Medical Romance™

CAROL MARINELLI

Sydney Harbour Hospital: Ava's Re-awakening





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Аннотация

Treating her clients' problems is what relationship guru Ava Carmichael does best, but no amount of therapy could fix her own barren marriage.Feeling utterly helpless, Ava pushed James away. But when he returns, grappling with issues of his own, suddenly it's time for Ava to take the advice she so passionately teaches…and apply it to herself!Sydney Harbour HospitalFrom saving lives to sizzling seduction, these doctors are the very best!

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About the Author

CAROL MARINELLI recently filled in a form where she was asked for her job title and was thrilled, after all these years, to be able to put down her answer as 'writer'. Then it asked what Carol did for relaxation. After chewing her pen for a moment Carol put down the truth—'writing'. The third question asked—'What are your hobbies?' Well, not wanting to look obsessed or, worse still, boring, she crossed the fingers on her free hand and answered 'swimming and tennis'. But, given that the chlorine in the pool does terrible things to her highlights, and the closest she's got to a tennis racket in the last couple of years is watching the Australian Open, I'm sure you can guess the real answer!

Sydney Harbour Hospital: Ava's Re-Awakening

Carol Marinelli



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For Anne Gracie. Thank you for your friendship and support. It means a lot. Carol x

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Sydney Harbour Hospital

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PROLOGUE

SHE would call him.

Ava Carmichael sat in her office at Sydney Harbour Hospital and stared at her phone, willing herself to pick it up and call her husband. She had just spent the best part of the last hour counselling a couple—telling them to talk, to open up to each other, that if they just forged ahead with communication then things would begin to improve.

As a sexual dysfunction specialist—or sex therapist, as everyone called her—Ava got to say those lines an awful lot.

Well, it was time for the doctor to take her own medicine, Ava decided, reaching out and picking up the phone and dialling in his mobile number. At the last moment she changed her mind, and hung up. She went back to twisting her long dark hair around her fingers—just unsure what it was she should say to him.

That she missed him?

That she was sorry?

Ava didn't know where to start.

Her husband, James, had been away for three months in Brisbane. He had taken a temporary teaching placement at a school of medicine there, which was ridiculous. James was an oncologist and completely hands-on in his work. He loved being with his patients more than anything. Had it been three months of research, it might have made some sense—Sydney

Harbour Hospital was cutting-edge and James kept himself right up to date, but James liked reading about findings rather than discovering them. He liked being with his patients and James, her James, wasn't a teacher.

She smiled at the very thought.

The medical students got on his nerves.

He hated explaining his decisions.

He was a man's man, a gorgeous man, her big honest bear of a man who would come home and flake on the sofa sometimes and moan because he wanted it to only be him in the room with his patient, especially when giving bad news.

'It's a teaching hospital,' Ava would point out, lying on the floor, doing her Pilates. 'They have to learn.'

'Yeah, well, how would you like to have a couple of students sitting there watching when you're trying to talk to someone about their bits not working?' There was rather more to her work than that but he'd made a very good point, and he had made her smile too, especially when he checked his own bits were there for a moment, indignant at the very thought.

Well, there *had* been conversations like that one, lovely evenings that had been shared, talking easily about their day, their thoughts, *them*, but those evenings seemed like an awfully long time ago.

Yes, he loved his patients and they loved him back, and the real reason he had taken the position, they both knew, even if they hadn't voiced it, had been because they'd needed space from

each other—they'd needed those three months to hopefully sort out their heads.

James and Ava had been married for seven years, but had been together for ever. They had met at university and, quite simply, at the age of eighteen the awkward and rather shy Ava Marwood had discovered love. James had been twenty-one, good-looking, funny and the first person in her life, it seemed, who actually wanted to spend time with her. Like James, she was an only child, but unlike James, who had grown up with parents who adored him, Ava's parents had made no secret she'd been an accident, an inconvenience really. It had been a parade of young nannies who had raised Ava—her parents had been far too busy with their lives, their careers, their endless extra-marital trysts, which, they'd both agreed, kept their relationship alive.

It had been a confusing, lonely childhood and then she had met James and her world had changed. Ava had found a whole new definition for love. It had been completely unexpected, thoroughly reciprocated and though they had their own friends and lives, there was no doubt they had met their match. Everyone thought them the golden couple and it had been golden for a very long while. A thirty-six-year-old James still made her toes curl just looking at him, and he had always made her laugh. And even if he wasn't particularly romantic, it was a love that went so deep Ava had considered it invincible. But over the last two years their marriage had slowly unravelled. With each miscarriage Ava had suffered, they had grown further and further apart and now they

were barely talking. In fact, if it weren't for email they would hardly be corresponding at all.

Still fiddling with her hair, she looked at her computer and then went and reread the last email he had sent her.

It was just his flight details really, and all so impersonal it might just as well have come from Admin.

And then, loathing herself, she did it again—checked their bank account with suspicious eyes.

She saw the boutiques he had visited and couldn't quite envision it—James, of all people, in male boutiques!

James, who got a wardrobe update each Christmas and birthday when she went and did it for him, had taken himself off to several trendy shops these past few weeks and from the amount spent he had been having quite a good time of it.

And what was it with all the cash withdrawals?

James never used cash or rarely, but now it was a couple of hundred dollars here, another couple of hundred there, and what was this weekly transfer? A few minutes' research later she found out.

