Andrew had stuck around, surely he would have realised that having a child with talipes wasn't the disaster he imagined?

Hannah's mouth compressed as she went over to her son. The likelihood of her ex altering his views was zero. From the moment they had discovered during her pregnancy that there was a problem with Charlie's feet, Andrew hadn't wanted anything to do with him. He had wanted a perfect child and he had made that clear.

'Hello, darling. Are you having a lovely time?' Hannah crouched down beside the little boy. With his dark brown curls and deep blue eyes, Charlie looked a lot like Andrew. It had hurt at first to see the resemblance, but she had learned to harden her heart. It took more than shared genes to be a *real* father.

Charlie gurgled in delight when he saw her. Hannah picked him up, inhaling his lovely warm baby smell. Even though she needed to work to support them, she missed him so much whenever they were apart.

'He's been as good as gold,' Lucy told her. 'You'd think he'd been coming here for ages, not that it was his first day.'

'That's a good boy.'

Hannah gave Charlie a kiss as she hitched him more securely onto her hip. Although the casts on his legs were lightweight ones, they were still cumbersome and made carrying him rather awkward. She collected his bag and took him out to the car. Digging into her pocket, she tried to ease out the keys but, with Charlie straddling her hip, it wasn't easy. She groaned when she ended up dropping them on the ground.

'Here, let me get them for you.'

All of a sudden Tom was there and she jumped. He smiled as he picked up the bunch of keys. 'I'll get the door for you as well.'

He unlocked the car and opened the rear door, standing back while she strapped Charlie into his seat. She straightened up, forcing herself to smile when he dropped the keys into her hand. Maybe it was the shock of seeing him when she'd least expected it, but her heart was racing again.

'Thanks. You could do with an extra pair of hands when you have a baby,' she said, lightly.

'So I can see.' He smiled back, his deep blue eyes crinkling attractively at the corners. With his tanned skin and athletic build, not to mention that air of confidence he exuded, he must have women fighting to go out with him, she thought, then wondered why the idea made her feel so dejected.

‘Well, I’d better get off,’ she said, opening the driver’s door before any more foolish thoughts could infiltrate her mind. She didn’t *want* to go out with him—it was the last thing she wanted! ‘Charlie will want his tea.’

‘Of course.’ He glanced at his watch and grimaced. ‘I’d better get my skates on too. I was supposed to be at the lifeboat station for six and it’s five past already.’

Hannah paused. ‘Are you part of the lifeboat crew?’

‘No. I’d love to be, but the fact that I spend most of my time working abroad means it isn’t possible.’ He shrugged. ‘I’m filling in for Simon tonight. He teaches first aid to the crew. There’s a couple of new guys who’ve just started and they need to complete the course as part of their training.’

‘Oh, I see.’ Hannah hesitated but there was no way she could avoid offering him a lift when she was heading that way. ‘I’m going that way so why don’t you hop in? It’ll save you some time.’

‘Oh, I wouldn’t want to take you out of your way...’

‘You aren’t.’ She summoned a smile when she realised how sharp she’d sounded. However, his reluctance to get into the car had stung. ‘I’m renting a cottage down by the harbour so I’m going that way.’

‘Oh! Right. Then thank you.’

He strode around the car and slid into the passenger seat. Hannah started the engine and pulled out into the traffic. Although the roads were nowhere near as busy as they were in London, she was surprised by the number of vehicles there were about.

‘It’s a lot busier than I expected,’ she observed, easing round a car and caravan combination that was partially blocking the road.

‘We’re coming into the holiday season. By the middle of July, you won’t be able to move in the town centre—it’ll be one big traffic jam.’

‘Really?’ She frowned. ‘I had no idea that Bride’s Bay was so popular with the tourists.’

‘All the towns along this stretch of coast are tourist magnets.’ Tom smiled at her. ‘You’ll learn to live with it, as everyone does. Yes, it does get hectic at times, but the plus side is that the holidaymakers bring a lot of money into the town.’

