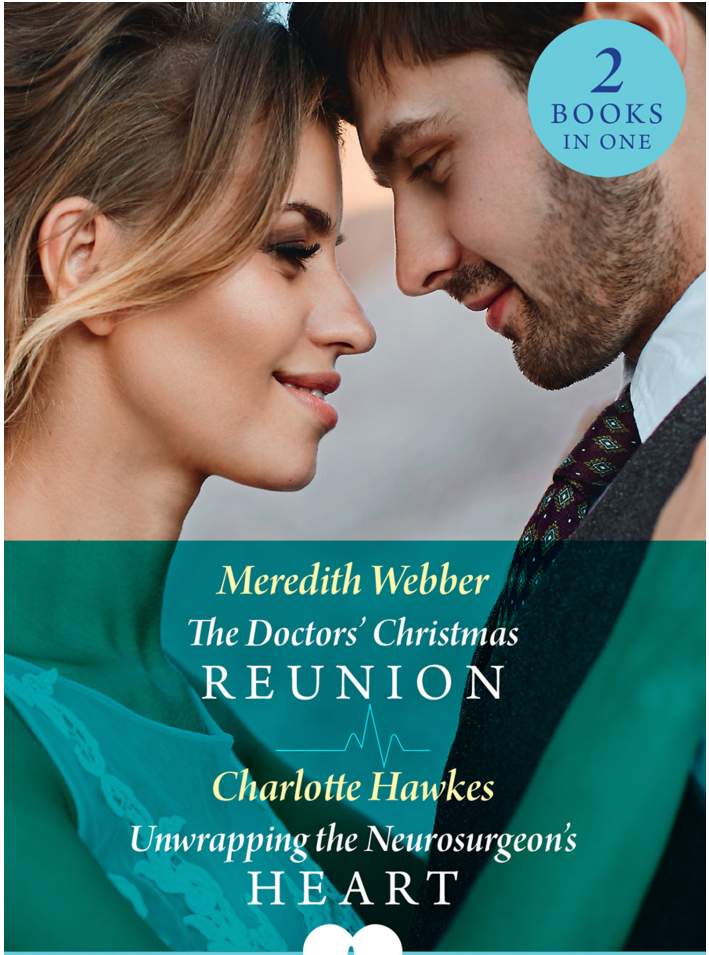

MILLS & BOON

MEDICAL

Meredith Webber
Charlotte Hawkes

The Doctors' Christmas Reunion / Unwrapping The Neurosurgeon's Heart

Серия «Mills & Boon Medical»

Аннотация

The Doctors' Christmas Reunion A second chance this Christmas?Losing the baby they desperately wanted tore doctors Ellie and Andy Fraser's marriage apart. But temporarily joining forces to care for an abandoned baby this Christmas – and sharing their lives with one another – they're beginning to fall in love again…Unwrapping the Neurosurgeon's Heart Playboy – or the man of her dreams? Beneath neurosurgeon Solomon Gunn's playboy reputation, ER doc Anouk Hart sees a compassion even more dangerous than his charm. Especially when the warmth of his festive spirit makes her long to unleash the real Solomon Gunn – for ever…

Содержание

About the Authors 5
MILLS & BOON 9
Note to Readers 10
Table of Contents 11
The Doctors' Christmas Reunion 13
CHAPTER ONE 14
CHAPTER TWO 33
CHAPTER THREE 51
CHAPTER FOUR 73
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента. 91

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MEREDITH WEBBER lives on the sunny Gold Coast in Queensland, Australia, but takes regular trips west into the Outback, fossicking for gold or opal. These breaks in the beautiful and sometimes cruel red earth country provide her with an escape from the writing desk and a chance for her mind to roam free—not to mention getting some much needed exercise. They also supply the kernels of so many stories that it's hard for her to stop writing!