Her husband, who liked nothing better than to lie on the sofa and laugh at her doing her exercises, had, a couple of months ago, gone and joined a gym.

She didn't know if she was being practical or being a fool to believe that James wouldn't cheat. And things must be bad because she was even thinking of turning to her mother for advice!

Call him, Ava counselled herself. *Call him now from your office*. Because each night at home she went to call but couldn't, and each night was spent in tears. Perhaps she could be more upbeat, logical and truthful if she sat at her desk.

More direct.

'Hi.' She kept her voice bright when he answered the phone.

'Ava?' He sounded surprised, well, he would be, she told herself, it was six-twenty in the evening and so rarely did she ring. 'Is everything okay?'

'Of course it is. Does there have to be a problem to ring for a chat?'

'Er … no.'

She could feel his wariness, but she forged on. 'Look, James, I know things haven't been—'

'Ava, can I call you back?' He sounded awkward and James was never awkward. She'd timed the call carefully, knew that he wouldn't be teaching now.

'Is someone there?' she asked, and there was a long silence.

'I'll call you back in ten.'

She sat trying to ignore the unsettled feeling in her stomach that was permanently there these days—he might have a colleague with him, she told herself, but that had never stopped him talking before. They were a very open couple, or had been; he wouldn't give a damn if someone was around—and he wasn't seeing patients so it couldn't be that.

'Sorry about that.' He had called her back five minutes later.

'Why couldn't you talk?'

'Just …' She could almost see his wide shoulders shrugging the way they did when he closed off. 'What did you ring for?'

'Just …' She shrugged her shoulders too.

'Ava.' She could hear his irritation. 'I'm sorry I couldn't talk before, but I can now—you just called at a bad time.'

'Well, when's a good time?' she snapped. 'I called you the other morning and you couldn't talk then either …' He had hardly been able to breathe. More to the point, he'd hardly been able to breathe! She'd rung him at seven and he hadn't answered and she'd called him straight back, and he'd picked up then, trying to pretend he'd been asleep, but he'd been breathless. She knew he was having an affair, except she didn't want to know it. Ava had always thought that their marriage ending was just about them—a private affair, not a real one.

She wasn't stupid. They hadn't slept together since God knows when, more than a year at the very least. As if James wasn't having the time of his life in Brisbane. She was mad to think otherwise.

'Do you want me to order a cake for your mum's birthday?' she asked instead.

'Please.'

'What about a present?'

'I don't know … just think of something.' And that annoyed her too. Veronica Carmichael was a difficult woman; she and Ava had never really got on. A widow, James was her only child,

and she was never going to like the woman who, in her eyes, had taken him away and, worse, a woman who couldn't give her grandchildren. Ava had organised a small family gathering for Veronica's sixtieth, which was next weekend, and would on Saturday go out and buy her something lovely for her birthday, something really beautiful. And she'd wrap it too, and then Veronica would unwrap it and thank James, and would go on and on about what a thoughtful son she had when, had it been left to him, there would have been a card bought on the way to her house and no party.

So she and James chatted for another thirty seconds about his flight home on Monday and then she hung up and stared at the view she loved. SHH looked out over Sydney Harbour and the sexual dysfunction centre was on one of the higher floors—the floor was shared with Psychology and Family Counselling. Nobody would ever get out of the lift otherwise, James sometimes joked when he came up to visit her some lunchtimes, though again, that hadn't happened in a while. Still, every morning that she came into work Ava pinched herself at the view from her window, and she gazed out at it now, to the opera house and the Harbour Bridge, the blue of the ocean and the white sails that dotted it, and she waited for the view to soothe her.

Unfailingly it worked.

It really was a wonderful perk of her job.

It was the same view she looked at the next morning after

another tear-filled night when Ginny, her receptionist, came in carrying a huge bunch of flowers from James.

'Ahh …' Ginny beamed and handed her the bouquet. 'He's so romantic.'

Ava *knew* at that point that he was having an affair. Knew that she wasn't simply being paranoid.

Not once in the seven years they had been married and not even when dating had James sent flowers, not one single time. It just wasn't him. *What do I need to send flowers for?* He'd shrug. *I've done nothing wrong*.

She read the card.

Miss you.

See you on Monday

James x

And she remembered a time, took it out from the back of her memory and polished it till she could clearly see.

It had been two, maybe three years ago.

Yes, three years ago and it had been their wedding anniversary and they'd both decided they were ready to try for a baby. Ava's career had been in a really good place and she'd felt confident she could juggle work and motherhood far better than her mother had. James had bought her a ring, the large amber ring that she was wearing now, because, he'd said, it matched her eyes. And he'd taken her out for dinner, the perfect night, and they'd had the same old good-natured joke as they'd got back to the apartment and she'd moaned about the lack of flowers.

It hurt to remember and she tried not to, but the memory was out there, all polished and gleaming and allowing for total recall.

Tumbling in bed together, making love as they once had.

His big body over hers, his chin all stubbly, those gorgeous green eyes looking down, and she saw in that image what she hadn't seen in a very long time. James was smiling. 'Men only send flowers when they've something to feel guilty about.'

'In your own words, James,' Ava said, and looked at the flowers and wanted to bin them. If her window had opened she would have tossed them out there and then, except her window was sealed closed, and then in came Ginny with a huge vase.

