



SUSANNE HAMPTON

White Christmas for
the Single Mum



**MEDICAL
ROMANCE™**



Susanne Hampton

White Christmas For The Single Mum

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«HarperCollins»,

Temptation under the mistletoe Specialist Juliet Turner flies half-way across the world to England with her young daughter Bea to perform life-saving in utero surgery. But her first white Christmas is complicated by the feelings awakened by OB/GYN Dr Charlie Warren! Juliet has protected her heart for years, but she soon finds there's so much more to this closed-off widower than meets the eye. Perhaps it's time for them both to let go of the past, surrender to their burning chemistry, and make this a Christmas to remember! Christmas Miracles in Maternity Hope, magic and precious new beginnings at Teddy's!

Temptation under the mistletoe

Specialist Juliet Turner flies halfway across the world to England with her young daughter, Bea, to perform lifesaving in utero surgery. But her first white Christmas is complicated by the feelings awakened by ob-gyn Dr. Charlie Warren!

Juliet has protected her heart for years, but she soon finds there's so much more to this closed-off widower than meets the eye. Perhaps it's time for them both to let go of the past, surrender to their burning chemistry and make this a Christmas to remember!

Christmas Miracles in Maternity

Hope, magic and precious new beginnings at Teddy's!

Welcome to Teddy's Centre for Babies and Birth, where the brightest stars of neonatal and obstetric medicine work tirelessly to save tiny lives and deliver bundles of joy all year round—but there's never a time quite as magical as Christmas!

Although the temperature might be dropping outside, unexpected surprises are heating up for these dedicated pros! And as Christmas Day draws near, secrets are revealed, hope is ignited and love takes over.

Cuddle up this Christmas with the heartwarming stories of the doctors, nurses, midwives and surgeons at Teddy's in the Christmas Miracles in Maternity miniseries:

[The Nurse's Christmas Gift](#) by Tina Beckett

[The Midwife's Pregnancy Miracle](#) by Kate Hardy

White Christmas for the Single Mum

by Susanne Hampton

[A Royal Baby for Christmas](#) by Scarlet Wilson

All available now!

[Dear Reader,](#)

In this Christmas story, my heroine, Dr. Juliet Turner, is transferred from a hot Australian summer to the snow-covered Cotswolds. Ordinarily this wouldn't be an issue for her, a young, single, world-renowned specialist, but while Juliet has no man to hold her back, she does have a four-year-old daughter, Bea, to consider. Despite her reservations, it appears that Juliet is the only one concerned about her taking Bea on this adventure that will include their first white Christmas alone on the other side of the world.

But will it be a Christmas alone? Pretty quickly Bea thinks that her mother's nemesis, handsome ob-gyn Dr. Charlie Warren, might just be a suitable daddy. Although widower Charlie finds moments of joy with the little girl and her mother, he is still burdened with overwhelming guilt over his wife's death. Can Charlie step from behind the cloud that darkens his life? And can Juliet learn to trust again after being left after only one night with Bea's biological father? Love has healing properties like nothing else, and that is just what Charlie and Juliet need to leave their pain behind. Will a white Christmas bring this single mom the happiness she deserves?

I hope you enjoy Juliet and Charlie's journey to happily-ever-after, and I wish you all a very Merry Christmas filled with love!

Warmest regards,

Susanne

White Christmas for the Single Mum

Susanne Hampton



Thank you to the wonderfully talented and incredibly witty Harlequin authors who shared this writing journey with me...Scarlet Wilson, Kate Hardy and Tina Beckett. You have made writing this book like a road trip with new friends. You all helped to make it a joyful experience and one I will never forget.

And to my amazing editor, Nicola...thank you again for your guidance and unending patience as we brought this book to life.

Praise for Susanne Hampton

“A stunning read about new beginnings that is guaranteed to melt any reader’s heart.”

—Goodreads on Falling for Dr. December

“Probably one of my top ten favorite reads this year. It was heartbreaking...kept me wanting to read to find out what happens next.”

—Goodreads on A Baby to Bind Them

[Contents](#)

[Cover](#)

[Back Cover Text](#)

[Introduction](#)

[Dear Reader](#)

[Title Page](#)

[Dedication](#)

[Praise](#)

[Chapter One](#)

[Chapter Two](#)

[Chapter Three](#)

[Chapter Four](#)

[Chapter Five](#)

[Chapter Six](#)

[Chapter Seven](#)

[Chapter Eight](#)

[Chapter Nine](#)

[Chapter Ten](#)

[Chapter Eleven](#)

[Chapter Twelve](#)

[Chapter Thirteen](#)

[Chapter Fourteen](#)

[Extract](#)

[Copyright](#)

[CHAPTER ONE](#)

IT WAS FOUR in the morning and snow was gently falling in the darkness like tiny stars floating to the ground when Charlie Warren awoke from a nightmare that was all too familiar. Beads of perspiration trailed over his half-naked body. The nights it happened were less in number than the year before but they still came with a regularity he found strangely comforting. Feeling the pain was better than feeling nothing. Or facing the fear of letting go completely. That was something he could still not bring himself to contemplate.

For the few hours that sleep claimed him during those nights, Charlie would relive the moments of impact. Sounds echoed in his mind, each as haunting as the one before. The buckling metal and splintering glass as his car skidded out of his control and slammed into the old oak tree. It was the crash that had claimed his wife and had come close to claiming Charlie’s sanity. He would wake and in the deafening silence lie motionless in his bed thinking over and over about the conversation they should have shared that fateful night. The one when he told his wife it was too dangerous to venture

out. The one when he firmly and resolutely refused to take the risk on the treacherous road. The conversation he would regret for the rest of his life that they'd never had.

Some nights were worse than others and on the very worst the nightmares began the moment his head hit the pillow and ended as he sat bolt upright woken by either the ringing of the telephone or his alarm clock. Both signalling he should head in to the hospital, the only place that gave him purpose.

But this night he'd been woken from his tortured sleep by the sound of a falling branch outside his window. The weight of the snowfall had been too much for the narrow branch and it had snapped, crushing against the leadlight window. It had not broken the glass, merely scratched down the panes as it fell, making a noise not unlike a dying animal's scream.

Still damp with sweat, Charlie rushed to the window believing an injured deer might have roamed into his property, but he quickly saw the silhouette of the damaged tree lit by the moon. There were no streetlights as Charlie's home was on a large estate. The seven-bedroom, seventeenth-century, run-down and previously unloved manor home was undergoing much-needed renovations so he was sleeping downstairs on the leather chesterfield in the sitting room while work was being completed on the upstairs part of the house.

The stone slate roof had been in a state of disrepair for too long and the ceilings had been damaged in most of the upstairs rooms. The master bedroom was due to be finished within a few days. The rooms were all empty and waiting to be filled with new furniture although Charlie had no burning desire to see any of it, let alone choose it, so he had left those decisions up to the decorator. He wasn't rushing to move back into the master bedroom. He had not shared it with anyone for two years and he had no plans of sharing it again. His wife, Alice, had begun the renovations and he was seeing them through to completion in her honour. After that he did not know what he would do with the home.

Or himself, for that matter. Other than work, he had no plans for the future.

