



FIONA MCARTHUR
The Pregnant
Midwife



**MEDICAL
ROMANCE™**



Fiona McArthur

The Pregnant Midwife

«HarperCollins»

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Courageous midwife Kirsten Wilson has been trying to forget Hunter Morgan since returning to Sydney. Getting up in the helicopter again to rescue tiny babies is just what she needs to put their past behind her. At least until Hunter arrives as the new doctor in charge! Hunter's still attracted to Kirsten, but he can't bring himself to commit to someone so feisty and daring. That is until a huge helicopter crash forces them to put their priorities in order – and the consequences change both their lives forever....

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Kirsten sagged onto the floor as she reached the cavern, and a fear greater than any Hunter had ever experienced crashed in on him.

He scooped her up and pressed her cold cheek to his, then carried her to the fire and kicked the remaining pile of wood onto it to build it up. With fumbling fingers he stripped off her shirt, peeling it away from the deathly pale whiteness of her damp skin. He pulled off her shoes and wet socks and her trousers until she sagged against him in a tiny pair of pink lacy underpants and bra, all cold legs and arms as she shivered.

Quickly unbuttoning his shirt, he pulled it open and then took his trousers off, and dragged her back against the warmth of his chest and legs in front of the fire. She sighed into him, burying her face in his chest as if to hide from the cold deep within her. Hunter wrapped himself and his shirt around her, closing her inside the cocoon of his own body heat.

“You’re so warm,” Kirsten murmured. “Don’t leave me.”

“I’ll be here as long as you need me.” Hunter hugged her tighter. He cupped her cheek in his hand and dropped a kiss on her lips without even realizing he’d done it.

Dear Reader,

The Marriage and Maternity trilogy is about three dedicated and devoted sisters who believe that marriage and midwifery don’t mix. While the books stand alone, they are linked by the impact each sister has on her siblings’ life. After sharing more than a year with them, I feel as though the Wilson sisters are part of my own family. I wish they were.

In *The Pregnant Midwife*, Kirsten is the adventurer and does all the things I’d love to do. She’s worked around the world, moved from the birth aspect of midwifery to the baby side as she cares for critically ill newborns and children and, privately, she’s made independence an art form. The baby of the family, Kirsten shares the special bond with her sisters that people outside the circle can’t understand. To Hunter Morgan, everything about Kirsten is mysterious. I hope you enjoy your time with Kirsten and Hunter as they venture on the flight of their life.

Very best wishes,
Fiona McArthur
The Pregnant Midwife
Fiona McArthur



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PROLOGUE

Dubai—United Arab Emirates

THE crack of the starter gun echoed across the desert and silenced the noisy crowd for a heartbeat as the annual doctors versus nurses camel race began.

Hunter Morgan, paediatrician and contestant for the doctors' side of the neonatal nursery, kicked his camel into a gallop as the crowd roared. Ex-patriot medical staff can't get out much, he thought with a wry grin, though he noticed even some black-robed Arabs were among the throng. He wondered fleetingly what the attraction was in the hospital games for them.

To be honest, he wouldn't have been here if Kirsten Wilson hadn't dared him. She was a determined woman. She'd cornered him in the neonatal unit and he could still remember her enchanting tenacity as she'd ensured his participation. She'd promised to pound on his door in the dark if he didn't show, to let the tyres of his car down, to tell everyone she was pregnant with his baby, and he stifled a laugh at what a frenzy of gossip that would have caused.

It was his own fault people took bets on any sign that his immunity to women was failing—he'd never weakened before.

Still, Kirsten had made him laugh more in the last few months than he had in the last five years.

She was an amazing woman. Hunter clamped his lips shut to stop the flying sand from coating his tongue. He pulled his scarf more closely into his face, despite the early heat, and wiped his eyes so he could focus on the delicate shoulders of the woman riding in front.

Kirsten was tall for a woman, he knew that. When she was standing in front of him in the unit, he could just see over her head. He used that trick to keep the mental distance between them. He'd discovered if he spent too long looking into her wonderfully expressive face he'd lose track of what she was saying and just enjoy the show.

He really didn't think she was aware that she threatened his peace of mind.

The first marker was coming up and she still sat lightly, and delightfully, on her throne-like seat as if she'd grown up there. He wasn't quite as comfortable but that didn't mean he couldn't win.

Dormant competitiveness surfaced where it had been lacking. 'Second really isn't good enough,' he said to himself as he urged his camel on, tapping with his crop to let the beast know.

Kirsten was only winning because of her lighter weight and those strange encouraging noises she was making to her camel, but he had to admit she could ride. Her white burnoose billowed out behind her and the sun glinted off the flying cloud of red hair which she usually kept confined. He realised she was attracting the attention of the raucous local contingent.

The corner barrel appeared and he almost checked the gait of his animal until he saw she wasn't going to slow her beast. She skidded around full pelt and he watched in trepidation. Her camel swayed unsteadily and she hauled on the reins to direct it into the turn. The woman was mad—and scared the bejesus out of him when she was like this—but he felt his own blood begin to pound.

Incredibly, still mounted, she flashed back past him towards the winning post and, as usual, her eyes were wild with exhilaration and the joy that seemed to shine on everything she did. In that instant, the barrier he'd erected against the entire female race five years ago finally splintered into a thousand pieces of flying sand and he woke up to life again.

Which was even more reason why he couldn't let her win. If she could send the safety factors to hell, so could he.

Hunter and his camel rounded the barrel at a gravity-defying angle and for a moment he thought he was going down with his mount, but his camel strained to keep its feet. Swaying high above the sand, Hunter urged his mount to greater speed. The beast responded to the command in his voice. This wasn't a charity race day any more. This was a personal struggle for supremacy between him and that alluring woman.

He charged her down with sand flying and the other contestants left far behind. The cheers from the hospital crowd were a distant buzz in his ears.

‘Come on,’ he growled, and the camel flicked its ears as if to tell him to go to hell. The ground was a blur below him but he could see nothing but the red hair in front which was drawing closer. Inch by inch he gained on her until he passed her camel’s tail and then its bony rump and finally he was level with Kirsten’s shoulder.

She laughed at him, tucked in her chin and slapped her camel on the rump with her tiny crop, and pulled away for a moment. But her camel was tiring, finally, and Hunter edged back level so that right at the end they crossed the finish line together.

Both camels slowed to a trot and then finally stopped, their hairy sides heaving and breath snorting from their huge nostrils. ‘Well ridden, Sister Wilson,’ Hunter had to concede, as they pulled up.

‘Well ridden yourself, Dr Morgan.’ She laughed back at him, barely breathless. Then she slid lightly down the great height from her camel without waiting for the boy who was running towards her. Kirsten moved to the camel’s face, stroked the giant’s neck and whispered something in its ear. For a horrible moment there, Hunter thought she was going to kiss the disgusting beast.