'Put them out in the waiting room,' Ava suggested. 'Let the patients enjoy them.'

'Don't be daft,' Ginny said, and plonked them right there on her desk. 'He sent them for you.'

And there they sat, for appearances sake, their sweet, sickly fragrance filling her nostrils, the violent colours perpetually in her line of vision. She wished they'd just wilt and fade.

Like her marriage.

CHAPTER ONE

'THEY'VE cancelled the surgery.' Ava said nothing for a moment, just stood quietly as her colleague Evie Lockheart leant against the corridor wall, her eyes closed as she struggled to keep in the tears, utterly defeated by what had happened. Ava had seen her walking dazed along the hospital corridor. Even if she didn't know Evie particularly well, she liked her—they had shared the odd conversation and everyone in the hospital knew that Finn Kennedy was having his surgery today.

Complicated surgery that was extremely risky. Ava already knew his operation had been called off—news spread fast around SHH and she couldn't even hazard how Finn must be feeling to have been told an hour before such major surgery that it wasn't going to go ahead.

'It hasn't been cancelled,' Ava said, her voice practical. 'It's been postponed.'

'Well, it might just as well have been cancelled,' Evie said. 'He just told them not to bother booking it again, then he told me to get the hell out.' Evie shook her head. 'I shouldn't be troubling you with this.' She was clearly in distress and not used to sharing her private life, and Ava was more than used to situations like that.

'Come back to my office,' Ava suggested. She could see a couple of nurses turning their heads as they walked past—Evie

and Finn were hot topics indeed. Finn was the chief of surgery and a formidable man at best, well known for his filthy attitude and ability to upset the staff, but no one could question his brilliance. His voice could be as cutting as the scalpel he so skilfully wielded, except lately he hadn't been operating and it had done nothing to improve his mood, and today poor Evie was wearing it. 'We can get a coffee there. I'm sure you might like a bit of privacy now.' She walked Evie back along the corridor and to the left and then up in the lifts they went without a word. She walked along the corridor, nodded good morning to Donald, one of the therapists, and then through to her own centre and shook her head when Ginny told her she had a message from the spinal unit.

'I'll call back later,' Ava said. 'I'm not to be disturbed.'

She and Evie entered her office—well, it was more a room. Yes, she had a desk, though it was terribly messy, but the room had a couple of couches and a coffee table, and a small kitchenette where Ava would make her clients a drink, or herself one, if they needed a moment to pause, and she gave Evie that moment now as she went over to make them a drink.

'Finn would never forgive me, you know …' Evie gave a pale smile as she sat down on one of the comfortable couches 'If he knew I was stepping into a sex therapist's office to talk about him.'

'I'd be patronising you if I laughed.' Ava turned around and smiled. 'I hear the same thing I don't know how many times a

day. She put on a gruff male voice. "'Well, I never thought I'd find myself here. I really don't need to be here …'" Ava rolled her eyes and poured coffee, taking a little longer than perhaps she needed to, to give Evie a chance to collect herself.

'Well.' Evie gave a wry laugh. 'At least we know that's one type of therapy that Finn doesn't need.'

Ava chose not to correct her—Finn had been using women as sticky plasters for a very long while, there was certainly something going on in that brilliant head of his. Still, that wasn't what Evie needed to hear today. Finn's and her on-again, off-again relationship was clearly taking its toll on her.

'What a view …' Evie noticed her surroundings for the first time. 'Maybe I could ask them to consider moving Emergency up here.'

'The paramedics would never forgive you,' Ava said. 'Do you want me to leave you?' she offered, handing Evie a steaming mug of coffee—Ava wasn't a nosy person at all and she certainly never gossiped. It was why, perhaps, she often found herself in situations such as this one. 'The cleaners have already been in.' She glanced at the desk, wished those blasted flowers were gone, but apart from a couple of wilting roses that the cleaner had removed, they were still there and still taunting her. 'I haven't got any patients for another hour, so you won't be disturbed.'

'No.' Evie shook her head. 'You don't have to go. It's actually nice to talk, just to be up here and away from the prying eyes.'

'It must be an extra pressure on Finn,' Ava mused. 'Having to

have his operation where he's the chief of surgery. Still, there's no better place.' SHH was the best hospital for this sort of procedure, there was no question that it might be done elsewhere. It was experimental and even with the best surgery, the best equipment, there were no guarantees that Finn's ability to operate again could be saved. Indeed, there was a good chance that he would be left a quadriplegic.

Ava knew that, not because of the gossip that was flying around the hospital but because, unbeknown to Evie, Finn had actually been in for mandatory counselling prior to surgery. The team had discussed who should see him and Ava had immediately declined. She didn't know Finn particularly well, but they lived in the same apartment block, Kirribilli Views—his penthouse apartment was directly above hers—and though they barely greeted each other if they met on the stairs or in the lift, still, it could surely only make things more awkward for Finn.

He'd seen Donald instead.

And even though Donald was terribly experienced—he did both family counselling and sexual dysfunction and his patients adored him—Ava wondered if his brusque approach would mesh with Finn in such a delicate matter.