As always, once Charlie had been woken he found it hard to fall back into a sound sleep again. He read for a while and then tried once again to sleep. But slumber evaded him so he slipped on his heavy winter dressing gown, tied it loosely around his hips, headed into his kitchen and made himself a coffee. While memories of the accident monopolised his dreams, it was the impending arrival of the Australian in-utero surgeon that dominated his waking thoughts, leaving him both anxious and irritated about her potential interference.

The hospital's decision, or more precisely Assistant Head of Obstetrics, Oliver Darrington's decision, to fly the specialist over to consult infuriated him. In Charlie's opinion there was nothing to be gained and everything to lose. The quadruplets were only weeks away from being big enough to deliver and, as the attending OBGYN, Charlie thought any deviation from the treatment plan should be his decision. In-utero surgery carried risks that he did not consider warranted. And he wouldn't readily agree with the procedure without proof it was the best way forward.

As he looked out over what many would call a joy of the Cotswolds at Christmas, the majestic sight of dawn breaking over the snow-capped hillside, Charlie barely noticed any of the landscape. With his blood pressure beginning to rise, he sat down at the large oak kitchen table, sipping the coffee that was warming his fingers.

Dr Charlie Warren was unable to appreciate anything because he was preparing himself for a professional battle.

This time his words of caution would be heard. And heard loudly.

* * *

'What on earth do you mean, there's no need for me to scrub in?'

Juliet Turner spun around with confusion dressing her brow and a surgical gown covering her petite frame. 'My patient's on the operating table, prepped for an open foetal repair of a neural tube defect. I have to scrub in. This can't be postponed.'

‘It hasn’t been postponed, Dr Turner,’ the theatre nurse told her. ‘The surgery’s going ahead today. It’s just that you’re not the surgeon operating.’

Juliet’s nostrils flared behind the operating mask. ‘That’s even more ridiculous. There has to be a mistake.’

‘No mistake, Dr Turner. Another in-utero specialist has been brought in to take over,’ the nurse replied firmly. ‘He’s already arrived, and in gowning now. Orders came from further up the food chain than me, so don’t go shooting the messenger.’

‘He’s in gowning! I’m sorry, Angie, but this is absolute nonsense,’ Juliet said as she returned her focus to lathering her hands and forearms as a visible protest. She wasn’t backing down and had no intention of relinquishing her role. Kelly Lester would have her surgery and her baby would have the best chance of a normal life. And she was operating as scheduled.

Being a female in a male-dominated profession had taught her to stand up for herself very early on. She had known entering the profession that women were at least twice as likely to drop out of surgical training programmes as men, making her well aware that it would not be an easy path and a shrinking violet would not succeed. During her studies her father, also a surgeon in the same field, often told her that, while half of the medical students in Australia and New Zealand were female, women made up less than ten per cent of fully qualified surgeons. It was a harsh reminder that she would have to be strong, focused and have a voice to survive. And she was going to use her voice whenever needed. Loud and clear.

It appeared that day was going to be one of those occasions.

‘I will not allow another surgeon to just step in now without a damned good reason. I know this is not at the patient’s request. I spoke to her only an hour ago.’

‘No, it wasn’t the patient who has requested the change, Dr Turner, and I understand you’re taken aback but I’m just passing on the message, not making the decision. However, I’m telling you the decision’s final. You really do need to stop scrubbing. Having sterile hands won’t change the outcome.’

Not hiding her irritation, Juliet turned off the flow of water with the foot control. ‘Well, we’ll just see about that.’

‘On the bright side, your replacement will no doubt meet with your approval. You’ve worked together more than a few times.’

Juliet was doubly confused with the smirk on Angie’s face. None of it made any sense but if she was to believe the nurse, and she had no reason to doubt her, she was being replaced without notice or reason. ‘I don’t care who’s been brought in to take over, it’s still madness,’ Juliet replied as she pulled her surgical cap free and the mass of brown curls dropped around her face. At that moment, the replacement doctor entered the scrub room.

‘Really,’ she announced, shaking her head in disbelief. ‘This is becoming more and more ludicrous by the minute. They call you back here two days after you retire. What is this craziness? I’ve a patient about to be anaesthetised and I’m told I’m not operating. Will someone please explain the absurd rationale behind all of this? And who made the call to replace me as Kelly’s surgeon?’

‘The hospital director...but with good reason,’ he replied.

‘I can’t think of one.’

‘You have to prepare for your trip.’

Juliet paused for a moment with a perplexed stare. ‘For goodness’ sake has everyone gone completely mad? My trip’s not until the middle of next week. I’ve got five days to prepare for the lectures and board the plane, but Kelly’s baby needs this operation now if he’s to ever walk.’

‘That’s where you’re wrong...not about Kelly and her baby—you’re right on that one, I just finished reading the notes and the surgery’s urgent—but your trip’s not next week. It’s tomorrow. You’re leaving on an eight o’clock flight in the morning.’

‘Tomorrow? But why?’ Juliet dropped her head into her hands still damp from the antibacterial wash. ‘The lecture is not until next Thursday.’

‘You’re not delivering the lecture in Auckland...you’re off to the UK—’

‘The lecture’s been cancelled?’ she cut in.

‘No, the lecture is going ahead...’

‘But without me?’ she asked as she pulled free her surgical gown and dropped it unceremoniously in the bin alongside her discarded cap.

‘Yes.’

‘And the surgery’s proceeding too, just without me?’ They were framed as questions but Juliet’s tone made it obvious they were statements that she was none too happy about.

‘That’s right.’

‘And I’m off to the UK?’ she continued with the volume of her voice escalating and increasing in speed with each word. ‘Before I go completely loopy, just tell me why my schedule is changing before my eyes without my approval?’

‘The call came through from Cheltenham just now.’

‘Cheltenham? As in the Cotswolds?’

‘One and the same.’

‘And who over there’s making decisions without consulting with me?’

‘The decision was made by four babies.’

Juliet blinked and shook her head. ‘Four? You’re speaking in riddles and you know that frustrates me.’

‘Apparently the Assistant Head of Obstetrics at Teddy’s, which is the maternity wing of the Royal Cheltenham hospital, spoke with our Head of Obstetrics about the quads. Almost twenty-nine weeks’ gestation, suffering twin-to-twin transfusion syndrome. Two sets of monozygotic twins. While the girls are fine at this stage, the boys have developed the TTTS. Oliver Darrington believes you’re the best chance that the quads have of all surviving should the parents agree to the in-utero laser surgery. And Professor Le Messurier just approved your secondment.’

‘That’s all very flattering but why am I being called in at the eleventh hour? If there was a risk, I should’ve been consulted upon the initial diagnosis. Surely being quads they would have been having weekly scans and intense monitoring and they’d know at Teddy’s that the earlier the intervention, the better the outcome.’

‘Apparently the quads were being closely monitored throughout the pregnancy, but the TTTS diagnosis has only just been made,’ her replacement continued as he began scrubbing in, and over the sound of the running water he continued his explanation. ‘The girls have separate placentas while the boys have one shared placenta so they were being scrutinised for any signs of transfusion. Up until now there was no indication of anything being amiss. It was picked up when the patient presented in what she thought was premature labour.’