‘Which can only be a good thing,’ she concluded. ‘Without the extra income then people would need to move away to find work.’

‘Exactly. As it is, most of the folk in Bride’s Bay have lived here all their lives. That’s what makes it so special.’

His tone was warm and she glanced curiously at him. ‘You obviously love the town.’

‘I do. I’ve been coming here since I was a child and I can honestly say that it’s my favourite place to be.’

‘So why didn’t you opt to become Simon’s partner?’ She slowed to let an elderly couple cross the road and glanced at him. ‘I’m sure he would have been delighted.’

‘I like variety, which is why I prefer to take short-term contracts.’

It was a reasonable answer yet Hannah doubted it was the whole truth. If Tom loved the town so much then the logical step would be for him to settle down here. She was about to point that out when a loud bang made her jump.

‘What on earth was that!’ she exclaimed, drawing the car to a halt.

‘A maroon. They let them off from the lifeboat station to alert the crew when there’s a boat in trouble.’ Tom leant forward and pointed through the windscreen. ‘Look! You can see the trail of smoke it’s left behind.’

Hannah leant forward to look then felt her breath catch when she realised how close they were. There was just the tiniest space separating them and it shrank even more when Tom suddenly turned and she found herself staring into his eyes. She felt a shiver run through her when she saw his eyes darken, turning from sapphire blue to midnight in the space of a heartbeat. When he bent towards

her she didn't move, couldn't have done so when it felt as though she was drowning in their indigo depths...

Charlie started to cry when a second rocket exploded and the spell was broken. Hannah took a quick breath as she turned to reassure him, but her heart was racing out of control. If they hadn't been interrupted would she have let Tom kiss her? Because that was where they'd been heading.

Her heart sank as she realised that she would have done. She would have let Tom kiss her, kissed him back, and there was no point denying it. On the contrary, she needed to face the truth, admit that she was deeply attracted to him, and do something about it.

She couldn't get involved with Tom. It was far too soon after what had happened between her and Andrew. Discovering that the one person she should have been able to rely on had let her down had knocked her for six and it would be a long time before she could trust anyone again. Then there was Charlie. She intended to focus all her time and energy on making sure that everything possible was done for him. The child may have been let down by his father but he wasn't going to be let down by her too.

Hannah took a deep breath. Nothing was going to happen between her and Tom, not now. *Not ever.*

Tom could feel the heat that had been pooling in the pit of his stomach turning to ice. He couldn't believe what had happened. One minute he'd been looking through the windscreen and the next...

He swore under his breath as he reached for the door handle. He had come within a hair's breadth of kissing Hannah. That was bad enough, but the fact that he appeared to have so little self-control where she was concerned was far more worrying. He *knew* that she wasn't right for him but it hadn't stopped him. He would have kissed her and to hell with the consequences because kissing her had seemed more important than anything else. It made him see how dangerous the situation was. Hannah could turn his world upside down, if he let her.

'I'll walk from here. It's not far now and it'll be quicker than waiting for the traffic to clear.' He opened the car door, using that as an excuse not to look at her. He didn't appreciate feeling so vulnerable. He had always been in control before, of himself and his relationships, but it appeared that he was putty in her hands.

The thought of her hands being anywhere near him was too much. Tom shot out of the car, pausing briefly, as politeness dictated, to thank her. Maybe he should have simply cut and run but he needed to take charge of what was happening, be proactive rather than reactive. 'Thanks for the lift, Hannah. I appreciate it.'

'It was nothing.'

Her voice was husky and he felt the hair all over his body stand to attention. Even though he really didn't want to have to look at her, he couldn't resist. The lump of ice rapidly melted again when he saw the stunned expression on her face. In that second he knew that if he *had* kissed her, she wouldn't have stopped him!