His own camel turned and nipped at his leg as if to say, I’ve given you all I’ve got—now get off!

He tapped behind its knobbly knee with his crop and the camel knelt down to allow him to slide off.

The other riders began to dismount around them and he shook hands with the contestants. Hunter drew a deep breath and smiled. He felt terrific.

The flags fluttered in the morning air and the colours of the barrackers suddenly seemed brighter than he’d noticed earlier. It really was the most beautiful day and he couldn’t remember the last time he’d noticed something mundane like the weather. His eyes were drawn to Kirsten, surrounded by her fellow nurses, and he forgot the weather to appreciate the woman.

Later, on the winner’s dais, when Kirsten stood beside him to share the trophy, Hunter frowned down the calls of their fellow medical staff to kiss her. Unexpectedly, she stretched up and kissed his cheek before he realised what she was doing.

Kirsten’s hair smelled of some herbal shampoo and a whiff of camel, and the feather-light feel of her lips against his cheek was more delightful than he was prepared for. His hand lifted of its own accord and caught her chin as she started to turn away, and he tilted her face back towards him. When he swooped to steal his own kiss, he wasn’t sure who was the most surprised—him or her.

Hunter hadn’t realised how much he’d wanted to do this. She felt right in his arms, as if she belonged there. It had been so long since he’d held any woman and now he knew why. He’d been waiting for Kirsten.

The feel of her lips against his was magic and when he released her, he could see the surprised recognition of something special mirrored in her beautiful green eyes. Then she was swept away by an admiring crowd of mostly male hospital staff. This time he followed.

And so it had started—eight weeks of magic. Silly, inconsequential conversations about stars and myths and unlikely scenarios that made him laugh in the cool of the evening after their shifts. Rendezvous at breakfast, eating fruit and rolls out under a tree in the courtyard while she fed the birds, hilarious trips into the bazaars where she would haggle fiercely with wizened street vendors as he watched in almost embarrassed awe until she’d won her bargain. Gradually they came to spend most of their off duty time together.

At work, they concentrated on their jobs and she remained Sister Wilson, Nursing Unit Manager of Neonatal Intensive Care, and he Dr Morgan, Paediatrician, because that was how Hunter wanted it.

He was terrified to rush or be sidetracked by the fierce ache to possess her, a trap that had snared him into foolishness and disaster in his first marriage. The simmering sexual tension between them only added to the intoxication of Kirsten. Hunter finally began to trust again.

Until that morning when his world shattered and he saw Kirsten in the arms of Jack Cosgrove, the senior consultant—and he realised that the woman he loved was just like his ex-wife. The darkness surrounded him again and he couldn't believe he'd been such a fool. But he wouldn't be one again.

CHAPTER ONE

Sydney—late September

MIRA! Kirsten Wilson stood outside the familiar three-storey headquarters of Mobile Infant Retrieval Australia and sighed with contentment at the sign. It was a relief to be back, both at MIRA and in Sydney.

Six years ago she'd watched the stabilisation and retrieval of a premature infant from Gladstone, her home town in northern New South Wales, and Kirsten had known MIRA was where she wanted to be. Before her stint in Dubai, she'd spent a year here at MIRA headquarters learning the ropes. It would be great to be back in the team.

Kirsten had moved her focus from the birthing suites favoured by her two older sisters, who still lived and worked in the tiny hospital at Gladstone, to the more specialised medical area of neonatal intensive care. But she would always share the Wilson family love for birth and holistic midwifery.

Kirsten adored tiny babies and revelled in the methodology of protocols in an emergency, which was why she'd gained as much experience as possible before her return to MIRA. Eagerly Kirsten swung open the door and stepped confidently into the foyer.

The receptionist jumped up to welcome her and Kirsten felt instantly at home. It was going to be a wonderful day.

'Hi, Maggie.' Kirsten couldn't contain her grin. Maggie and Jim Rumble were childless and ran MIRA headquarters and the dynamic staff like the parents of a large family. Their unobtrusive guidance worked well in the often highly stressful situations.

Maggie, thinner and aged a little since last Kirsten had seen her, bustled out from behind the desk and hugged the much taller flight sister. 'Kirsten. It's wonderful to see you. Welcome back. I'll take you through because I want to watch Jim's face when he greets you.'

She pulled Kirsten to walk beside her, effervescent with excitement. 'So when did you get back to Australia?'

Kirsten looked down at Maggie and slipped in a quick hug of her own. 'I've only been back in Australia about two months. My older sister—you know Bella, she visited me here a few times—married one of the locums in Gladstone. I filled in on the wards up there while she was on her honeymoon.' Her face softened. 'And I've been learning to be an auntie to my eldest sister Abbey's baby.'

She refocussed on the familiar corridors with approval. 'Now I'm back in Sydney for a while and I'm so glad there was a vacancy here.'

'There would always be a place for you here, you know that. For as long as your feet can stay in one place, that is.' Maggie winked up at her. 'Did you meet our current paediatrician, Dr Morgan, over in Dubai? He's only worked here for a couple of months.'

Kirsten's fingers tightened on her shoulder-bag strap and she forced them to relax their death grip. Not Hunter Morgan? Of all people! She kept her face expressionless but it wasn't easy. She swallowed to moisten the sudden dryness in her throat. 'It's a big place, but his name does ring a bell.'

Kirsten tried to contain the familiar sting of pain and disappointment that came when she thought of Hunter, but it washed over her like a shore-dumping wave at Manly Beach and the force of it left her so cold she shivered.

From an oasis of sharing and caring and joy in her relationship with Hunter, something she'd never planned on, she'd been evicted from his life with a shattering suddenness that had left her reeling in an emotional desert more barren than any sand outside the hospital compound. Hug a married man in sympathy a couple of times and lectures on morality was where she landed! She'd tried to make him see how ridiculous his accusations were but he'd doggedly avoided her. Then anger had come

to her rescue and at least straightened her spine. Piously, he'd even warned her of the penalties of adultery in Arab countries before he'd left. She gritted her teeth at the memory.

The urge to just walk out of MIRA now and think about this before she got in too deep was tempting. Maggie was looking up at her, puzzled by something she heard in Kirsten's voice, and Kirsten forced herself to smile.

It was too late already. She'd so looked forward to being part of the team again. Now this. There'd be no freedom from tension if she had to fly with that man.

In the control room, three other people were waiting and Kirsten tilted her chin with a determined smile.

Hunter Morgan dominated the room even with his back towards her and his concentration directed to a phone conversation. Her heart sank in a shivering mess. Kirsten knew the thick dark hair and square set of his shoulders intimately. Her eyes had drilled holes between those massive shoulders many a time in those last few weeks as he'd walked away from her. He swivelled slowly to face her, still talking into the phone, and Kirsten looked away to Jim.