‘Caused by the amniotic fluid imbalance affecting the recipient twin.’

‘Again, apparently but you’ll know more details when you get there.’

‘But the lecture in Auckland?’

‘Handled. I’m not sure who’s your proxy but your focus needs to be on the quadruplets. Darrington’s worried it could deteriorate quickly and there’s an increased risk they could lose at least one of them if you don’t get over to Teddy’s immediately, and of course we know the risks if one dies to the remaining foetuses. The parents have been briefed and want to be fully informed so they can consider all options, in particular the in-utero surgery.’

‘Anything else I need to know?’

‘Just one thing...the attending OBGYN, Dr Charlie Warren, is averse to fetoscopic laser surgery. Believes the risks are too great so no doubt he’ll be challenging you.’

Juliet took a deep breath. 'Looks like I'll be catching a plane tomorrow morning to meet Dr Warren's challenge and convince him otherwise.'

'I hope he knows what he's up against.'

'He soon will.' With her head tilted just slightly, and the remnants of bewilderment still lingering, she looked at her replacement. 'Okay, Dad, looks like Kelly and her baby are in your hands now.'

'Don't worry, honey. I'll do you proud.'

CHAPTER TWO

'DR TURNER, WE'RE about five minutes away from the Royal Cheltenham hospital.'

The voice of the immaculately suited driver made Juliet lift her tired eyes to meet his in the rear-view mirror. They were warm and smiling back at her but with a curiosity that she had been so very accustomed to over the years. She was well aware that she didn't look her thirty-three years and many apparently found it difficult to believe she was a doctor let alone a surgeon. Her curly brown hair and spattering of freckles along with her petite frame, she realised, didn't help her quest to be taken seriously. She had no time for make-up except for a natural lip gloss to prevent her lips from cracking, and that too added to her young appearance. It also helped her go under the radar and not gain the attention of the opposite sex and, although it wasn't her primary motivation, it was a welcome side effect.

But despite the general consensus, she was both a surgeon and a mother and she took both roles incredibly seriously. Her work, she loved with a passion, and her daughter, she loved more than anyone and anything in the world. And more than she had ever dreamed possible.

'Thank you,' she responded as she gently turned to stir the little girl fast asleep and leaning against her. Running her fingers down the child's ruddy cheeks, she softly kissed the top of her head. 'Wake up, Bea, my precious little sleepyhead.'

The little girl silently protested at being disturbed and nestled in tighter to the warmth of her mother's woollen overcoat. Her eyelashes flickered but her eyes were far too heavy to open.

'Well, I hope this part of your marathon travel's been pleasant,' the driver commented.

'Very pleasant, thank you.'

'So how many hours have you two been travelling to be here this morning?'

'I think it's about thirty five hours, but it feels like for ever,' she replied with a little sigh, thinking back over the logistical nightmare they had survived. 'We left Perth early yesterday, Australian time, had a layover in Singapore before we headed on to Heathrow, and then the sixty-mile trip to the Cotswolds with you,' Juliet added as she continued to try and wake her still-drowsy little girl as gently as possible. She wasn't sure just how coherent she was but didn't want to appear rude. She had a lot on her mind, including the impending in-utero surgery on the quadruplets within the week. The reason she had been seconded halfway around the world at a minute's notice.

Keeping all four babies viable was everyone's focus. And something everyone agreed could not be done with Juliet on the other side of the world. Well, almost everyone agreed. She knew she would have her work cut out convincing the quads' OBGYN, Dr Charlie Warren. She presumed he would be leaning towards bed rest, high-protein diet and medication for the quads' mother. It was conservative and Juliet was surprised that he was not encouraging the laser surgery. She'd had no time to research the man but assumed he might be perhaps closer to the driver's age and had managed previous TTTS cases in that manner. But once he heard her argument for the surgery, surely the traditional English physician would see that her method had clear benefit? Particularly once she stated her case and the supporting statistics. How could he not? With both hospitals agreeing that Juliet was best placed to undertake the procedure, all she needed was the parents' approval. She was not about to allow Teddy's overtly conservative OBGYN to question the validity of her surgical intervention. It was an argument she was more than prepared to have. And to win.

But that wasn't the issue that had weighed most heavily on her mind on the long flights over to the UK. It was her parenting. How responsible was it to drag her daughter with her? she had wondered incessantly. And with less than twenty-four hours' notice. The poor little girl barely knew what was happening. The only thing that she could really comprehend was a plane trip to see snow.

Up until that point Juliet and Bea's lives had been so settled and planned. Some might say overly so, and among those were Juliet's parents. They had openly encouraged her to take Bea with her and together enjoy the opportunity to travel. In her home town, Juliet's mother looked after Bea three days a week and the other two days Bea was in childcare only five minutes from Juliet's workplace at the Perth Women's and Children's Medical Centre. When the proposition of travelling to the UK had been forced upon her, Juliet's parents had quickly had to push her out of her comfort zone and into embracing the opportunity. Her mother had immediately brought the suitcases down from the attic and personally delivered them to Juliet's home and offered to help her pack. Juliet didn't doubt it would be better for the quads for her to be there but it was not just her any more. She had her daughter to consider in every decision she made.

'I just hope I'm doing the right thing in dragging Bea to the other side of the world for such a short time,' Juliet had muttered in the car on the way to the airport at five-thirty in the morning. Her father had been driving, her mother next to Bea in the back seat.

'That's just it, honey, it might not be a short time,' her father reminded her as he pulled up at traffic lights and turned to his daughter. 'You don't know when the quads will arrive and it's best you stay until they do. There could be post-operative or postnatal complications, so it's better to remain there up to the birth.'

'I know you're right, but this whole trip is so rushed, I've had no time to prepare mentally. I know it's too late, but I can't hide the fact I'm having second thoughts about everything.'

'It's an amazing opportunity to consult at Teddy's and no one can come close to your level of expertise,' he said with pride colouring his voice as the lights changed and he took off down the highway. 'It's part of a teaching hospital, and along with assisting those four babies, not to mention their mother, you can add value to the students', interns' and residents' learning experience. You're the best in your field, Juliet. And I should know since I've operated alongside you more than once. It's time you took your skills out to the world, not just in research papers and journals and lecture tours, but in person in an operating theatre.'

'Dad, you're completely biased.'

'Nonsense, your father's right. We're both proud of you and you need to take that knowledge and expertise where it's needed most. Those babies and their parents need you,' her mother argued from the back seat. Her voice was soft but her tone was firm. Gently she kissed the top of her granddaughter's head. 'While we'd love to have Bea stay with us if it was for your three-day trip to Auckland, this is not three days. Poor little thing, she would fret terribly without you for any longer than a few days and visiting the UK will be such a wonderful experience for her too. It will be her first white Christmas.'

'And mine,' Juliet said, but her tone lacked her mother's enthusiasm as she drummed her fingers nervously on the leather upholstered seat. There was an uneasiness stirring in the pit of her stomach.

'Exactly, so stop questioning your decision. It's made now, you're both going,' her father piped up as he took the turnoff to Perth International airport in the dawn light. 'You've been hiding away, Juliet. You're not the only professional woman who's going it alone as a single mother. It's not the eighteen hundreds, and you don't need a man to help you realise your dreams. You have your career and Bea.'