Ava dealt with spinal patients a lot. Her work gave her much pleasure, seeing relationships saved, helping people to learn that there could be life, a satisfying sex life even, after such catastrophic events. Her work was, in fact, moving more towards trauma and posttraumatic stress disorder patients, it was how she

and Evie had first started talking. Evie worked in Accident and Emergency and had dropped by for a chat about a 'patient'. Ava was sure, quite sure, that the person they had been discussing was Finn. Finn's brother had been a soldier like Finn. His brother had died in Finn's arms and shrapnel from the bomb that had killed his brother was still lodged in Finn's neck, and it was that that was causing his health issues.

Sometimes Ava wondered if Finn had ever heard the rows between her and James, not that there had been many, really, before he'd gone away to Brisbane. They had been so deep into injury time by then that she and James hadn't talked much at all, but Finn had never intruded, there had been no chatting on the stairs or anything, just a very occasional 'Good morning'. And not once had Finn questioned her about her red, swollen eyes, neither had he done the neighbourly thing and popped around to see if she was okay when she'd lost the last baby. Ava cringed at the memory—Finn had been in the lift that day—the cramping had started on her way home and she had just wanted to get into her apartment, to call her doctor, to lie down, but there had been this awful sudden gush and then a crippling, bend-over pain and, terribly practical, Finn had helped her to her door, had taken her inside and had then called James. They'd never discussed it further—instead it had been a brief nod in passing and Ava had been grateful for that. Grateful now that Finn never stopped to ask when James was returning, or how she was getting on.

No, they just shared the same brief nod and greeting.

Grief recognising grief perhaps.

Respecting it.

Avoiding it.

'I can't believe we're going to have to go through all this again.' Evie broke into her thoughts. 'I really don't think he'll consent to surgery a second time.'

'Why did they cancel the operation?' Ava asked. 'I thought they had everyone on board, it's been planned for weeks.'

'This piece of equipment they need,' Evie explained, 'they're having trouble calibrating it. There's a technician coming over from America so it looks like it will be another week before the surgery can go ahead. They just can't risk even a single mistake.'

'What did he say when they told him?'

'Not much—a few choice words and then he took out his drip, put on his suit, told me where to go, and not very nicely either, and now he's back at work—he's doing a ward round as we speak, no doubt chewing out everybody in his path. Ava …' Evie's eyes were anguished '… the thing is, with Finn and I, I know it's very on-and-off, I know how appalling he can be, but in the last few days we've been close. Last night we …' She let out a startled half-laugh. 'I can't believe I'm discussing this.'

'You won't make me blush,' Ava said.

'We had a really nice night.' Evie was awkward. 'I mean, it was really intimate, amazing. It wasn't just sex, it was so tender, we were so close.' Ava said nothing, reminded herself she was thinking as a friend, not a therapist, and she let Evie continue.

‘And now, just like that, he’s told me to get out, that he doesn’t want me around.’

‘Give him some time,’ Ava said. ‘He would have been building himself up for this surgery, and to have it cancelled at the last minute—’

‘But cancellations happen all the time and you don’t see couples breaking up over it,’ Evie interrupted. ‘He said that now he knows a bit how the patients feel when we cancel them at the last minute.’

‘Ooh, are we going to get a new, compassionate Finn?’ Ava was pleased to see Evie smile. A cheerful person, Ava found that a little dose of humour helped in most situations.

Most, not all.

‘Finn compassionate?’ Evie rolled her eyes, and then sat quietly as she finished her drink. Ava sat in silence too, a comfortable silence that was perhaps needed by Evie before she headed back out there, but after a moment or two in their own worlds it was time to resume appearances, to play their parts. Evie drained her drink and stood. ‘Thanks so much, Ava.’

‘Any time,’ Ava said.

‘Oh.’ Evie suddenly remembered. ‘That gorgeous husband of yours comes back today, doesn’t he?’

‘This morning.’ Ava nodded. ‘He’s heading straight in to work. That’s James.’

‘Well, you can see him tonight,’ Evie said. ‘He’s the luckiest guy in the world, isn’t he? Married to a sex therapist …’

Ava grinned. 'Again, I'd be patronising you if I laughed, if you had any idea of the amount of times I hear that each day …'

She was *sick* of hearing it.

So too must James be.

The assumption that they must have most amazing sex life and wonderful relationship was a pressure in itself. As if people thought her job followed her home, as if the smiling, cheerful, practical Ava, who was open to discuss everything, who managed to deal with the most sensitive subjects with barely a blink, translated to the Ava at home.

Finn would never say such a thing, Ava thought as she saw Evie out.

Or maybe he would, she mused—nervous, embarrassed, new to a wheelchair, maybe Finn would crack the same old jokes if she offered her help.

She stood alone in her office and looked out the window at the glittering view and wondered if she could stand to leave it, not so much the view but her work here. She didn't want to start over at another hospital or open a private practice. Because SHH was so cutting-edge she got the patients in her office that she was most interested in helping. It was no doubt the same reason James would remain here, but how hard would it be to work in the same hospital, to see your ex-husband most days?

Ex-husband.

There, she'd said it and she didn't like how it sounded.

More than that, she didn't want to be James's ex-wife.

CHAPTER TWO

'LOVELY flowers.' Elise was a bit flustered but George was friendlier this time. 'From your husband?'

'They are.' Ava smiled. 'Come in, take a seat.'

She had been seeing them for a few months now. For George and Elise it was a complicated process and not as simple as writing a prescription. George had been in an accident at work last year, an appalling accident where he'd seen a colleague die. It wasn't just George's physical injuries that had caused him pain. Over and over he had relived the moment of the accident and the depression and anxiety had been all-engulfing. He'd seen his GP but the medication for the depression had affected his libido, which had increased his anxiety, and by the time they had arrived at Ava's, the pair had all but given up, not just on their sex life but on themselves.