Born and raised on the Wirral Peninsula in England, **CHARLOTTE HAWKES** is mum to two intrepid boys who love her to play building block games with them and who object loudly to the amount of time she spends on the computer. When she isn't writing—or building with blocks—she is company director for a small Anglo/French construction firm. Charlotte loves to hear from readers, and you can contact her at her website: charlotte-hawkes.com.

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THE DOCTORS' CHRISTMAS REUNION & UNWRAPPING THE NEUROSURGEON'S HEART

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Unwrapping the Neurosurgeon's Heart © 2019 Charlotte Hawkes

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Table of Contents

Cover
About the Authors
Booklist
Title Page
Copyright
Note to Readers
The Doctors' Christmas Reunion
Back Cover Text
CHAPTER ONE
CHAPTER TWO
CHAPTER THREE
CHAPTER FOUR
CHAPTER FIVE
CHAPTER SIX
CHAPTER SEVEN
CHAPTER EIGHT
CHAPTER NINE
CHAPTER TEN
CHAPTER ELEVEN
EPILOGUE
Unwrapping the Neurosurgeon's Heart
Back Cover Text
Dedication

CHAPTER ONE
CHAPTER TWO
CHAPTER THREE
CHAPTER FOUR
CHAPTER FIVE
CHAPTER SIX
CHAPTER SEVEN
CHAPTER EIGHT
CHAPTER NINE
CHAPTER TEN
CHAPTER ELEVEN
CHAPTER TWELVE
CHAPTER THIRTEEN
CHAPTER FOURTEEN
About the Publisher

The Doctors' Christmas Reunion

Meredith Webber

Can this husband and wife…

…be reunited for Christmas?

Losing the baby they desperately wanted tore doctors Ellie and Andy Fraser's marriage apart. Though they still share a home, they no longer share their lives. But when they find themselves caring for an abandoned baby, they must temporarily join forces, and as Christmas approaches, Ellie and Andy start to fall in love all over again. Is it time they created their own Christmas miracle?

CHAPTER ONE

ELLIE FRASER STUDIED her husband across the breakfast table.

Rather stern profile, with a straight nose and high forehead—until he smiled, of course, when the crinkly lines fanning out from his eyes made you want to smile back at him.

Brown, those eyes were, and she knew them both warm and soft as a cuddly blanket *and* hard as stones.

Dark hair, cut stubble-short—a number one, but due for a cut, so nearly a number two at the moment. It would feel like the fuzz on her old teddy if she ran her hand across it, but it had been a while since that had happened.

And that funny little whorl of hair, just on the hairline above his left eyebrow. A whorl she'd touched so often, twirled around her fingers, back when his hair was longer…

Her heart ached, just from looking at him.

She'd loved Andy. She knew that with the deep certainty that had been with her from the day he'd asked her to marry him.

She loved him still—she knew that, too—but she had somehow lost him, and along with him the oneness of them as a couple that had seemed so normal for so long.

Ellie and Andy. Andy and Ellie. All through university; through the almost soul-destroying work schedules of their internship; through their volunteer work in Africa—where they'd

seen the worst that human beings could do to each other—their oneness had remained. Their goals, dreams and futures had been inextricably entwined in a way she'd thought would never fray, let alone be pulled apart.

And yet right now they couldn't have been further apart, for all that Andy had asked her up to his flat in the top section of the old house to discuss some idea he had about a soccer team that he was setting up, which seemed to be of far more interest to him than the split in their relationship.

Or was it a useful diversion from it?

She'd thrown herself into work, but still had far too much time to think of the past and what might have been…

Andy had even cooked her breakfast, though she could have done without the pain that the pretend intimacy of eating together brought with it.

'So I thought I'd have a barbecue here on Saturday—about lunchtime, before the game. Until we get a proper clubroom there's nowhere else. I'll ask some of the older team members to organise the food—just sausages and onions and bread, or bread rolls.' He looked up at her and grinned. 'And, yes, I'll make sure the boys do some of the shopping, not just send the girls.'