She was hardly going it alone, in her opinion, with all of the help her parents provided, she thought as she looked out of her window and up into the still-darkened sky. But her father was right, she mused. She didn't need a man to experience or enjoy life. She and Bea would be just fine on their

own. The plane would be up in that same sky in less than two hours, the sun would be up and they would be heading off to the other side of the world. To see four babies...and snow.

Juliet tried to muster a smile for everyone's sake. Her parents were always forthcoming with their very modern wisdom and they were generally right about everything. The quads needed surgical intervention and Bea needed to be with her mother. And Juliet could hardly stand being away from her daughter for a day, let alone the possibility of three or four weeks. So if Juliet went, then so would Bea.

Initially she wasn't sure how she would manage but when the information had arrived via email the night before, providing the details of the onsite hospital crèche, it had given Juliet no valid reason not to say yes to everything. Besides which, the tickets had been arranged. There was no turning back. And so it was that, with less than a day's notice, Juliet and Bea had left their sunburnt homeland behind and were on their way to Teddy's.

'It's a beautiful part of the world,' the driver announced, bringing Juliet back to the present. 'I've lived here for almost thirty years. Raised my children and now my grandchildren. You'll be sure to love it too.'

Juliet smiled at the way the man praised his home town. 'I won't be here quite that long, but long enough to enjoy the stunning scenery.' She looked out from the car window across fields blanketed in snow and dotted with trees and bushes in variant shades of green, all dusted by a fresh layer of white drift along the fences. It was so picturesque and a very long way from the long hot summer days of home. Since she could not turn back she had decided that she needed to accept her decision and be excited to share her first white Christmas with Bea. While she knew it had the potential to be a stressful time for her, with the impending surgery she would be performing, she was glad the two of them were together. They were like two musketeers off on an adventure.

Juliet had long accepted there would never be a third musketeer in their lives and that suited her fine. She didn't need a man in her life. Apart from her father, the rest just brought grief. Even in a new country, a man she had not laid eyes upon, Dr Charlie Warren's objection to her surgical option was another piece of proof that men caused unnecessary anguish.

And she didn't need any more of that.

'So you're only here for a short visit, then?'

'I'm consulting at Teddy's for a few weeks. I agreed because it was a short term. I couldn't keep my daughter away from her grandparents for too long. They'd miss her terribly.'

'I can see why. She's a proper little sweetie,' the man added, clearly wanting to keep the conversation flowing.

Juliet guessed him to be in his mid-fifties. He looked a little like her father, quite distinguished, greying around his temples with a moustache and fine-rimmed gold glasses. Her father was a chatty man too, even in the operating theatre. Perhaps it was his age that made it easy for her to talk to this man. There was no hidden agenda. Just pleasant conversation.

'Thank you. She's my little angel and she's a real sweetie.'

'She's got your curls and pretty eyes. I don't think her father got much of a look-in there. My granddaughter's just the same, spitting image of her mother.'

Juliet felt her stomach sink a little, the way it always did at the mention of Bea's father. The man who had caused more anguish than she had ever thought possible. A man who didn't want a look-in. He was the one time she had let down her guard and the reason she would never do it again. After the one romantic night they had shared, he had walked away and never looked back. Married the fiancée he had forgotten to mention to Juliet while he was seducing her. And as quickly as he had swept into her life, he was gone. Well before she had discovered she was having his baby. Two months after the night they spent together, Juliet had caught sight of his wedding photo complete with huge bridal party in the society pages of the local newspaper.

She had instantly felt overwhelmingly sad for his new wife.

Heaved twice with morning sickness.
And sworn off men.
For ever.

Juliet paid the driver and asked him to take her bags to the boutique hotel where she was staying for a few nights. The hospital had contracted the car service and, after their conversation, she felt she could trust him to take her belongings, including Beatrice's pink fairy princess suitcase, and leave them with the hotel concierge. Being over fifty meant he fell in the trustworthy category. Men under forty had no hope in hell of being trusted with anything belonging to Juliet.

Not her suitcases...her medical decisions...or her heart.

* * *

With Juliet holding Bea's gloved hand tightly, the two of them stepped inside the warmth of the main entrance of the hospital to hear the heart-warming sound of piped Christmas carols. Juliet slipped off her coat and laid it over her arm and then unbuttoned Bea's as she watched her daughter's eyes widen at the sight of their surroundings. Teddy's, as the hospital was affectionately known, was certainly dressed in its Christmas best. Neither Juliet nor Bea had seen such a huge tree and certainly not one as magnificently decorated as the one that filled the glass atrium. It was overflowing with brightly coloured baubles, and tiny lights twinkled from behind the gold tinsel generously covering the branches. Their eyes both scanned around the foyer to see a Santa sleigh and carved wooden reindeers welcoming patrons to the hospital tea room and all the staff appeared as happy as both Juliet and Bea felt at that moment.

'Ith very beautiful, Mummy.'

'It is indeed.'

Taking hold again of her tiny daughter's hand, Juliet approached the information desk and introduced herself and mentioned her appointment with the OBGYN with whom she would be working.

'I'm sorry, Dr Turner, but Dr Warren hasn't arrived yet. He was due an hour ago but, to be honest, I haven't heard anything so I can't be sure what time we'll see him.'

Juliet's expression didn't mask her surprise. She had flown almost eight thousand miles and had arrived on time and Dr Charlie Warren, whom she assumed to be a resident of the Cotswolds and who therefore had a significantly shorter journey, was the one late for their meeting. She was not impressed and hoped he had a darned good explanation since she and Bea were each in need of a bath and some sleep and had gone without both to meet with him.

'Is Oliver Darrington available, then?'

'Mr Darrington's on surgical roster today so, I'm sorry, he won't be available until after four-thirty.'

Juliet was trying to think on her feet. And both her feet and her brain were tired. 'Then while we're waiting for Dr Warren perhaps I can take my daughter to the crèche.'

'Of course, that's on this floor but the other side of the building overlooking the visitor gardens,' the young woman told her. 'If you follow the corridor on your left to the end then turn right, you'll see it.' Then smiling, she added, 'And hear it. It's quite the noisy place with all the little ones.'

Juliet hesitated; she didn't want to walk away with Bea and have Dr Warren arrive. She checked her mobile phone for messages. Perhaps Dr Warren had been delayed and sent the hospital a message that hadn't reached Reception but had been relayed to her in a text. It seemed logical and it would give her an indication of how much time she had to settle Bea into the crèche, but after quickly finding her phone she discovered there was no such message.

'I suppose I shouldn't be surprised,' she muttered under her breath. 'Another unreliable man.'

'Pardon, Mummy?'

Juliet looked down at the angelic face staring back at her. 'Nothing, sweetie, Mummy was just mumbling. Everything's just perfect.'

‘Okay,’ Bea replied as her eyes darted from one festive decoration to the next before she began pulling her mother back in the direction of the main doors.

Juliet knew everything in their lives was not perfect but she would make it as perfect as she could for her daughter. She would devote her life to ensuring that Bea never felt as if she was missing out on anything. Particularly not about the lack of a father in her life. Juliet often felt sad that, while she enjoyed a wonderful relationship with her own father, Bea would never experience that bond. Although, she conceded gratefully, while the special father-daughter relationship would never be a part of her daughter’s life, an unbreakable grandfather-granddaughter relationship had already formed. Juliet’s father and Bea were like two peas in a pod and seeing that closeness brought Juliet joy.