She was seeing them monthly as a couple and George was also having one-on-one counselling with Ava, but more about the accident and the flashbacks he was getting and his appalling guilt that the colleague who had died had been so much younger than him.

'How have you two been?' Ava asked.

'We're doing fine,' George said, handing over a folder. 'I've done my homework.'

Ava grinned and checked off their sheets. Her methods were

a bit flaky at times, and with some couples she made things a bit more fun. With George and Elise she had them playing Scrabble, taking walks, doing little quizzes to find out more about each other, just little things, and she looked through the sheets.

'Elise?' She saw the woman's worried expression as she handed over a folder. She looked as if she was about to start to cry. 'Elise, the homework's for fun …'

'It's not that.' She was really flustered, Ava realised. 'You know you said we weren't to …' She could hardly say it.

'I suggested that you didn't try to have sex.'

To take the pressure off George Ava had suggested a sex ban, kissing and holding hands only—which apparently they hadn't done for decades.

'Oh, we haven't,' Elise assured her.

'Okay.'

'We did get a bit carried away, though,' George admitted.

Quite a bit carried away, it turned out! By the time their hour was up, they were all smiling. 'I'll see you again next month and, George, you in two weeks,' she said to the couple. 'And follow the rules this time.'

She grinned at her own success. Okay, they had a long way to go, but they were both determined to get there, and with a couple as lovely as them, they would, Ava was quite sure.

'Ava?' She heard a knock at the same time she heard her name, Elise and George had left the door open. She felt her stomach tighten at the sound of her husband's voice, and she turned round.

'James.' There he stood, tall, strong, gorgeous and *different*. His light brown hair, which usually fell rumpled and messy, now had a modern cut, and usually his chin was crying out for a razor, but he was clean-shaven today. Generally James wore jeans and a T-shirt or jumper, depending on the season. His patients, he'd explain, had more on their minds than whether or not the doctor was wearing a suit—but now and then he donned one and when he did, he quite simply took her breath away.

He wasn't wearing a suit today but, dressed in grey linen trousers and a black fitted shirt, he was a mixture between the two versions of James she adored and it almost killed her to see it. James never bought himself new clothes; they simply didn't interest him. Her heart stopped in her chest for a moment, seeing him in new attire, wondering who had bought them for him, or who James had bought them to impress. She had a horrible glimpse into her future if they both worked at SHH, watching the man she loved and knew so well change before her eyes.

'You've lost weight,' she said, because he had. He was a big man, and had never been *that* overweight, but he'd lost a lot and now stood broad, lean and toned.

'A bit.' He shrugged.

'How was your flight?' How stilted and formal she sounded when really she wanted to run to him, to rest her head on his chest, to welcome him home, to say how much she had missed him, except she greeted him like a colleague and clearly it was noticed, because he didn't even answer the question, just shot her

a slightly incredulous look that that was all she had to say after his three months away.

'I'll see you tonight,' James said instead, and then as he turned to go, he stopped. 'Ava, we need to talk.'

He'd been saying that for months—no, years—as more and more she'd shut him out, only this time it was a different conversation to be had. 'I know we do.'

'I'll speak to you tonight.' He didn't come over and kiss her, he just turned and walked away and headed out to work, to involve himself in his patients. Only it wasn't his familiar scent that lingered. Instead she smelt cologne. Ava wished she had patients scheduled this morning, that she could think about someone else's problems instead of her own.

Instead, she was giving a lecture.

She had her little case packed, filled with aids that would make the student nurses laugh at first, but she would push through it, hoping to get her message across, hoping that one day in the future her words would be recalled and a sensitive, informed word might be had by one of them to a patient, that there was help available.

Except she felt a fraud as she stood there, this cheerful, laughing, sexual dysfunction specialist married to the gorgeous James.

She couldn't remember the last time that they had slept together and wasn't stupid enough to think in the three months he'd been away, in the years they'd been away from each other

physically, that James wouldn't have seen someone else.

Someone he liked enough to lose weight for, to tone up for, to buy new clothes for and splash on cologne for—it wasn't the James she knew. She knew that she'd lost him long ago.

Lost them.

CHAPTER THREE

'LOOK at you!'

The reception that greeted him as he walked onto the unit for the first time in three months was far more friendly and receptive than Ava's had been.

'Where did you disappear to?' Carla, the unit manager on the day ward, asked.

'Brisbane,' James said.

'She meant this.' Harriet gave a friendly sort of pat to his stomach as she walked past and, yes, he'd forgotten that Harriet had been getting a bit too friendly before he'd gone away.

'Ava's got herself a whole new man,' Carla said, and winked at him, and he grinned back, because Carla would soon have a word if needed. 'Bet she's delighted to have you back.'

'She is,' James said, and as Harriet pulled on her gloves he watched her cheeks flood with colour as he made things clear. 'And I'm really glad to be back—I've just been up to see her.'

He'd read through files and results and it really was good to be back—at least on the unit. He tried not to think about Ava's lukewarm—or, rather, stone-cold—reception. A long breath came out of his nose as he tried not to think about it but, hell, he'd thought she might be at the airport, he'd even emailed his flight times as a prompt, and then when she hadn't been he had stopped by the flat, just in case she'd taken the morning off, but

of course she was at work.