'Welcome back, my dear.' Jim was the senior paediatric consultant, control room supervisor and occasional flight doctor. A short, round man, Jim had the kindest face in the world. His eyes crinkled with years of good humour and he bounced across the room when Maggie announced Kirsten's arrival. He shook her hand so hard Kirsten could feel her head wobble and she suppressed a smile. The warmth in his face almost brought tears to Kirsten's eyes as she suddenly longed for the safety and shelter of her own family.

He presented her to the other woman in the room as if she were a major prize. 'Kirsten Wilson, Ellen! This is our senior flight nurse, Ellen Gardner, who I think started just after you left.' The other nurse inclined her head in acknowledgement. She was three or four years younger than Kirsten's twenty-eight and if she felt any anticipation at Kirsten's arrival she hid it well beneath a smooth makeup mask.

They shook hands and Kirsten offered a friendly smile, and then, for Kirsten, the other woman's presence faded away as Hunter replaced the telephone receiver and turned fully to face her.

'Kirsten, meet Dr Hunter Morgan. Hunter comes to us fully qualified and plans to move into emergency paediatric care after his stint with us.' Jim completed his sentence as if he had just given Kirsten a huge present.

Great, Kirsten thought. I'd rather have herpes. There was something in Hunter's face that made Kirsten raise her chin even higher. The man had an aura that ensured women were aware of his presence, and few could resist falling at least a little under his spell. Kirsten vowed to be one of those few if it killed her.

His chiselled features matched the fierce intelligence behind his insolent grey eyes and that unexpected sensuality in the tilt of his lips still packed a punch that landed somewhere below Kirsten's midriff.

She felt like stamping her foot. Hunter Morgan must be her nemesis. Just when things promised to go to plan, he intruded into her carefully ordered world and threw her into chaos.

Hunter met Kirsten's glare and memories of their last battles hung between them. Neither blinked and the moment froze for an extended few seconds until they both looked away.

Oblivious to the tension between his two newest staff members, Jim rubbed his hands together. 'Well, let's hope you two don't run off to get married, like the last lot.' The older man laughed with a slow, deep resonance that seemed to reverberate in his rounded stomach. Jim's idea was bitterly humorous and his rolling laugh helped. Kirsten's usual good humour asserted itself. Dr Rumble, indeed.

'I don't think there's much chance of that,' she said, and hung onto her calm smile as if meeting the man who had caused the only professional problem in her career wasn't in front of her. So what was she going to do?

MIRA was her vocation and an environment in which she knew she could make a difference. And only Hunter stood in her way. She'd gone to Dubai to set herself up financially and gain more experience to be better at this job. How ironic that a man she'd met there could ruin it for her when she came back.

But he could only ruin it for her if she allowed herself to be brought down by his negative attitude. The good news had to be that most doctors only stayed at MIRA for a six-month term. With luck she'd have just a few months of discomfort. She began to feel better.

Kirsten held out her hand with resolve. 'Hello again, Dr Morgan.'

Hunter couldn't believe her bare-faced gall after what had passed between them. While he'd been devastated at seeing her in the arms of another man, she'd thrown herself into dangerous pursuits as if nothing had been between them. Desert skiing, ballooning, four-wheel-drive safaris—she'd been in the thick of it everywhere he'd looked until he'd stopped watching in those last few weeks. Working with her in the unit had been so icily professional the other staff had avoided the pair of them when they'd had to be together.

He took her slender fingers in his and although the tension was slight, he was aware how she stiffened beneath his touch. Unintentionally, his grip tightened.

Her fingers were warm under his and he remembered when he'd finally accepted he'd been drawn to her as a woman. Her red hair flying straight out behind her head as she'd revelled in the danger of the race. She loved danger all right, he thought cynically. Life of the party, and always on the lookout for some mad new adventure or life experience, Kirsten had been the sun that less exuberant staff had gravitated around yet she had never seemed to favour one person—until him.

Initially, Hunter had blocked that attraction because he'd thought, mistakenly, he'd sensed a core of innocence beneath her bravado that he'd had no right to taint with his cynical distrust of women. But the joy she seemed to find in the everyday had worn his resistance down and he'd finally allowed himself to accept the idea that he'd found the woman he could plan his future with.

Until that morning!

He'd thought the tearoom was empty when he rounded the corner but then he saw them. Cosgrove twisted to protect the woman from his eyes and at first he only realised it wasn't Jack's wife cradled so passionately in the man's arms. And then Kirsten stepped out of the man's embrace to face him. He knew his face mirrored his devastation.

'It's not what you think,' Kirsten whispered. The same words Portia, his wife, had said when he'd confronted her with her lover five years before. It felt as if a stiletto was still lodged under his ribs after all this time and Kirsten was twisting it deeper.

Foolishly, in the last few months at MIRA, he began to believe he was over his shock at Kirsten's behaviour. What a fool he was.

Aware at first hand of the devastation that could be caused by infidelity, both as a child and as a husband, Hunter did the right thing when he ruthlessly severed their relationship. Afterwards, the gap left by Kirsten's friendship in his life warned him how close he'd come to repeating the mistake of his first marriage.

Here she was, threatening his peace of mind again. Typical. Jim's promise of the perfect candidate for the job had been too good to be true. He lifted his own chin, staring down at the top of her colourful red head and not into her magical if devious eyes.

'Kirsten, how nice to see you. Settled back into Australia?' He could feel the tug of her arm as she tried unobtrusively to free her hand. He chose to let her go and she snatched her hand back so fast he smiled.

Interesting. He looked down to see her eyes narrow as she probed behind his smile, and Hunter realised he could make this woman's life hell. That wasn't his style but he couldn't help a little satisfaction that he wasn't the only one feeling discomfort.

Hunter had left for Sydney and stepped straight into this job. He'd never really understood the dramatics Cosgrove or his doctor wife had displayed. He understood less why Kirsten had felt the need to come between a married couple.

Jack had even seen Hunter and tried to explain away his involvement with Kirsten, but Hunter had wanted no bar of it. He'd heard that Jack and his wife had moved on to Canada for a holiday before heading back to Australia so the man must have seen sense. He wondered if Kirsten had been asked to leave Dubai and if she was sad she'd lost her conquest back to his wife. Maybe Jack had been just another diversion—like he'd been, Hunter thought with gritted teeth.

'We must catch up later on how your last few days in Dubai panned out. Do you see much of Jack Cosgrove or Eva?'

'Sure,' Kirsten answered easily enough, but she felt the innuendo in the question. A few months ago, with Hunter, she'd known she'd found the man she wanted to spend her life with and it had certainly seemed as if he'd felt the same way.