Quite frankly, it was the last thing he needed to know. Tom slammed the door and headed off down the hill as though the hounds of hell were snapping at his heels. In a way they were, because it would be his own version of hell if he allowed the situation to gather momentum. He took a deep breath as he weaved his way through the crowd that had gathered to watch the lifeboat being launched. He was attracted to Hannah, more attracted to her than he'd been to any woman. She seemed to push all the right buttons, or maybe that should be all the *wrong* ones because he certainly didn't want to feel this way. He was happy with his lot, enjoyed his life free from complications...

Didn't he?

Tom's mouth thinned. He wasn't going down that route. He had to do what was right and for him that meant living his life unencumbered by a wife and a family. It was the only way he could guarantee that he wouldn't turn out like the rest of the Bradburys.

He didn't intend to leave behind a string of broken marriages and tawdry affairs. *He* didn't plan to break any hearts or ruin any lives. So maybe he'd thought he could buck the trend once, be the one member of his family who could make a marriage work, but he'd soon discovered he was mistaken. How long had his engagement lasted? Two months? Three? Definitely no longer. As soon as he'd realised he was losing interest, he had broken it off.

It had been a salutary lesson, however, and one he needed to remember. Attraction could and did wane. Maybe he was attracted to Hannah at this very moment, but in a week or so's time it could be a different story. It wasn't fair to Hannah to start something that was doomed to failure. It wasn't fair to him either! He didn't need this kind of pressure. He didn't need the worry of constantly wondering if he would hurt her. He wanted to get on with his life and enjoy it, and if that meant staying single then so be it.

Hannah gave Charlie his tea then knelt on the rug and played a noisy game of cars with him. Charlie loved it when they crashed into one another, laughing loudly when his red plastic fire-engine sent her little white ambulance skittering across the floor.

'You're going to be a demon driver when you grow up, my boy,' she smilingly admonished him as she retrieved both vehicles.

Charlie gurgled happily as he sent the toy fire-engine spinning across the room closely followed by the ambulance. Although the casts on his legs meant he couldn't crawl, he had developed his own technique for getting about which involved shuffling on his bottom. Hannah chuckled as she watched him make his way towards the toys.

'You're a determined little chap. I'll say that for you.' She went to help him get the ambulance, which had rolled under a chair, then paused when someone knocked on the front door. 'I won't be a second, darling,' she said, veering off to answer it. There was a young man outside wearing bright yellow oilskins and he smiled uncertainly at her.

'Are you Dr Morris?'

'Yes, that's right. What can I do for you?'

'I'm Billy Robinson, one of the lifeboat crew. Tom asked me to fetch you. We've got two casualties at the station and he needs a hand.' He looked past her and grinned when he saw Charlie. 'Tom said you had a little 'un and to bring him along. There's plenty of folk there who'll be more than happy to look after him for you.'

'In that case, of course I'll come,' Hannah agreed immediately. 'I just need to fetch my bag from the kitchen.'

She hurried back through the tiny sitting-room into the equally compact kitchen. Her medical bag was on the table and she quickly checked that she had everything she needed. When she went back, Billy was holding Charlie, who was laughing happily up at him.

'He seems to have taken to you,' Hannah observed as she shut the front door.

'Oh, I'm well used to kids,' Billy told her cheerfully. 'There's seven of us at home and I'm the oldest, so I've done my share of babysitting.'

Hannah laughed at the rueful note in his voice. He seemed a pleasant young man and she didn't have any qualms about letting him carry Charlie the short distance to the lifeboat station. The doors were open and she hurried inside, taking in the scene that met her. Tom was kneeling beside a middle-aged man, setting up a portable defibrillator, whilst two of the lifeboat's crew were performing artificial respiration on him. It was obvious they had everything under control so she hurried over to the second casualty, a woman. There was another crew member with her and Hannah knelt down beside him.

'I'm Dr ...' She paused and corrected herself. 'I'm Hannah Morris. Can you give me some idea what's happened to her?'