She was drawn back to the current situation, caused again by a man. Bea’s grip was tight and she was clearly on a mission as she tried to pull Juliet along. Juliet tugged back. ‘It’s so cold outside, darling. Let’s stay in here where it’s nice and warm.’

‘But, Mummy, it lookth like the top of my cake.’

‘What looks like the top of your cake, sweetie?’

‘Out there,’ the excited little girl replied as she pointed to the snow-covered ground. The branches of the trees and even the cars that had been parked for a few hours had been blanketed.

Juliet had to agree that it did look like Bea’s fourth birthday cake. Her grandmother had baked a triple-layer strawberry sponge cake with a generous covering of brilliant white icing and decorated with four different fairy tale princesses for her beloved granddaughter. But this was not a cake, it was their reality for the next few weeks, and, despite her reservations and her annoyance with Charlie Warren, it was very pretty. Postcard pretty. And it was the first time either of them had seen snow up close and she couldn’t blame her daughter for wanting to go outside and enjoy it.

‘But I need to stay inside and wait for the doctor. He’ll be here any minute, I hope, and I don’t want to miss him when he arrives because after my meeting with him you and I can go to the hotel and have a nice nap.’

‘Pleeease can I play in the snow?’

Juliet felt the sleeve of her blouse being tugged by two tiny hands, still gloved, and Bea’s eyes were wide with anticipation and excitement. Juliet looked out to the fenced area near the entrance doors. There was a park bench, see-saw and a small slide and the playground was secured with a child safety gate. It was clearly a designated area for children to play on a sunny day but it wasn’t a sunny day. It was freezing cold, overcast and the ground was covered with snow, which she knew was the draw card for Bea but a cause for concern for Juliet. Although she didn’t want to impose a fear of almost everything onto her daughter, she couldn’t help but worry.

After a moment she took a deep breath; she had made her decision. ‘All right, you can play outside but only if we button up your coat again, put on your hat and keep your gloves on...and only for five minutes. And I mean five minutes—you’ll catch a terrible cold if you stay out any longer.’

‘Yeth! Yippee! Thank you, Mummy.’

With trepidation, Juliet buttoned up her daughter’s heavy overcoat, pulled a knitted cap from her bag and popped it over Bea’s mass of honey-blonde curls, pulling it down over her ears, and then slipped on her own coat again before walking the little girl outside into the wintry weather. She was still worried about leaving Bea for even five minutes, but common sense told her it would be safe. It was ten o’clock in the morning not the middle of the night and it was no longer snowing.

Her father’s words rushed back into her head, ‘You can’t keep Bea in bubble wrap. Let her have some fun sometimes or she’ll grow up scared of taking chances. Who knows what she can do in life if she’s allowed to really live it? She might even become a surgeon like her mother...and grandfather.’

Although Juliet loved her work, she wasn’t convinced medicine was the life she wanted for her daughter. Part of her wondered if the lack of a social life due to the years of heavy study load, and then the long shifts at the hospital as an intern, then as a resident didn’t assist Bea’s father to deceive her. She was far from streetwise about men. She’d had friends but never a love interest until she met

him and he'd swept her off her feet and into his bed. Making her believe their night together was the beginning of something more. She wanted Bea to be wiser and not naive about the opposite sex.

But that was many years away and this was a playground. But it was still making Juliet very nervous.

She paused at the playground gate and looked down at her daughter, trying unsuccessfully to mask her concern.

'Mummy, I'll be good, I promith.'

Juliet realised she was being silly. It was only a children's playground and one she could see from inside and so too could all of the staff in the hospital foyer and the tea room. Juliet needed to meet with the now quite late Dr Warren. There might be a message from him any minute. She also wanted to meet the quadruplets' mother as soon as possible to discuss her treatment plan. Bending down and looking Bea in the eyes, she said, 'Mummy has to talk with the nice lady at the desk inside. I'll be back in five minutes. You know my rule—don't talk to strangers.'

Bea nodded. 'Okay.'

With that Juliet closed the childproof gate with Bea inside the playground wearing an ear-to-ear smile, already making small snowballs with her tiny gloved hands. Juliet tugged again on the gate to check it was closed properly before she headed back inside. She doubted she would leave Bea for five minutes, estimating it would only take two to check again on Dr Warren's whereabouts and see if there had been an update on his ETA. And she would be watching her the entire time through the large glass windows.

* * *

Charlie Warren pulled into the Royal Cheltenham hospital astride his black motorcycle. Both he and the bike were geared for riding in the harsh winter conditions of the southern English countryside. The sound of the powerful engine reverberated across the grounds as he cruised into the sheltered area of the car park. Charlie climbed from the huge bike that would have dwarfed most men, but, at six feet one, his muscular frame dressed in his leather riding gear stood tall against the bike. He removed his snow-splattered black helmet and heavy riding gloves and ran his still-warm fingers through his short but shaggy blond hair. It was cold riding to work every day, even brutal his colleagues would tell him some days in the middle of winter, but Charlie wouldn't consider for a moment taking a car. He couldn't; he didn't own one. Not any more and not ever again. He hadn't driven a car of any description in the two years since the crash.

Two years and three days to be exact. The anniversary was only a few days earlier, and, he assumed, was the reason the nightmares had returned. He knew he would never forget the date. It was the day the life he loved had ended.

After that, little brought him joy outside his work.

He had nothing to look forward to each night he rode away from the hospital. So he didn't stay away from Teddy's for too long.

* * *

Juliet watched Bea giggling as she climbed carefully up each rung of the tiny ladder on the slide. Her gloved hands gripped on tightly, her tiny feet, snug inside her laced-up leather boots, struggled a little not to slide, but she still smiled a toothy grin at her mother. Juliet loved seeing her daughter so happy and she smiled back but her smile was strained. Worry was building by the minute as she watched her only daughter take each slippery step, but her father's words resonated in her head, forcing her to stay put. Reminding her not to run to her daughter or call out, Climb back down...it's dangerous.

No, on this trip she would heed his instructions and let her daughter have a bit of fun after all and the slide was only a few feet tall.

What could possibly go wrong?

Bea looked down at each rung then back to her mother. Juliet could see that Bea thought she was such a big girl and seeing that reinforced that her father did know best. Juliet had to let Bea try new things. She had to unwrap the cotton wool that she had lovingly placed around her daughter...but only just a little.

Juliet gave a little sigh and resigned herself to her four-year-old's growing independence and her desire to encourage it but her fear at the same time. She wondered how she would cope when she turned sixteen and asked to get her driver's permit. Mentally she shook herself. That's twelve years away...you have time to prepare for it.

With any luck Dr Warren would arrive before then, she sniggered to herself.

At that moment, a smiling Bea lifted her right hand and waved at her mother. But Juliet didn't have time to smile back as she watched in horror as Bea lost her concentration and then her footing. She gasped out loud as her daughter's tiny hands lost their grip too. Helplessly Juliet watched from inside the building as Bea fell backwards to the ground.