Then it had all stopped with his ridiculous accusations. Hunter's lack of faith had shattered her. Obviously his suspicions remained. Kirsten had always prided herself on her honesty and came from a family that had high moral standards. To see that the man she'd loved had no capacity for trust, had shown her a serious flaw in what she'd thought a perfect relationship. Kirsten had forced herself to accept it had been better to find out then, but it hadn't helped her hide her hurt and disillusionment from Hunter. There'd always been an extra tension or double meaning in any communication they'd shared since Jack.

But she was over the brief Technicolor space he'd occupied in her life. Kirsten turned away to ask a question of the senior flight sister. He had the problem, not her, and she'd just have to learn not to let it rankle.

Ellen Gardner wasn't much warmer than Hunter, but she was safer. The two women moved across the room to discuss a map on the wall and Kirsten was glad to increase the distance between her and that man.

The area serviced by MIRA was bounded by the New South Wales border, though sometimes patients were transferred to Canberra in the Australian Capital Territory if beds were scarce. MIRA serviced around one hundred and forty hospitals of varying levels of care by road or air. They transported the critical patients to the closest paediatric or neonatal intensive care facility that had the resources to cope, often using fixed-wing aircraft or helicopters, depending on the ground facilities, weather and condition of the patient. The whole structure worked closely with the NSW Ambulance Service.

'Are the same number of personnel still flying in the aircraft?' Kirsten imagined it would be running in a similar vein from when she'd been here over eighteen months ago. Jim, as supervisor, hadn't changed, but she needed to convey to the other sister that she herself wasn't a threat to Ellen's authority.

'The minimum team consists of one transport doctor, one transport nurse and, of course, the pilot. Your first few flights will be supervised by me—' Ellen smiled without humour '—to ensure you don't require any further orientation on the use of the latest equipment or updates on aviation medicine. I'll also make sure you still have the skills needed for clinical call conferencing. Of course, space is always at a premium, but if there's room, we try to accommodate a parent as well. I'm not sure how many were here in your time...'

Kirsten suppressed a grin at the inference she'd worked at MIRA back with the dinosaurs.

'But now we have ten doctors,' Ellen continued, 'most on a part-time roster, and twenty-five nurses as well as support staff. Plus our very experienced pilots.'

'The pilots were good even back then,' Kirsten murmured, tongue-in-cheek.

'I gather you're not afraid of flying.' Ellen raised pencilled eyebrows.

As if. 'I'm not afraid of much,' Kirsten said quietly as the men came across to join them. Hunter obviously caught the end of the conversation.

'So what are you afraid of, Sister Wilson?' Hunter looked down at her with a wicked smile and Kirsten's concentration slipped for a moment. She'd forgotten, or had maybe blocked out the memory, of what it felt like to be on the receiving end of one of his smiles.

When he was amused, Hunter's eyes became flecked with molten silver and he had the ability to thaw her reserve with sudden heat. A heat that wasn't helped by the sensual curve of his lips. The man was too blatantly male and eight weeks of unresolved sexual tension lay buried, sizzling, somewhere deep between them. She flushed and tried to remember the question. She wasn't going to let him do this to her again. She wasn't going to let him tantalise her with possibilities and then refrigerate her with his chilly moral lectures.

Her brain clicked into gear, no thanks to him.

'Afraid? Only of leeches.' She shuddered. 'I discovered that on a survival course. But that's why I'm a midwife and neonatal nurse and not a doctor like you.'

The others laughed and Ellen looked admiringly across at Hunter. 'I'll bet you're not afraid of anything, Hunter.'

Kirsten only just resisted the urge to roll her eyes as she turned back to look at the map again. As she did, she saw that Hunter was watching her and not Ellen. 'I'm a commitment-phobe. I have one other phobia but as it's not flying, it shouldn't worry you,' he quipped, and arched his eyebrows at Kirsten.

Jim called them all to order and the meeting started. They discussed rosters and allocation of calls and the division of labour to ensure the skill mix remained even among the disciplines while integrating the new staff member.

When the meeting was over, Jim took Kirsten's arm. 'Come and look at the latest photos.' He flicked open the album and Kirsten smiled as photos of country hospital nurseries all over the state flipped over.

Dozens of photos were of tiny patients, dwarfed by mountains of equipment, and the recognisable trousers and shirt of the MIRA team with the reflective stripe below the knees as they hovered over their charges. Kirsten even saw two old snapshots of herself, smiling into the camera. Then there were photographs of the aircraft and grinning pilots, as well as some aerial photos of different airstrips.

Kirsten could feel the thrill stir in her stomach. She was meant to be here. The excitement that had been there before she'd met Hunter Morgan was here again too. The intensity she'd planned to fill the hollow emptiness left from her shattered relationship with Hunter rekindled.

'Glad to be back, my dear?' Jim said as she closed the album.

Kirsten smiled up at him. 'MIRA is something I'll always love.'

'We're lucky to have you. Welcome home, Kirsten.'

Kirsten hugged the older man but her eyes drifted to Hunter, who raised one eyebrow cynically then turned away. Just one annoying fly in the ointment, she thought to herself, and suppressed a sigh.

Hunter left the room as if he were back in the camel race, out of control. Despite the fact he was heading towards the neonatal intensive care unit and his tiny patients. The great thing about babies was they had no ulterior motives. They struggled to survive by sheer tiny heart and determination and the skill of their carers, and you could trust them. Not like women.

As he entered the huge teaching hospital, his thoughts kept drifting back to that last scene of Jim with his arm around Kirsten. Hunter couldn't believe that Kirsten was here at MIRA and, knowing his luck, no doubt would show up in his NICU. And as before, she'd be blatantly in his face. The hell of it was, he couldn't deny he was still attracted to her.

Nearly six months ago, he'd begun to let her close, until that episode with Jack Cosgrove. Painfully, but almost with relief, his heart had hardened implacably as if pleased to justify that

distance. Having been a cuckolded husband once before, Hunter had vowed to stay immune to the power of a woman. But Kirsten had burst into his black-and-white world like a comet and had showered him with so many bright moments and such a zest for life he'd been blasted out of his usual comfort zone. Thank God and good sense he hadn't slept with her. Fantasies of her in his arms were bad enough, without having to contend with real memories.

After the truth had come out, such had been his bitter disappointment at his own stupidity he'd found he could barely speak to the woman and it had become untenable for him to continue working there, though he'd cited other reasons for heading back to Sydney.

Hunter stabbed the elevator button with more force than necessary and he spared a glare at the female orderly who warily shifted a few paces away from him. The last thing he would allow was distraction during neonatal transfers at MIRA. His passion for his work as his tiny patients struggled for life was what had helped him through Portia's deceit. And it would get him through Kirsten's return, he thought as the elevator doors opened. Getting out at his floor, he strode through the swing doors that led towards the neonatal intensive care unit. And he wouldn't be distracted in his unit either.