‘Nice to meet you, Hannah. I’m Jim Cairns and this here is Marilyn Baines. She and her husband were out on their yacht when the rudder broke and they ran aground on some rocks. From what I can gather, the main mast broke and hit her on the head.’

‘Right.’ Hannah bent over the woman. ‘My name’s Hannah and I’m a doctor. I need to examine you, Marilyn, if that’s all right?’

‘Ye...’ Marilyn tried to speak but it was obvious that she was still very woozy from the blow to her head.

‘Just relax.’ Hannah smiled reassuringly as she set about examining her, starting with the injury to her head. It was obviously tender because Marilyn winced when she gently probed it. ‘Sorry. It’s a nasty blow and you’ll need a CT scan at the hospital.’

‘Clive... how is he?’ the woman managed to ask.

Hannah gently eased her back down when she tried to sit up. ‘Dr Bradbury is with him. Let’s concentrate on you for now.’

She carried on, noting down a broken left wrist and dislocated left shoulder. There could be damage to the left humerus as well but that would need to be confirmed when an X-ray was done. There was no doubt that the poor woman was in a great deal of pain so Hannah drew up 10 mg of morphine.

‘I’m going to give you something for the pain, Marilyn. Have you had morphine before?’

‘No,’ Marilyn whispered.

‘Sometimes it can make you feel a bit queasy but it’s nothing to worry about.’ She swabbed the woman’s good arm and slid in the needle. The drug took effect almost immediately, although she waited a couple of minutes to see how Marilyn had tolerated it before she set about strapping her wrist and stabilising her shoulder ready for transfer to the hospital.

‘How long before the ambulance gets here?’ she asked, glancing at Jim.

‘The helicopter is on its way,’ a familiar voice answered from behind her.

Hannah took a deep breath before she turned, determined that she wasn’t going to allow Tom to upset her equilibrium again. He’s just a colleague, she reminded herself. Just someone you work with. However, as her gaze skimmed up the long legs and narrow hips before coming to rest on a firmly muscled chest, she realised with a sinking heart that Tom could never be *just* anyone.

She had tried to tell herself that it was purely physical attraction she felt, but it wasn’t true. Tom appealed to her on many different levels, ranging from his innate warmth to the consideration he showed to other people. She only had to remember how concerned he’d been about Peter Granger to know that it wasn’t an act either. He genuinely wanted to do his best for people, wanted to help them, and that was very appealing.

It was also in marked contrast to Andrew’s attitude. Her ex had always put himself and his needs first, as she knew to her cost. However, she sensed that Tom didn’t do that, that, despite his playboy lifestyle, he cared about other people. It all added up to one seriously attractive package and the thought scared her.

She might not like the idea, certainly hadn’t wished for it to happen, but she had a feeling that Tom was about to take on a far more important role in her life than that of colleague.

CHAPTER FOUR

‘IT WILL be faster if the transfer is made by helicopter.’ Tom fixed a smile to his mouth. He had made his decision to keep Hannah at arm’s length and he intended to stick to it. He blanked out the thought that the length of his arm wasn’t *that* far and carried on. ‘It’ll cut almost half an hour off the journey time.’

‘I see.’

Hannah stood up, making it clear that she wanted to speak to him in private, and he reluctantly followed her. He made a rapid calculation, stopping when he judged himself to be just beyond touching range. There was no point taking *any* chances.

‘How bad is he?’ she asked, glancing over to where one of the crew was keeping watch over his patient.

‘Not good. He’s had an infarct—a bad one too—and he needs to be in the coronary care unit ASAP. Although we managed to get his heart started again, there’s definite signs of arrhythmia.’

‘As you say, he needs urgent treatment.’

‘He does. How about your patient?’ Tom kept his tone light but even then he feared it wasn’t anywhere near as bland as Hannah’s as she outlined the woman’s injuries. Was she merely better at hiding her feelings or was the explanation far more simple? Had he made a mistake about her being interested in him?