'We've a new patient this morning.' Carla handed him a file. 'Richard Edwards. He was supposed to be in on Friday for his first round of chemotherapy but he cancelled. I wondered if you could have a word with him as he's ever so anxious. Wouldn't be surprised if he refuses again.'

'Sure.' James read through the file and his colleague Blake's meticulous notes. Richard was nineteen and had been recently diagnosed with testicular cancer. He was stage one and all his markers were good, but after discussion with Blake he had decided to go ahead with chemotherapy, though he was clearly wavering on that decision now.

'Where is he?'

'He's in the coffee room. Do you want me to bring him through to your office?'

'I'll find him.'

James headed down to the patients' and relatives' coffee room and met with the young man and his worried parents. 'I'll have a chat with Richard …'

'We'll come,' his anxious parents said, but James shook his head.

'I'll speak with you all shortly, but first I'd like to speak with Richard himself.'

'He gets overwhelmed—'

'I'm sure he does,' James said. 'That's why I'll go through everything again afterwards.'

'Thanks for that,' Richard said as they took a seat in James's office. 'They've been great and everything, but …' He struggled to finish his sentence and James tried for him.

'They're not the ones going through it?'

Richard nodded. 'They don't understand why I wouldn't want the chemotherapy if it gives you more chance that it won't come back. Blake seemed to think it was the better option, but he did speak about waiting and watching,' Richard said. 'I've just started a new job, I've got a new girlfriend and she's been great and everything, but I just can't imagine …' He closed his eyes for a moment and James didn't interrupt. 'I always look after myself. I'm a vegetarian. I just think I might be able to take care of this myself. I've been looking into things …'

'It's called watchful waiting,' James said. 'There's no evidence your cancer has spread so if you adopt that approach then you'll come back regularly for tests—and if it does come back the treatment is still there for you. Some people prefer that, whereas others find it far more stressful and just want the treatment straight away.' He spent time with Richard, going through everything, giving him pointers to do his own research, and it was good to be back at work with real patients. He liked informing his patients, liked them informed, and Richard was. He didn't, at this stage, want to go ahead with the treatment, but as they wound up the discussion, along came the question, the one he was asked so many times. 'What would you do if it was you?' There were variations to the question, of course—if it was your

wife, your mother, your daughter, your son. So often James was asked what he would do in their place, and normally he answered it easily, but maybe he was out of practice, because he hesitated a moment before answering.

'What you're doing,' James said. 'I'd weigh up my options. Do you want to make another appointment so we can talk again in a couple of weeks?

'That would be great,' Richard said. 'Will you speak with my parents?'

'Sure.'

It didn't go down very well, but James took his time with them too, assuring them that it was a valid option, that Richard wasn't closing any doors—and sometimes, James thought as he headed back to the treatment area, it was the relatives who had the hardest time dealing with things.

'No go?' Carla asked.

'Not at this stage,' James said. 'I've given him some decent sites to look at and some reading material.'

As he wrote in Richard's notes James could fully understand Richard's decision. He was fortunate that he did have options, and chemotherapy wasn't a decision to be made lightly, or pressured into. He looked through the glass screen at the patients in for treatment this morning and recognised a couple of them.

There was Georgia, back to do battle again, her headphones on. She gave him a smile as she caught him looking over and James returned it, and then he let her be because she closed

her eyes and went back to the affirmations she played through the headphones each time her treatment was delivered. Then he looked over at Heath, who didn't look over or up. He was still too busy controlling the world from his laptop, still insisting the world wouldn't survive without him for a couple of days …

It just might have to, though.

James must have dropped his suitcase off on his way to the hospital because when Ava walked into the apartment, laden with bags, there it was in the lounge.

She could smell that blasted cologne in the air, just a trace that lingered, and she opened a window to let in some fresh air. They had a two-bedroom apartment at Kirribilli Views. It was the perfect place for a young professional couple and several other medical staff from the hospital lived there. One of the bedrooms was used as James's study. Many times while he had been away Ava had found herself in there and she found herself in there now. It was always messy. James had forbidden her from tidying it, insisting he knew where everything was. There was their wedding photo on the desk and Ava couldn't help but think how young and happy they looked. She wandered into their bedroom—well, for the last year or so it had been her bedroom. She kept her home far neater than she kept her office, though it was hard to keep anything tidy with James around, even though they had Gladys, the cleaner, coming once a week. Really, for the last three months Gladys must've thought herself on holiday—well, she'd get a shock when she came in this week now that James

was back.

She wandered into their en suite. Gladys would have a fit when she saw it, because for the last three months it had been spotless. Ava routinely wiped down the shower after use and folded towels and put them back. James left his clothes where they dropped and his towels too. Funny, that even though he slept on the sofa, he always used the en suite. There was a small bathroom in the hallway, a guest bathroom, and James probably didn't want to be a guest in his own home.

God, she was nervous, and she jumped when her phone bleeped a text from James telling her he'd be home about seven.

Well, he wasn't exactly racing home his first night back.

So she put the shopping away and marinated some chicken and tried to tell herself it was ridiculous to feel so nervous. It was just James coming home.