Kirsten had mapped her life out twelve years ago when her mother had died a year after her father. She'd decided she would be self-sufficient, travel and live the adventurous life she'd read about to escape a fifteen-year-old's reality of her parents' deaths. Until she'd begun, to her surprise, to imagine settling down with Hunter.

Thanks to Hunter Morgan and his icy lectures, she remembered why she didn't need any man, why she was determined to stay focussed on the two-bedroom flat she'd transferred her attention to. All she needed was a home to return to occasionally and the world was an adventure. The extra income for a casual night duty once a week in the NICU would help pay extra off her mortgage and maybe she'd even be able to start saving for her next overseas holiday.

Her interview at NICU was brief and she was swiftly accepted as a casual RN to start immediately. Gloria Westerland, the nursing unit manager of the NICU, introduced her to the other staff.

Hunter, her nemesis, just had to keep popping back into her life. Because she was prepared this time, Kirsten was pleased her reaction didn't register on her face. When Gloria paused at the crib where Hunter examined one of his tiny patients, he barely looked up.

'This is Kirsten Wilson, Hunter. She's a very experienced NICU nurse and will be working Saturday nights here.'

He grunted. 'We've met. Burning the candle at both ends as usual, Kirsten?' He nodded briefly and then went back to work without waiting for an answer. Kirsten stared at a point somewhere over his left shoulder and didn't say anything. She was thankful when the NUM moved on.

'Despite his lack of warmth in this instance...' Gloria glanced curiously at the tall paediatrician and then turned back to Kirsten '...Hunter is a real asset to the unit. He's kind, brilliant with the babies and contactable any time, day or night, for the five days of the fortnight we have him, and I guess you know he works at MIRA for the other five days.' Gloria gazed back to where Hunter leaned over the infant. 'And he's not bad to look at.'

Kirsten couldn't help a glance over her shoulder. His face was chiselled into stern lines as he concentrated and she missed the brilliance of his smile. He'd been able to warm her across the room when he'd smiled at her, and it wasn't only her that was affected. Gloria's understatement drew an answering smile from Kirsten. Not bad to look at indeed. 'We met in Dubai, but we've agreed to disagree. I'm not worried.'

Gloria nodded. 'That explains it. So you're sure you might want some extra shifts, apart from MIRA?'

'I'm sure.' Kirsten glanced at her watch. 'I start at MIRA on Monday and I've just bought the sweetest unit overlooking Randwick Racecourse. The occasional night shift would work perfectly for me.'

‘Well, I’m happy.’ Gloria sagged with relief. ‘The weekends are always the hardest to fill with experienced staff.’ They shook hands. ‘We’ll see you Saturday night, then. When you have more time, I’d love to hear about your experiences overseas.’

Kirsten rolled her eyes comically. ‘Have I got some stories to tell you.’ The two women laughed and shook hands, and Kirsten tried not to notice that Hunter was watching her from across the room. She hadn’t mentioned to Gloria that she also hoped that on night duty she’d be able to avoid contact with Hunter Morgan more easily.

For her heart’s sake, that was a must.

CHAPTER TWO

KIRSTEN'S first shift as a night neonatal nurse started off quietly, if you could call the beep of two dozen heart monitors and the hiss of several ventilators breathing for tiny infants quiet. It was strange but good to be back in an Australian hospital and she glanced around at her workmates. In Dubai, the eclectic mix of nationalities was always fun but she had missed the twangy accent and dry wit of the Australians.

Kirsten was rostered to start at MIRA headquarters on Monday morning, but for tonight it would be good to have a chance to see what had changed on the home front. Around midnight, though, her leisurely check was cut short.

Twenty-eight-week twin girls were rushed in from the delivery suite with very little warning, and Kirsten was actually happy to see Hunter follow them in.

Kirsten took over the care of one child, Kinny Baker, and her coworker, Patricia, took the other sister, Carla. Weighing in at just eight hundred and fifty and nine hundred grams respectively, Kirsten spared a brief thought for the long road the girls and their parents had ahead of them as the tiny infants were placed in the humidicribs to keep warm.

Hunter had already intubated the girls in the delivery suite within a few minutes of birth and the babies had been hand-ventilated with tiny resuscitation bags by delivery-suite staff until they could be transferred to the nursery and connected to the ventilators. Kirsten attached Kinny's three leads to the heart monitor and clipped the pulse oximeter to her tiny foot to check peripheral oxygen saturation. The capillary oxygen saturation in an infant, or sats, was a good indication of how the respiratory system was coping.

Silently, Hunter appeared beside Kirsten and she could feel the warmth from his body beside her as he attended an initial physical examination while Kirsten was establishing baseline observations.

'Hello, little one,' he murmured to Kinny as he moved to listen to her heart and lungs. Then he examined her tiny body for any abnormalities. Kirsten checked the endotracheal tube was secure now she was hooked up to the ventilator.

She tried to ignore the seeping heat that burned into her hip from his nearness and her chest ached with unwilling sadness. She watched Hunter deftly insert a tiny intravenous cannula into Kinny's arm and together they splinted the little girl's tiny forearm to safeguard the line. They'd done this for so many infants in the past. Tonight it was all achieved without speaking.

Kirsten found she could still anticipate Hunter's treatment plan and the thought brought a pang to be shrugged off as she considered what they'd achieved. Airway was secure, breathing was controlled via the ventilator and circulation didn't seem to be a problem. Kinny looked good.

The IV would avoid the need for feeding until Kinny's condition had stabilised and provide immediate access for antibiotics and any other drugs the premature infant would need.

Kinny's arm, smaller than Hunter's little finger, emphasised the extreme fragility of their tiny charge. Next to Kinny's shiny, transparent skin, Hunter's brown hand looked like carved stone. A little like his face whenever he needed to look at her, Kirsten thought dryly.

Kinny's dad, Ken Baker, arrived from the delivery suite and his eyes misted at the sight of his tiny daughters as they lay pink and fragile amidst the technological paraphernalia. Attached to each baby, a network of leads snaked out through a port in the side of the humidicrib and connected to the digital monitor beside Kirsten's and Patricia's work area around the cribs.

Hunter's voice was quiet as he spoke to Kirsten. 'Now that we have them connected, if you want to get the surfactant from the fridge, I'll have a quick word with their dad.'

Kirsten nodded and turned to go, but Hunter stopped her. 'We can use half an amp for each baby down the tube—that will be plenty.' She dashed off and Hunter gently steered the babies' father closer to the cribs so he could watch their progress.