The thought should have reassured him. It didn’t. In fact, it felt like a kick in the guts to wonder if he had misinterpreted her response to that near-miss kiss. He’d thought that she had welcomed his advances, whereas she had probably been so shocked that she hadn’t resisted! The thought made him wince and he saw her look at him in concern.

‘Are you all right?’

‘Fine. Just my stomach rumbling.’ He gave her a tight smile, cursing his own stupidity. He should be rejoicing because he’d been let off the hook, not feeling down in the dumps because she wasn’t interested! ‘I skipped lunch and haven’t made it as far as supper.’

‘Me too. Well, I did sneak a piece of toast off Charlie’s plate so I’ve fared a little better than you.’

She smiled back and this time Tom could see a hint of something in her eyes. What it was he had no idea and didn’t investigate. However, his spirits rose a fraction and he grinned at her.

‘We’re a right pair, aren’t we?’

‘I...um... If you say so.’

Thankfully, the roar of an engine announced the arrival of the helicopter so he was spared having to reply. He went back to his patient and got him ready for the transfer. Hannah was doing the same, getting her patient ready to be transferred to hospital. She worked quickly and methodically, sorting everything out with the minimum of fuss. As well as being both beautiful and sexy, she was a damn fine doctor, Tom thought, and sighed. What a beguiling combination. No wonder he was having such a hard time keeping his distance.

Hannah handed over her patient, briefly reporting her findings to the crew: head injury, which would need a CT scan doing; fractured left wrist; forward dislocation to the left shoulder; and possible fracture to the left humerus. Then it was Tom’s turn.

She stepped aside as he succinctly explained what had happened to Clives Baines and what treatment the man had received. His voice was as confident as ever. When it came to medical matters, he obviously knew his stuff; however, when it came to anything else, she could only speculate.

What was he like as a lover? she wondered. Would he be tender, caring and patient? Or would he be eager, greedy and determined to satisfy his own needs? Maybe he would be a mixture of both—tender and giving but also eager and demanding as he drew a response from his partner.

Hannah shivered. She didn't want to think about such things but now that she'd started it was difficult to stop. A picture of Tom, lying naked in bed, sprang into her mind, but the picture wasn't complete. There was no one lying beside him and she didn't dare fill in the gap when she knew whose face she would see. That would be a step too far, picturing herself lying beside him.

'Right. That's all sorted. Do you want to take Charlie outside so he can watch the helicopter taking off?'

All of a sudden Tom was standing beside her and she hurriedly applied a mental eraser to the images in her head. 'Good idea. I'm sure he'll love it.'

She felt quite proud of herself when she heard how calm she sounded. If she could maintain this kind of balance then everything would be fine, she assured herself as she went to collect her son, who was playing a noisy game of pat-a-cake with Billy. Maybe she was attracted to Tom but so long as she recognised the fact, she could deal with it.

'Thanks for looking after him,' she said, scooping a reluctant Charlie into her arms. 'I hope he's not been too much trouble.'

'He's been as good as gold,' Billy assured her. 'Pity about those casts on his legs. They must be a real nuisance for him.'

'They'll be coming off soon,' Hannah explained, and Billy's face brightened.

'That's good to hear. He'll have to come round to our house then and play with my little brother. He's just turned one so they're much of an age.'

Billy said goodbye and left. Hannah frowned when she heard him asking one of the other men if he fancied a pint.

'Something wrong?'

She glanced round when Tom joined her. 'Not really. I was just a bit surprised when Billy mentioned he had a little brother a few months older than Charlie.'

'His mum was more than a bit surprised when she found out she was pregnant again!' Tom laughed. 'There's a ten-year gap between the baby and the next child so it came as a bolt out of the blue.'