'Sorry about that.' She jumped as she heard James's key in the door. 'I dropped into Mum's.' He was balancing containers of food from Veronica, who seemed to think he needed rations to fortify him. He gave her a kiss but he was still holding the containers, so it was rather hit-and-miss.

'No problem.' Ava was used to him being late, so she didn't put the vegetable steamer on till she heard him come through the door. 'Dinner won't be long.' It felt strange to be cooking for two again. The last three months she'd been eating mainly frozen meals, healthy ones, though, and with extra steamed vegetables, and she'd taken up exercising again and lost a little bit of weight

too. Still, cooking for two really meant cooking for two in this house. James liked jacket potatoes and butter with *everything* and he hated steamed vegetables, which were what Ava liked. She'd started eating really healthily when she'd lost the first baby, and she couldn't quite let go of it, but she *was* trying to get her old self back.

'Do you want veggies?' she asked as she served up, and he gave her the oddest look. 'I mean, you've lost weight, I thought maybe you're on a diet.'

'I joined a gym.' James shrugged. 'I can eat what I want now,' he said. 'It's great.'

No, she wanted to correct him, because it wasn't just about that, but she didn't want to start the night with nagging. She'd already pursed her lips when he'd come home with cartons of chicken and stir-fried rice from his mum's.

'You look like you've lost weight too.' James followed her into the living area and they sat down at the table for the first time in a very long time. She felt more awkward than one of her patients on their first visit. 'I've been riding,' Ava said, 'and swimming.'

'That's good,' James said. 'That's good, Ava.'

It was good, except she felt as if she was giving up on her dream … She'd given up so many things trying to hold on to their baby. Their first pregnancy the doctor had said that of course she could ride, given that she regularly did, and she was incredibly fit after all. So she'd carried on riding and swimming each morning and they had made love lots, as they always had.

The second pregnancy, she'd given up riding, figuring that it seemed stupid to risk a fall.

The third pregnancy, she had felt as if she were on a tightrope and had given up swimming, and by the fourth she had given up James.

And when she'd lost that one, Ava simply knew she couldn't go through it again. It had been a relief to go on the Pill, to decide that children weren't going to happen for them, to get on with their lives.

Except they hadn't.

She sliced her grilled chicken, tried not to think about it. She didn't want to think about babies. It was hard not to, though. She never had any problems getting pregnant. It was staying pregnant that had proved impossible. Six weeks, nine weeks, seven weeks and then ten weeks once …

She remembered Finn dragging her to the door.

Remembered his voice as he'd called her husband, but by then it had already been too late.

'So what did you get up to in Brisbane?'

'Not much. The teaching was pretty full on.'

'You seemed pretty busy.'

He stood to get another bottle of water.

'Might treat myself to sparkling,' James said, and she knew it was a dig, because after three months apart they should be popping corks.

'Can you check I turned the oven off?' She watched his

shoulders stiffen, knew it drove him crazy when once it had made him laugh, but she was forever checking things like that.

'Well?'

'It's off,' he said, cracking open the sparkling water, filling his glass and then raising it. 'Cheers!'

She was quite sure he hadn't checked but didn't say so, very determined not to start a row.

Or face *that* conversation.

'I got you Mum's present for her birthday.' God, but it was awkward. They hadn't seen each other for three months so they should be at it over the table right now, completely unable to keep their hands off each other. Instead, there had been no contact and, worse, the conversation was strained. They simply had nothing to say to each other—it was worse than a first date.

'How's your work?' James asked.

'Busy.'

'I heard about Finn's operation being cancelled.'

'Postponed.'

'Ava.' He'd finished his chicken and she had barely started hers. 'While I've been away, I've been—'

'I had a chat with Evie …' They didn't speak at the same time. James started and she interrupted and then stopped. 'Sorry.' She knew she had to face it. 'You were saying?'

'It can wait,' James said, because he didn't want to face it either. 'How was Evie?'

They watched a movie, or tried to, but it was a crime one and

she hated those, so midway through Ava gave up and went on her computer, writing up patient notes, fixing other people's lives instead of her own.

'I'm going to bed.' She didn't bend her head to kiss him and James hardly looked up, neither quite brave enough to have *that* talk.

He sat in the semi-darkness, teeth gritted, and tried to concentrate on the film, because if he didn't he might just march into that bedroom and say something he'd regret.

Some welcome home.

He was a night person, and once Ava had been. She'd been a morning person too—up at the crack of dawn and swimming on weekdays, riding at weekends, and he was glad she was doing that again. It was the early nights he couldn't stand and she was going to bed even earlier. Now it was lights down at ten, like some school trip.

James hauled himself from the sofa and wandered into his study, saw the wedding photo on the desk and he barely recognised them so he closed the door, went back into the living room, opened up his case then headed to the cupboard and took out a blanket and pillow and tossed them down.

God, but he hated that sofa.

There was a small bathroom in the hall and he was quite sure she'd prefer that he use it, but he refused to, so he took out his toiletry bag from the case and walked into the bedroom where she lay pretending to be asleep as he went into the en suite.

James took off the shirt and discarded the linen pants on the floor, then he rinsed off the cologne and looked at her make-up bag, saw the little packet of pills that was supposed to have been the solution. He thought about having a shower, but decided that it could wait till morning. There was a show he liked starting soon, so he put a towel around his hips and walked past her bed on the way to the sofa. They'd talk tomorrow, he decided, or maybe they should wait till after his mum's birthday. He was starving. One piece of grilled chicken and a baby potato with a tiny knob of low-fat sour cream—there hadn't been butter in the apartment for years, another thing that was banned. Maybe he should ring for a pizza; that would really get under her skin …

And then he stopped.