He shook Mr Baker's hand. 'It must look pretty daunting to you but both girls are doing really well.' As an opening line it must have worked, Kirsten thought as she returned, because Ken seemed to sag a little with relief at Hunter's smile.

She carried a tiny feeding tube to help ensure the hormone reached well into the little girl's lungs.

Hunter went on. 'Your daughters are sedated to allow them to rest while the ventilator expands and deflates their lungs for them. The tiny amount of liquid that Sister is squirting into their breathing tubes is a hormone to help stop their lungs from sticking together, which means less pressure is needed by the ventilator to expand their lungs.' Ken nodded that he understood and Hunter went on.

'Less pressure from the ventilator is a good thing because it means less long-term damage and less chance of a hole in the lung occurring.'

Kirsten listened to Hunter explain the humidicribs to the babies' father with a small smile. 'It's like a miniature rainforest in that crib,' he said, and his hands illustrated his point. 'All premature babies around your daughters' gestation are about eighty to ninety per cent fluid and they need moisture or they'll dry out, a bit like chips.'

The father blinked at the graphic image and Kirsten turned away to hide her smile. Hunter was right but a less graphic description might have been better.

Ken shook his head at all the technology. 'So how long do they stay here?'

'This young?' Hunter looked at the girls thoughtfully. 'They stay on average the time it would have taken for them to come to term naturally. So about twelve weeks! If all goes well, we'll wean them off the ventilator in about a week and even start them on maybe a few drops of breast milk every four hours in a few days. But they won't get anything to eat till then.'

The girl's father rubbed his stomach in sympathy. 'But they get what they need out of the drip, right?'

Ken looked as though he couldn't take much more information.

'That's right,' Kirsten said. 'I think you're doing really well with the day you've had. Did you want to get back to your wife? You know you can come back any time.' Ken nodded with relief. She handed him two instant photos of his tiny daughters which she'd taken while she and Patricia had weighed the babies earlier. 'Take these with you. Please, let your wife know she's welcome to come down and see your daughters any time.'

Kirsten showed him how to get back to the delivery suite and when she returned, Hunter was beside Kinny's crib, looking in. 'Dry out like a chip?' she said, and shook her head.

Hunter had the grace to look embarrassed. 'Well, they do dry out.'

'The poor man will worry that his babies will be crinkled when he comes back.' Kirsten laughed and sat back on her stool to do the next round of observations and for the briefest moment they both seemed to forget the past as they shared a smile. Then they both looked away.

It was after three a.m. before Hunter decided he could leave his charges in the NICU staff's hands.

Patricia looked up. 'Do you want a coffee before you go, Hunter?'

Kirsten was surprised when Hunter agreed because the last thing he'd seemed had been eager to stay around. She wondered at his motives.

'Sure. You ladies have done a great job tonight.' By the warm glance that passed over her, Kirsten gathered even she was included in the compliment. He always had been fair with his appreciation. She looked away.

The last thing she needed Hunter to see was her confusion at approval when he'd been impersonating the basilisk all night. She knew she was good at her job, so why should it mean so much for Hunter to say it?

'Decaffeinated shouldn't keep me awake for what's left of the night,' he said. 'I almost envy you girls a night shift if it means you can sleep through the day.'

‘You must get very tired,’ Patricia murmured sympathetically, and Kirsten shifted on her stool with resignation. And she’d thought Patricia a sensible woman. As if Hunter sensed her distaste at the drift of the conversation, he turned himself fully to face her. ‘And are you sleeping today, Kirsten?’

‘After lunch,’ she said shortly, and turned back to record Kinny’s vital signs on her chart. He came to stand beside the crib and looked down at her as she sat on the stool. They weren’t touching but she was aware of how close he was. She could have lifted her fingers a centimetre and she’d have been able to feel the warmth of his skin. It was strange, the way she could force herself to ignore these thoughts while they were working, yet when the tension was over it was as if the build-up she’d ignored took over.

‘So what’s planned for you this morning that’s more important than sleep?’

Kirsten smiled noncommittally and unconsciously leaned her body slightly away from him. ‘My new unit. I’ve unpacking to do.’ Her tone didn’t encourage further questions and he shrugged. Then she glanced back over her shoulder. ‘If you want to grab coffee, Patricia, I’ll stay here and watch both girls until you and Hunter come back.’

Patricia’s pleased smile wasn’t reflected in Hunter’s face and Kirsten stowed that piece of useless information away for later. The good news was he moved away to follow the younger woman to the tearoom and Kirsten felt the tension ease from her neck.

This was ridiculous. Already she could tell that half the women in NICU were attracted to the man and she knew better than to join the ranks. She’d seen how fickle he could be and how cold he became when he withdrew his favour. A brief glow under the Hunter Morgan sunlamp, despite the memories that could make her smile softly in weak moments of the night, were not worth the chill of being discarded. Now she knew why she preferred a non-threatening platonic friendship with men. She’d get on with her satisfying life as a single woman, and for male companionship she’d stick with those who were no risk to her peace of mind. Maybe she’d tattoo ‘Just friends’ on her forehead.

As if conjured up, a pair of masculine hands encircled her eyes from behind. ‘Boo,’ a male voice whispered, and Kirsten spun around under his light hold. Thin and blond, Marcus Gleeson, a young registrar she’d shared some of her MIRA experience with last time, grinned cheekily at her. ‘Hey, Wilson, where’d you spring from? You’re more gorgeous than ever.’

Kirsten looked him up and down. ‘I morphed out of this stool here. Gorgeous, eh? I’m sure three in the morning is my best time.’ She looked critically at the bags under the young man’s eyes. ‘How are you, Marc? Still playing the field?’

His smile wavered for a moment and then he shrugged. ‘I might tell you later, you always were a good listener. But what about you?’

Kirsten tilted her head and noticed his usual mischief was missing. Unable to help herself, she stood up, reached out and drew Marcus into a quick sisterly hug. ‘Poor baby. We’ll have coffee soon.’ When she stepped back she looked up into the cold eyes of Hunter.

Kirsten resisted the ridiculous urge to explain and sat back on her stool and spun to look into crib. Both babies were stable and it wasn’t time for more observations so she turned back to find Hunter still staring at her. She raised her eyebrows in a ‘what?’ gesture and his gaze moved over her dismissively before he turned away without answering.

Marcus watched him walk away. ‘What’s wrong with the boss?’

Kirsten shrugged and tucked her hands into her pockets to hide the effect Hunter’s disdain had on her.

Hunter glared at the point where the exit light showed the way out and strode faster than usual towards the door. He’d actually felt like lifting Gleeson up by the scruff of his skinny neck and tossing him out the third-floor window. Which was not a normal thought. Up until today he’d quite liked the young chap. Hunter frowned. He supposed Gleeson was only a couple of years younger than he was, but Hunter felt like an old man compared to his registrar.