'It must have done,' Hannah replied, smiling as she followed him outside. The helicopter had landed in a nearby field and they were just in time to watch it taking off.

'Look,' Tom said, lifting Charlie out of her arms so he could see over the top of the crowd. 'Helicopter. Whee!'

Hannah wasn't sure how to react. Tom hadn't asked her permission to hold Charlie yet it seemed churlish to complain when it was obvious that her son was enjoying himself. She stood silently beside them, thinking how wonderful it would have been if it had been Andrew holding him, Andrew playing the doting father; Andrew accepting him for what he was, not what he'd wanted him to be.

'That was fun, wasn't it, tiger?' Tom swung Charlie round to face him, laughing when the little boy grabbed his nose. 'Hey, that's quite a grip you've got, young man. Can I have my nose back, please?'

He gently released the baby's fingers then balanced him on his hip as he forged a way through the crowd. Hannah shrugged off the moment of introspection as she hurried after them.

'I'll take him now, thanks. He's rather heavy.'

'All the more reason for me to carry him when you've got your bag to lug home.' Tom paused and glanced at her empty hands. 'You are taking it home, I suppose?'

'Oh, er, yes, of course.' Hannah felt herself blush when she realised that she hadn't given a thought to her medical bag. Bearing in mind that it contained a variety of drugs and expensive equipment, she should have been more careful.

'We'll wait here while you fetch it,' Tom told her. 'I'll show Charlie the fishing boats. He'll love them.'

He went over to the harbour wall, leaving her hovering in a sort of no-man's land. She wanted to go after him and insist he give back her son, while on the other hand she needed to fetch her bag. In the end duty won and she hurried back inside the lifeboat station. Jim Cairns was standing guard over her case and he smiled at her.

'Here it is, Hannah. No one's touched anything.'

'Thanks, Jim. I'd forget my head if it wasn't screwed on tight.'

It was obviously the right thing to say because he laughed. Hannah had a feeling that her lapse had created a bond between them and it was something she would take on board. It didn't always need perfection to make a situation turn out right.

Tom placed Charlie on his knee as he sat down on the harbour wall. The baby seemed entranced by the scene, waving his chubby little fists as he watched the boats set off for an evening's fishing, and Tom smiled. He'd had very little to do with any children outside his work and it was fascinating to observe Charlie's reaction. Even at such a tender age, Charlie was taking everything in, his head turning this way and that as he watched the boats leave the harbour. It was growing dusk and when some of the boats turned on their lights, Charlie gave a little squeal of excitement.

Tom laughed. 'You like this, don't you, tiger?' He buzzed the top of the baby's head with a kiss, surprised by the sudden rush of longing that assailed him. He had long since ruled out the possibility having children yet all of a sudden he found himself thinking how wonderful it would be to watch his child discovering the world. There must be a special kind of magic seeing everything through a child's eyes and he couldn't help wishing that he could experience it for himself. Maybe he shouldn't rule out the possibility of him having a family at some point?

The thought was contrary to everything he had always believed. Tom pushed it aside when Hannah came to join them. He patted the wall, doing his best to behave as though nothing had happened even though it had. Could he really see himself as a father? It was the ultimate commitment, after all, and normally he would have shied away from the idea. However, he couldn't deny that for the first time ever it held a definite appeal.

'Sit yourself down while we finish watching the boats.' He summoned a smile, determined that he wasn't going to get carried away. Maybe the idea did appeal at the moment but he could very easily change his mind.

The thought should have set him back on course faster than anything else could have done but Tom found it lingering at the back of his mind as they watched the last few boats set sail. Charlie gave a little sigh, obviously worn out by all the excitement, and Tom took it as his cue that they should leave. Standing up, he swung the baby into his arms, somewhat surprised by how natural it felt to carry him.

'Shall I take him now?' Hannah suggested, but he shook his head.

'No, we're fine, aren't we, tiger?' He dropped another kiss on the baby's head and heard her sigh softly.

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