He just stopped.

Because he could do this no longer, because it had come to *this*. He was sick of the sofa and sick of not wanting to come home—and, as hard as it was, he had to say it—he was an oncologist after all, should be able to stand by a bed and deliver a grim diagnosis.

'Ava.' He stood by the bed. 'I need to talk to you.' Her eyes were still closed but he carried on. 'These last months while I've been away in Brisbane, I've been doing a lot of thinking.'

'James.' She turned on her side. 'It's late, can we talk tomorrow? At the weekend maybe?' She didn't want to hear it.

'No,' James said. 'We're going to talk now. You know how we agreed about no children, that we weren't going to have babies …'

She didn't want this conversation, just didn't want to have it, but James pressed on regardless. 'When you went on the Pill, I thought it was supposed to take the pressure off, supposed to be a relief, but if anything it's made things worse.' She could feel him standing over her, could feel tears building behind her eyes, and then as he carried on, she grew angry. 'I mean, even if we only had sex because you wanted to get pregnant, at least we did it …'

'Oh, poor James.' She opened her eyes now—angry eyes that met his. Three months apart and a whole lot of thinking and that was all he could come up with, that they weren't doing *it* any more. 'So you're not getting enough!'

'I know I'm not good at this.' James hissed his frustration. 'I know that I say the wrong thing, but will you just hear me out? Every day you tell your patients to talk things through,' James said. 'Every night you come home and refuse to.'

'What do you want to talk about, James? That we're not doing *it*? Well, sorry …' And she stopped. She just didn't have the energy to argue any more, couldn't drag up any more excuses, and she sat up in the bed and looked at the face she had always loved, and he was looking at her as if he didn't even know who she was.

'We're finished, aren't we?' James said it for them and it made her want to retch, but instead she just sat there as he answered the question for them. 'I mean, how much more finished can you be if after being away for three months I'm automatically heading for the sofa?'

'Some sex therapist!' She made the stupid joke for him, the one he must hear every day, when no doubt people nudged him and said how lucky he was. If only they knew. She wanted to reach out to him but she didn't know how. She'd tried so many times to have the conversations that ran in her head with him, to mourn the loss of their babies together. She had tried to tell him how she was feeling, that it wasn't just the baby she grieved for but the chance to be a mother, to fix what had been broken with her own mum. She really had tried. At first she'd cried on him. James all big and strong, telling her things would be fine, that there would be other babies, except that wasn't what she had wanted him to say.

Neither had it helped when he'd told her that they'd try again soon because she hadn't wanted him to say that either.

He was an oncologist, for God's sake; he should know how to handle grief!

She could remember how excited he had been the first time she had been pregnant. He'd told her how much he wanted children, how much he was looking forward to being a dad. He'd shared his dreams with her and she felt like she'd ended them.

'What happens now?' She looked over at him.

'I don't know,' James admitted. 'I guess we both get a lawyer.'

'We don't need lawyers.'

'That's what everyone says, isn't it?' James said. 'Let's just get a lawyer and get it done.'

He headed out to the sofa and she called him back. 'It's your

mum's birthday next weekend—should we do it after that?'

He gave a short nod. 'I'll go to a hotel tomorrow. I'll tell her after, well, not straight after …'

'Okay.' She couldn't stand it—she couldn't stand to look at what she was losing so she moved to turn out the bedside light. 'Night, then.'

That incensed him. He strode over, his face suddenly livid, and as she plunged them into darkness he turned the light back on and stood over her. 'You can't even squeeze out a tear, can you?' James accused.

'Don't say that.' Because if she started crying she thought she might never stop.

'You're just glad it's done, aren't you?' James said. 'Well, you know what? So am I. It's been hell …'

'It wasn't all bad.'

'No, Ava, it wasn't all bad,' James said, his voice rising, 'but it wasn't all good either, so don't try and sugarcoat the situation. This last year has been hell and I just want done with it.' She winced at his anger, at the hurt that was there, and then he stopped shouting. 'Sorry.' he ran a hand through his hair. 'I'm sorry, okay? I don't want to fight.' He sat down on the bed and took her hand. 'We'll do this civilly. I don't want any more rows, we'll finish things nicely … You're right, it wasn't all bad.' And he looked at her. 'There was an awful lot of good.'

'I don't want to fight,' she begged, because she hated fights, she hated rows, they made her feel ill, and James knew that.

'We won't,' he promised. 'We'll just …' He gave a shrug. She could see all his muscles, he'd really toned up, he looked amazing, he felt amazing on her skin as his hand met her arm. 'We'll remember the good times,' James said. 'We don't want to end up like Donna and Neil.'

And they both shared a pale laugh, because they'd had Donna and Neil over many times, at first together and then, when their marriage had broken up, separately, where they'd sat bitching and moaning about their exes—and James and Ava had shared many cross-eyed looks in the kitchen as they'd topped up drinks or put out dips …

'"He makes out he's so easygoing …"' She put on Donna's voice.

'"Don't know what she spends it on."' He put on Neil's.

'"He was crap in bed …"' She was still Donna.

'Well, you won't be saying that,' James said, but in his own voice now.

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