He'd seen the smile Kirsten had given Gleeson and the way she'd hugged him. Hunter had thought Gleeson was enamoured by Patricia and had spent his coffee-break steering the young woman towards Marc and away from himself. That was probably why he felt so annoyed. The flat of his hand slapped the door open. Lack of sleep could make you intolerant—though he hadn't noticed that problem before tonight. Perhaps he was getting old.

On Kirsten's first shift back at MIRA she started at seven in the morning. It felt strange to be back in the familiar spread of rooms and balconies. She found her old locker with the key sticking out waiting for her, and she had to smile. Maggie would have done that.

Kirsten had brought a bag of things from home to keep on site and there was a feeling of *déjà vu* in packing them back into the locker, having emptied it eighteen months ago. She tucked her bathroom bag, small pillow and quilt at the back for those nights when all the checking and cleaning was finished and they were waiting for a call. If she was going to do extra nights in the nursery she might be glad of an hour's catch-up sleep.

Headquarters had two bedrooms with proper beds, a sofa in the TV room and a fold-up bed that could be erected in the education room. But from past experience she knew there wasn't usually much chance of sleep.

Most days, the MIRA staff averaged two retrievals per ten-hour shift, with each trip taking between three to five hours. Sometimes it was much longer if the infant was difficult to stabilise before transfer.

Hunter came into the room and Kirsten shoved away her box of emergency muesli bars, relieved she'd finished packing her locker. The sudden awkwardness at his presence made her press back to let him past.

The locker room was tiny and he couldn't help brushing against her as she shrank almost inside her locker to keep out of his way. Just that minute contact made her stiffen in denial of an attraction she didn't want to feel.

'Worried about catching germs, Kirsten?' he drawled, but didn't look at her as he put away his jacket. Kirsten gritted her teeth as she backed out of the small space.

'Don't be a pain, Hunter.'

There was silence from behind her as she left the room. Great beginning to the first day, she chided herself, but he'd started it. She sensed him follow her out towards the kitchen. They really needed to get professional here and bury the past. She slid her lunch into the fridge and eyed the new vending machines in the kitchen that hadn't been there last year and grinned. Sweets, chips, Coke and microwave meals—a truly balanced diet for those who wanted it.

One of the male registered nurses from the night shift wandered into the kitchen with an empty coffee-cup, let out a whoop when he saw Kirsten, picked her up and swung her around. 'Kirsten Wilson. How the hell are you?' he said, and gave her a big hug. At the look on Hunter's face Kirsten could either have laughed or cried. She chose the former and hugged Paul Netherby back. Take that, Hunter Morgan, Kirsten thought as the big nurse put her down, but when she turned to see what his reaction was, Hunter had gone.

Suddenly she felt flat, and in denial she became more vivacious.

'It's good to see you, Paul. How's Serena and the baby?'

The man's face fell. 'She left me. Not interested in taking her place, are you?' He looked cautiously hopeful but Kirsten wasn't fooled.

'Nobody could take Serena's place for you. If you've hurt that woman, you have some major sucking up to do and you know it.'

Paul hugged her again. 'I love you, Kirsten Wilson.' Hunter returned with a dirty coffee-mug and his lip curled as if he'd just swallowed a particularly loathsome insect. Kirsten signed. Paul was oblivious and dragged a stern-faced Kirsten out into the other room. 'You know me so well,' he chattered as they left. 'Come and meet my partner from last night, the delectable Nicky.'

Hunter stood at the sink and stared out the window, but he couldn't see anything. Lord, he'd had a lucky escape. That woman attracted men like flies and she seemed to lack all moral judgement. Hunter knew about poor Serena Netherby and the flighty Paul, and he'd thought they were almost back together again. And they even had a baby. Netherby was just the sort of low-life Portia, his ex-wife, would have liked, too.

He couldn't believe Kirsten could be so stupid as to believe anything Netherby said, but obviously they'd had some kind of past relationship to be that friendly.

It was all none of his business and he'd had a lucky escape. It was good to have a calm and safe life again. Now there was no reason he and Kirsten couldn't be professional about this—she'd always maintained that in the unit.

Ellen wandered into the kitchen to find Hunter gripping a cup, white-knuckled, at the sink.

'You OK, Hunter?' she asked, and he blinked and smiled a perfunctory greeting.

'Fine.' He glanced down at the cup in his hand and loosened his fingers. 'Looks to be good flying weather out there,' he said, and walked away.

Ellen glanced out the window at the shredded clouds scattered ahead of a thick cumulonimbus front. 'What planet are you on today?' she muttered, as she switched the kettle on.

Paul, Nicky and the other night team members had left and Ellen cornered Kirsten to run through the protocols and check routines. All the time Kirsten nodded that she understood, she was aware of Hunter on the sofa as he pretended to read the newspaper. He kept staring at her over the top of the pages, trying to put her off, and if he didn't stop she'd clock the man with one of the cushions.

She knew he could get up to mischief. It would be just like him to decide to amuse himself at her expense.

Before the battle of wits could escalate, the MIRA phone rang and personal tensions disappeared. Jim took the incoming call from a base hospital on the north coast and they all looked towards the conference phone as Hunter joined in.

A three-hour-old baby boy, Isaac Curtin, had been diagnosed with a large ventricular septal defect (VSD) or hole in the heart. Born in Taree, an hour's flight north of Sydney, baby Isaac needed to be airlifted to a major centre for care and assessment by a paediatric cardiologist and probable urgent corrective surgery.

Kirsten listened to Jim as he outlined the hospital doctor's problem, what his needs were and other possibilities, but she could tell they all agreed retrieval was the best option. Jim conferenced the call with Hunter, a paediatric cardiologist and a surgeon in Western Sydney, and Hunter took notes on the recommended treatment for stabilisation by the MIRA team after the decision was made to transfer.

Kirsten's heart did a little flip-flop of excitement and she couldn't help savouring the flush of adrenalin for her first retrieval in a year and a half despite the fact she was sharing the trip with Hunter and Ellen. She shrugged. The baby and parents were the important people.

The preparation and flight routine emphasised minimum delay in departure and Kirsten pushed the equipment out onto the roof ahead of the rest as all the sequences returned from memory.

The extra-warm greeting Kirsten received from the tall pilot, Keith, a man not noted for warm greetings, was observed stonily by the two senior staff members as they followed Kirsten into the helicopter. Kirsten rolled her eyes. Hunter probably thought she was having an affair with Keith now. She winked at Keith and watched Hunter's eyebrows shoot up.