CHAPTER THREE

CHARLIE SAW THE small child fall from the playground equipment. He was only too aware that while there was a thick blanket of freshly fallen snow in some places, in other areas there was only a thin covering. The shade the trees gave in summer when they were covered in lush green leaves was lovely but the branches had acted as natural canopies preventing the snow from building up to a level that would have broken her fall. He felt a knot in the pit of his stomach at seeing the child lying motionless on the ground and he rushed across the car park.

While it wasn't an overly tall slide, the child, he could see, was very tiny. As he drew closer he could see there was no one with her. Why would anyone leave a child out in the freezing weather unattended? He looked around and there was no one in sight. No one running to help. Fuelled by concern for the child and anger at the parent or parents, he raced to the gate.

'How damned irresponsible,' he muttered under his breath and shook his head. But his words were driven by something deeper. His dreams of being a father had ended the day his wife died and that made it even harder to see that this child had been left alone. If he were the father he would protect his child at any cost and he would never have left one so tiny out in the cold. Alone.

He undid the safety latch with a sense of urgency as he heard soft moans coming from the child he could then see was a little girl, lying still on her side. She was conscious. He quickly crossed to her and knelt down. 'You'll be okay, honey. I'm a doctor at this hospital. I just want to see if you've been hurt.' He kept his words to a minimum as he could see just how young she was.

'Where's th Mummy? I want Mummy.' Bea's eyes suddenly widened and began to fill with tears.

'We'll try and find Mummy,' he said as he wondered the very same question.

Where the hell was the little girl's mother? And her father?

As he began to check her vital signs he guessed she was between three and four years of age. 'Where does it hurt?'

'My arm hurths,' she said, abruptly sitting upright with tears running down her ruddy cheeks.

Charlie was surprised but relieved to see her level of mobility and suspected her tears were fuelled by fear and pain in equal amounts. 'Anywhere else?'

'No. It's th jutht my arm. Where's th Mummy?' Her chin was quivering and the tears were flowing freely.

Charlie reassured her again they would find her mother as he continued his medical assessment. As she awkwardly tried to climb to her feet, it was obvious to Charlie that she had only injured her arm so he scooped her up ready to take her to the emergency department. Neither a stretcher nor a paramedic team was needed and he wanted to get her out of the bitter cold air immediately and into the warmth of the hospital where she could be thoroughly assessed.

'Put my daughter down now!' Juliet's loud voice carried from the gate to where Charlie was standing.

Charlie's eyes narrowed on her. 'I'm a doctor, so please open the gate for me and step aside. This child's been hurt,' he told her as he approached with Bea still firmly in the grip of his strong arms. 'I'm taking her to have an X-ray.'

Juliet hurriedly opened the gate. 'She's my daughter. I can take her,' she said, reaching out for Bea, but Charlie ignored her request and moved swiftly, and in silence, in the direction of the emergency entrance with Juliet running alongside him.

'I said, I can carry her.'

'I heard you but I have her, so let's keep unnecessary movement to a minimum.'

Juliet nodded. It was logical but she still wished her injured daughter were in her arms, not those of the tall, leather-clad stranger who was supposedly a doctor. 'I saw her fall but I couldn't get to her in time.'

Charlie's eyebrow rose slightly. 'That's of no consequence now. I saw her. I'll get her seen immediately in A&E and then you can perhaps explain why she was left unattended out in this weather at such a young age.'

'Excuse me?' Juliet began in a tone that didn't mask her surprise at his accusatory attitude. While she thought it was unfair and unjust it also hit a raw nerve. 'I wasn't far away—'

'Far enough, it would seem, for me to get to her first,' Charlie cut in with no emotion in his voice. As the three of them entered the warmth of the emergency department, the feeling between them was as icy as the snow outside. 'I need her name and age.'

'Beatrice, but we call her Bea, and she's four years and two months.' Juliet answered but her voice was brimming with emotion. Overwhelming concern about Bea and equally overwhelming anger towards the man who was carrying her child. How dared he be so quick to judge her?

'Four-year-old girl by the name of Bea, suspected green stick fracture of the forearm,' he announced brusquely to the nursing staff as he took long, powerful strides inside with Juliet following quickly on his heels. Charlie carried Bea into one of the emergency cubicles and laid her gently on the examination bed. With the curtains still open, he continued. 'We need an X-ray stat to confirm radius or ulna fracture but either way, if I'm correct, we'll be prepping for a cast. And bring me some oral analgesia.'

'Ibuprofen, acetaminophen or codeine?' the nurse asked.

'One hundred milligrams of suspension ibuprofen,' Charlie replied, then, as it was a teaching hospital and he was aware that three final-year medical students had moved closer to observe, he continued. 'Generally paediatric fracture patients have significantly greater reduction in pain with ibuprofen than those in either the acetaminophen group or the codeine group and they suffer less negative side effects.'

'What's happening, Mummy?'

'The doctor,' she began before she shot an angry glare over her shoulder in Charlie's direction. She was impressed with his knowledge but not his attitude towards her. 'Sweetie, the doctor thinks you may have broken your arm when you fell from the playground slide so he'll take a picture of your arm with a special machine.'

'Will it hurt?'

'The machine won't hurt you at all but they will have to very gently lift your arm to take off your coat and then take a picture. So the doctor will give you some medicine so it doesn't hurt.'

The nurse returned with the ibuprofen and Charlie asked Bea to swallow the liquid.

'Please do as the doctor asks because it will make the pain go away,' Juliet told her daughter with a smile that belied how worried she was. 'Don't worry, Bea, I'll be with you every minute. I'm not leaving your side.'

'That'd be a nice idea,' Charlie put in, with sarcasm evident in his voice just enough for Juliet alone to know the intent of his remark but no one else. Without looking up, he signed the radiograph request the A&E nurse had given him.

Juliet took a deep breath and counted silently to three. It was not the time to tell him just what she thought of his snide remarks, particularly not in the presence of her daughter and the medical students. But that time would come once everyone was out of earshot. And he would hear in no uncertain terms just what he could do with his unwarranted opinion.

‘Can you please complete the paperwork?’ the nurse asked of Juliet. ‘We only need the signature of one parent.’

‘Bea only has one parent,’ Juliet said flatly before she accepted the clipboard from the nurse and hurriedly but accurately began to complete the details so she could expedite the process and allow Bea to have the X-ray. She wasn’t sure if the doctor had heard and she didn’t care as Bea’s parental status wasn’t his concern.

‘Dr Warren,’ another young nurse began as she neared the trio with a clipboard, ‘would you like me to call for the paediatric resident so you can return to the OBGYN clinic?’

‘No, I’m here now, I’ll finish what I’ve started.’

‘Of course,’ the nurse replied. ‘Then we can take the patient down as soon as the paperwork is completed.’

‘Dr Warren? Dr Charlie Warren?’ Juliet demanded as she fixed her eyes on Charlie for a moment. He was not the borderline elderly OBGYN she had pictured. Dr Charlie Warren, she surmised, was closer to his early thirties.

‘Yes. Why do you ask?’

Juliet didn’t answer immediately. Instead she ensured she had not missed any details on the admissions form before she signed and returned it to the nurse. It gave her a few moments to compose herself and reconcile that the man treating her daughter was the OBGYN who had stood her up for their meeting and the one who wanted to oppose her treatment plan for the quadruplets. He was already very much on the back foot but, with his obvious bad attitude, it did not augur well for them working together.

‘Well, Dr Warren, it appears that you owe me an apology since you’re the reason why my daughter is in here.’ Juliet wore a self-satisfied look, one she felt she more than deserved to display.

‘I hardly think so. I just pulled into the car park when your daughter fell. We both know that I had nothing to do with her accident so let’s not waste time trying to shift blame. Leaving a child this young alone is something I am not sure I can fully understand...or want to.’

‘That’s where you’re wrong. You have everything to do with the accident because if you’d been on time for our meeting my daughter would not have stepped outside to play.’

‘Our meeting?’

‘Yes, our ten o’clock meeting,’ she began. ‘I’m Dr Juliet Turner. The in-utero surgeon who has flown halfway around the world and managed to be here on time for a meeting about your quad pregnancy patient, and, I might add, we travelled straight from the airport. My daughter needed to stretch her legs for a minute after such a long journey, so I allowed her to play in the fenced area that I assumed would not be open unless it was in fact child-safe while I enquired further about your arrival. If heavy snowfall changes the safety status of the area then it should be closed. You may like to speak to the hospital board about looking into that matter.’ Juliet had not taken a breath during the delivery. Adrenalin was pumping out the words. She was scared for Bea. And extremely angry with Charlie Warren.

‘Dr Turner? I had no idea...’

‘Clearly...and apparently no time management either.’

Charlie was momentarily speechless. Juliet felt momentarily vindicated.

She noticed a curious frown dress his brow. Then she also noticed, against her will, that his brow was very attractive, as was his entire face. She had been focusing on Bea and not noticed anything much about the man who had whisked her daughter unceremoniously into A&E. But now she noticed his chiselled jaw, deep blue eyes and soft, full mouth. In fact, each moment her eyes lingered on his

face she realised he was in fact extremely handsome, even when he frowned. His powerful presence towered over her with long, lean legs and his leather riding gear accentuated his broad shoulders. She shook herself mentally. His manner was both judgmental and conceited. Alarm bells rang in her head. Why were her thoughts even teetering on noticing him past being her daughter's emergency physician? He was just another arrogant man and one she was going to be forced to work with in some capacity.

In a perfect world she would have nothing to do with him once he had finished treating Bea. But she also knew that they didn't live in a perfect world. And not seeing Charlie Warren again wasn't possible. They would be consulting on the high-risk patient until the birth of the four babies.

And she was well aware that, after challenging her parenting, he would shortly be challenging her treatment plan. There was no way this working relationship was going to run smoothly. And she doubted with his attitude he intended to play nicely.

'I had additional house calls this morning as I needed to cover another OBGYN's patients. He's down with the winter virus that swept through Teddy's. With both patient loads it look longer than I anticipated, but point taken. I should have called in.'

Juliet couldn't help but notice him staring at her. It was a curious stare, no longer angry or accusing.

'I understand covering for ill colleagues happens but a text would have been prudent,' she continued, ignoring his reaction, suspecting like everyone else he was looking at her as if she weren't old enough to be a surgical specialist. She had grown tired of that look and in Dr Warren's case she wasn't about to give him any leeway. Nor was she about to give her unexpected reaction to him any acknowledgement. Her tone was brittle but with his masculinity hovering around eleven out of ten he was making it difficult not to be a little self-conscious despite her ire.

'We can speak further about my delay later, Dr Turner, but let's get Bea into Radiography and ascertain the extent of the fracture,' Charlie announced, breaking her train of thought.

Juliet did not respond to Charlie as she wasn't sure what exactly she would say. Her equilibrium was beyond ruffled and she was struggling to keep her thoughts on track. She returned her attention to Bea, and stroked her daughter's brow. 'Mummy and the doctor will be taking you on this special bed to have that picture now. And then if the doctor is right and you have broken the bone in your arm then you will have a cast put on until it's all healed.'

'What' th that?'

'You know when Billy, the little boy from playgroup, fell over last year and he had a bright blue plaster on his arm? And everyone drew pictures on it with crayons? That's a cast.'

Bea nodded. 'I drew a star and a moon.'

'That's right, and it was a very beautiful star and moon.'

'Can I take it off? Billy couldn't take it off.'

'No, you won't be able to take it off but it won't be too uncomfortable,' Charlie chimed in with a voice that Juliet noticed had suddenly warmed. She wasn't sure if that warmth was directed at Bea alone or if he was attempting to be nice to Juliet as well. 'There's a soft bit inside and a hard layer outside that stops your arm from moving so that it can heal.'

Juliet turned back to face Charlie to ask another question and immediately wished she hadn't. He had moved closer and his face was only inches from her. His cologne was subtle and very masculine. She tried to keep the same professional demeanour but dropped her eyes, refusing to keep the courtesy of eye contact for two reasons. One, she was still fuming and waiting for an apology that she doubted she would ever receive, and, two, she didn't want to risk falling into the dark blue pools that were more blue than any she had ever seen before. She didn't want to forgive him for his appalling behaviour. Without all of the facts he had jumped to a conclusion that was unjust. But her hormones were overriding her good sense. It was completely out of character for her. She was angry

and she never paid attention to men, good-looking or not. And she would be damned if she would allow it to happen that day. Or any day in the future.

She quickly decided she didn't want to hear an apology from Charlie. If one was not offered it would mean that she could then remain furious with good reason, keep the man at arm's length and her mettle would not be tested. If he made amends, he might prove to be a distraction on some level that she didn't want. Although she knew her sensible side would win, she didn't want to waste any time on some ridiculous internal battle of hormones versus logic. Particularly when she had a very real battle to fight with the very same man.

Coughing, she cleared her throat in an attempt to gain some composure. Dr Warren's nearness was, for some inexplicable reason, threatening to awaken something in Juliet she had buried a long time ago. And it didn't need digging up now. That part of her life was over. Perhaps it was just sleep deprivation, she wondered. She had not travelled for so many hours straight before either. Nor had her daughter ever suffered an injury of that nature. It had to be the series of events stacked against her that was messing with her logic. Making her emotions a little unstable. It wasn't her. It definitely had to be the combination of factors, she decided, not Charlie Warren himself. Suddenly she had everything back in perspective, the way she liked it. Charlie Warren was her daughter's doctor and her potential nemesis.

'Will you be using fibreglass?' she asked, quieting any sign of emotion. Her heart was no longer beating madly and the butterflies were one by one exiting her stomach. She was proud of herself for so quickly once again gaining control of the situation. Although she was still disturbed the situation had presented in the first place.

Jet lag, she quickly told herself. Definitely jet lag.

'If Bea needs a cast we'll use fibreglass and, since it will be difficult to expect Bea to keep it dry, I'll use a waterproof lining too,' Charlie told her.

'Billy had blue but I don't like blue,' Bea said softly, looking down at her arm.

'We have pink and yellow and I think red too,' Charlie responded with his mouth curving to a half-smile and that did not go unnoticed by Juliet.