An experienced fixed-wing instructor, as well as helicopter pilot, Keith had flown many times in the past with Kirsten. She'd shared several hilarious picnics with Keith and his wife at the Camden Aero Club before she'd gained her own unrestricted pilot's licence, and she considered them both good friends. Darned if she'd start feeling uncomfortable around Keith because of Hunter Morgan's hang-ups.

'Looks like it'll be a bumpy ride.' Keith seemed to derive a certain malicious satisfaction from the forecast and Kirsten grinned back. He hadn't been able to make her airsick yet.

Stormclouds accumulated off the starboard wing and Kirsten was glad they were in the sturdy Bell 412 helicopter. At least there was plenty of room for the extra staff member and Kirsten didn't have to stare at Hunter all the way.

Prior to take-off, baby Isaac's weight and birth date had been fed into the computer and the MIRA program-generated drug sheets produced the correct dosage for every conceivable drug they might need on the retrieval. This double-sided printed sheet was a valuable tool in saving time in drug calculations and dramatically cut the chance of medication error. The team prepared the most likely drugs en route to save more time at the destination hospital.

Ellen ran through the probable scenario of arrival for Kirsten, as if she'd never been on a retrieval or even an aircraft before, and Kirsten listened and nodded. At least Ellen was a distraction from Hunter who was on the other side of the cabin, watching with his arms folded. She wished he'd recheck the portable crib or something because she found his scrutiny hard to ignore.

At last they arrived and Kirsten heaved a sigh of relief. Next time she'd make sure she had the window seat as a distraction.

CHAPTER THREE

AT THE destination hospital, if there was time, the first step was always to meet the parents, then quickly move to assess the patient.

Baby Isaac would become more tired as his in-coordinated heart struggled to achieve what had been so easy inside his mother, and Kirsten knew they'd have to watch out for heart failure.

Isaac's parents looked very young as they hovered anxiously on the periphery of the medical drama, and Kirsten went over and shook their hands.

'Hi, I'm Kirsten Wilson and I'm one of the neonatal nurses from Sydney. This must be pretty frightening for you both.' The young couple nodded and Kirsten smiled. 'We're going to keep you updated as we make Isaac as comfortable as we can for the flight. After that we'll get Isaac and you, Mum, transferred to the major hospital. When you get there, the paediatric cardiologist will talk you through his treatment plan.'

Lily, Isaac's mum, clutched her boyfriend's hand tighter. 'There seems to be so many people here and Isaac looks so small.'

'I know,' Kirsten said. 'But he's getting the best care so he can have the safest trip we can manage for him. About one baby in a hundred has a heart problem so we've done this before.'

Both parents sagged a little with relief at Kirsten's confidence. 'We'll all be with you until we hand Isaac over to the staff at the city hospital so don't forget to ask questions as you need to.'

Lily nodded and Kirsten rejoined her colleagues. She allowed herself a brief stroke of Isaac's head as she began to record his respiratory rate, heart rate and oxygen saturation as she looked for signs of cardiac failure. Ellen connected the baby to the MIRA monitors as well as the referring hospital's equipment to ensure constant monitoring during change-over, and she offered Kirsten the stethoscope to listen to Isaac's chest. The heart murmur was very clear.

'What's your instinct on this baby?' Hunter spoke quietly in her ear and Kirsten knew he was testing her.

'He's breathing faster than he should be so respiration is affected, and he's sweaty and that's not a good sign. I'd say he has substantial fluid backing up in his lungs and when I listened to his chest he sounded "wet".' She glanced at Hunter. 'The heart murmur is loud and I'd say it's a large VSD.'

Ellen, dressed in a lead apron, held Isaac while X-rays were taken, because it was important to see the quality of Isaac's lungs and any cardiac enlargement. As soon as they were finished, Kirsten did a quick twelve-lead ECG to give Hunter some idea of the electrical conductivity of the sick baby's heart.

Hunter took the chance while the nurses were busy to explain things to the parents and reassure the base hospital staff on the excellent job they'd done in preparation for the retrieval team. She had to admit that when he wanted to use his charm he was a master at putting people at ease, which helped in situations like this.

She watched him put his arm around Isaac's mother and clap his father on the back as he congratulated them on their beautiful son. His obvious empathy with frightened parents had a lot to do with the attraction she'd felt for him when they'd first met.

They couldn't be friends but they should be professional about their differences at least. She could still admire his skill and empathy as a neonatal intensivist.

Hunter returned to the baby and the equipment Kirsten had assembled. He inserted an intravenous cannula in Isaac's hand and when the newborn grasped Hunter's finger, they shared a smile across the humidicrib at the wonder of tiny babies.

This was ludicrous, Kirsten thought, and vowed to establish some 'safe' camaraderie because moments like this were too special to waste on something that was never meant to be.

The finality of that thought stayed with Kirsten as she turned away to document the time of insertion and the start of the minuscule measured amounts of intravenous fluids.

‘Let’s give him a diuretic to see if we can offload some of this fluid he’s accumulating,’ Hunter said, and Kirsten handed him the preloaded syringe with the ampoule taped to it.

They checked the dosage together and just as Kirsten started to relax, Hunter had another question for her.

‘What else are we looking for?’

Kirsten glanced down at Isaac and the answer came readily. ‘Probably signs of any other abnormalities or indications for other syndromes that this condition can run with.’ The obvious ones were often identifiable by abnormal facial characteristics. She glanced across at Isaac’s dad, and any facial features that might have hinted at a genetic disease were vetoed by the mirror image of father and son. She smiled, and Hunter, following her thoughts, did too. Then they both looked away quickly and Kirsten busied herself by recording what they’d done.

All treatment for the stabilisation of baby Isaac would be diligently recorded, as would any improvement or deterioration in his condition. Later in the week, at the team meetings, all cases would be reviewed and discussed to ensure any improvements in care would be noted and used in the next case.

Within a short while they had achieved the best oxygen saturation and cardiac output they could for Isaac, and all that was left was to fix the cables and tubes, clean up their mess and prepare for transfer.

For Hunter, working with Kirsten was as hard as he’d feared it would be, yet at the same time incredibly easy. The last few months he’d felt he had become adept at completing retrievals with Ellen and the other neonatal nurses, but with Kirsten the clinical component of patient care seemed so much more streamlined.

There was no need to ask for anything. She had either already done it or had what was required ready for him to complete the procedure, as it had always been in Dubai.

And, as it was then, all the time she smiled—at the baby, at the parents, at the referring hospital staff. And at him.

Hunter had forgotten how much joy she shared with those around her. Even in the midst of tension and fear, she was a reassuring light that parents and staff turned to when things seemed blackest, and suddenly there was hope or at least reason in the chaos.

He’d blocked out how many times he’d witnessed her like that in the past and he did not want to go there now, but it was hard not to remember. How ironic that she was happy and he was miserable.

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