'I like red for Chrithmath...but pink ith pretty... I want pink,' Bea announced.

Juliet smiled at her daughter. As she lifted her head her eyes met Charlie's eyes staring back at her and her heart once again began to pick up speed. It was madness for certain. The intensity of his gaze wouldn't allow her to look away. It was as if there was something deeper, something hidden behind the outer arrogance. Warmth and kindness seemed almost trapped inside him.

And she couldn't ignore, no matter how much she didn't want it to be true, and how much she'd fought it over the years, that there was a tiny part of her craving warmth and kindness from a man like Charlie.

CHAPTER FOUR

'UNFORTUNATELY BEA HAS a distal radial fracture...but at least it's non-displaced so we should be grateful for that news.'

Charlie turned back from the radiographs on the illuminated viewer in the room to see Juliet holding her daughter closely. He could not help but notice the tenderness in her embrace and the obvious love Juliet had for her daughter. He had been wrong about her, he admitted to himself as he watched her gently kiss the mop of blonde curls on the top of her daughter's head. He had not accompanied them to the radiography department. Instead he had excused himself to change into street clothes he kept in his office and then met them back in the emergency department.

Their eyes met and he paused in silence for a moment. He hoped she had not noticed him staring longer than was necessary but he could not help himself. Despite their professional differences, there was something about Juliet that was making him curious. Making him want to know more about the single mother with the Australian accent; the very pretty face; the spitfire personality; and the

adorable daughter. He had noted her mention Bea only had one parent. Whether she was widowed, divorced or had never married, he didn't know. And it was none of his business.

It was out of character for him to be distracted by anything or anyone. Least of all someone he had only just met. But he could not pretend even to himself that he had not been distracted by Juliet, and it was not just her appearance. She was a conundrum. A surgeon who looked closer in age to a first-year medical student while he knew she would have to be in her thirties, with an academic record that would come close to that of a professor and an attitude when provoked of a bull. Not to mention a love for her child that was palpable. He had not met anyone quite like Dr Juliet Turner before.

Charlie was never thrown by anyone or anything. Charlie Warren's life was organised and predictable. It was the only way he could function. He had few friends, save his colleagues during his work hours. Socialising was a thing of the past although he had been forced to attend the recent hospital fundraiser, escaping as soon as decently possible.

He spent any time away from the hospital alone and preferred it that way. In more than two years, Charlie had never experienced any interest in anything other than his work. Returning home only to sleep and prepare for the next day's surgery or consultations. His patients were his sole passion in life. And now the Australian in-utero expert, with whom he completely disagreed on a professional level, was rousing his curiosity in knowing more about her.

And it was unsettling.

The second anniversary of the accident had just passed and it was a day he wanted to do differently every night as he lay alone in his bed reliving the hell that had become his waking reality. One he couldn't change. One he had accepted a long time ago that he would live with for the rest of his life. And to be spending any time thinking about a woman other than his late wife was ridiculous.

But as much as he fought the distraction, he couldn't control his wandering thoughts.

He wondered for a moment what life had dealt Juliet. Just being a surgeon would have provided struggles along the way. He had found the study and workload gruelling and he was not raising a child alone. Whether or not her status as a single mother was recent he was unsure. She looked to him like a waif but she had the fire and fight of someone a foot taller and he assumed she would have faced life head-on. His wife had been similar in stature but very different in demeanour and profession. She was quietly spoken, and a local Cotswolds girl who managed a craft shop in town. She spent hours quilting and running the little store that doubled as a social hub for the local community.

Charlie doubted that Juliet would have any interest in quilting. But it bothered him greatly that questions about the woman holding her daughter had suddenly and unexplainably captured his thoughts.

He was grateful that Juliet had been distracted by the nurse coming back and looked away. For some unfathomable reason he was struggling to do just that. The woman before him was nothing close to the stoic surgical specialist he'd been expecting and he was shocked at just how much he had noticed about her in such a short space of time.

And he was angry and disappointed with himself for doing so.

* * *

Juliet forced herself to blink away her wandering thoughts. Charlie Warren was nothing close to what she'd been expecting. His white consulting coat covered black dress jeans and blue striped shirt. He was still wearing his black motorcycle boots. The combination of the leather and gunmetal hardware of his boots was both edgy and masculine. It had to stop. She had not flown to another hemisphere to find herself distracted by the first handsome man she met. First handsome, arrogant man who would be her work colleague for the next few weeks.

She felt butterflies slowly returning just knowing he was so close to her. Close enough to reach out and touch her. Not that he would...nor would she want that, she told herself sternly. But it was as if she could see there was something more to the man who had rudely stood her up and then berated her for inattention to her daughter. Was his brash exterior a shield? She wasn't sure as she tried in

vain to analyse the ogre. Perhaps it was the way he had rushed to Bea. As a man and as a doctor, he had not hesitated to help Juliet's daughter. He had lifted her into the safety and strength of his arms the way a father would. The way Bea's own father never would and the way no man other than her grandfather up until that day had done.

But it was romantic nonsense. He was just the tall and not so dark—more dusty blond—handsome stranger of happily ever after stories that she knew didn't really exist.

There wasn't anything more to this man, her practical self was saying firmly and resolutely despite how her body was arguing. He wasn't even nice let alone the type to sweep her off her feet. He was far too brusque and cold. What was going on in her tired mind? she wondered. It had to be international time difference setting in. Most definitely. It couldn't be anything else stirring her thoughts into chaos. She needed a good night's sleep and all would be as it should be. And she would be looking at her colleague as just that, a colleague. And if his strong, borderline obstinate opinion about her plans on surgical intervention with the quadruplets' mother remained, they would in fact shift from colleagues to adversaries.

She took solace in the idea that their differing opinions would add another protective layer to the armour she wore very comfortably.

'Hmm-hmm...' Juliet coughed. 'I said I'm happy there's no need for a closed reduction.'

'That makes two of us,' he replied, turning back to the radiographic films.

'So there'll be no intervention to realign the bones, just a cast as we already discussed, then?' Juliet continued as she fought to keep her thoughts professional.

'It's standard practice to give the arm a few days in a sling to allow swelling to subside,' Charlie explained to everyone in the room. 'But I'm concerned at Bea's age she may cause further damage if we don't protect the fracture with a cast. There's a marginal amount of swelling around the fracture site but not enough to warrant risking further damage by allowing it to be without protection.' He then asked the nurse to prepare for the cast while three medical students, who had quickly become part of the furniture, continued listening intently. The nurse moved swiftly, while the medication still kept Bea's pain at bay. 'And we need pink. That is the colour you want, isn't it, Bea?'

Bea looked up and nodded.

'Then pink it is,' he told her. The nurse helped Juliet to carefully roll up Bea's long-sleeved top that she had worn underneath the woollen jacket that was still under Juliet's arm.

'You were all layered up, weren't you, young lady?' the nurse commented with a smile. 'Rugged up for our chilly winter?'

Bea nodded and watched as her mother and the nurse worked gently to lift the clothing free so the cast could be applied.

'It's a nice loose top so it should roll down again afterwards, but the jacket will never fit so we'll have to just rest that over her shoulders and go shopping for a cape,' Juliet mentioned as she dropped the little coat on the nearest chair.

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