Heaven help me! We've barely spoken for months, apart from work stuff, and still that grin makes my stomach churn…

Ellie swallowed a sigh along with the last of her toast, left the dirty dishes on the table—after all he *had* invited her as a guest—and made her way downstairs to her own flat, with its well-

set-up medical surgery, enclosed under the old timbered home.

Ellie and Andy had moved to Maytown six months ago—she pregnant at last and Andy excited to be back in his home town, doing the job he'd always dreamed of doing: providing medical care for people in the often harsh Outback.

Maytown, a small town in the mid-west, had been established when settlers had brought sheep to the area, although now it was mainly cattle country. A large coal mine, opened twenty kilometres north of the town, had brought in extra business in recent years, with some of the mining families settling in the town while other workers lived in the on-site camp, flying in and flying out from places on the coast, working shifts of two weeks on duty then one week off.

Ellie had become as keen as he was on the town, both from Andy's talk of growing up there and her visits to his family, so they'd leapt on Andy's parents' suggestion they buy the old house and practice. Andy's parents had both been doctors, his mother running the practice, his father working at the hospital. The senior Frasers had wanted to move closer to the coast, cutting back on their workloads as they prepared for retirement.

To Andy and Ellie, it had seemed a magical coincidence—a little bit of serendipity—because they'd both wanted to bring up their longed-for child in the country. And it had been an ideal situation, with Ellie working from the surgery downstairs, knowing when she had the baby she'd get help but would still always be on hand, while Andy took over his father's post at the

hospital.

They'd moved in late July, and Ellie had practically danced through the old house, imagining it festooned with Christmas decorations. With the baby due in November, their first Christmas in their new home would be spent celebrating his or her—they hadn't wanted to know the sex—first Christmas, too.

Just the three of them this year, a family…

It should have been perfect.

Until, at twenty-three weeks, when they'd settled in, and everything seemed to be going so well, she'd lost the baby and somehow, in the ensuing pain and anguish, lost Andy, too.

They'd turned to each other for comfort and support in those first hard weeks, and had also discovered that they were part of a very caring community. The local people had helped them through their grief with comforting words and little acts of kindness, flowers left on the front steps, a picture drawn by a kindergarten child, and more food than they could ever eat.

And, slowly, they'd made their way back to a different kind of peace, each wrapped in their private sorrow, but together still.

Until, six weeks after the loss…

Ellie sighed again.

Had she been wrong?

Pushed too hard?

She didn't know.

But when she'd talked to Andy about one last attempt at IVF —not immediately, of course, but when her body was ready—

Andy's response had staggered her.

He had been adamant—enraged, really. His answer had been an adamant *no*.

Their two—well, three now—failed IVF attempts had already cost them too much, both financially and emotionally, and no amount of arguing was going to change his mind. He was done.

Completely done.

And if she thought they needed a baby to make their marriage complete then it couldn't be much of a marriage.

Stunned by his pronouncement, Ellie's immediate reaction had been to pack her bags and head back to the city, but she'd grown far too fond of the town and its people to just walk out and leave them without a GP.

Early on, she and Andy had tried to talk—one or other of them calling a truce—but the talk had soon become a row and now too many bitter, hurtful words hung in the air between them. Although Ellie could concede in her head that they would never have a child, she found it so much harder to accept it in her heart.

Even harder to accept that Andy wouldn't consider trying…

So she'd opted to stay, but *had* packed her bags, moving into the flat downstairs, built to house the locums his parents had hired to replace Andy's mother during her own maternity leave.

Did the townspeople know?

Was there gossip?

Ellie assumed they did and that the gossip existed as it did in all country towns, but few attempted to discuss their situation,

although she often felt the warmth of their compassion.

The separate living and work situation had turned out for the best, Ellie thought glumly as she made her way through to the surgery and nodded a good morning to Maureen, her receptionist-cum-nurse, who was busy hanging tinsel along the front of her desk.

Dismissing the idea that it could possibly be that close to Christmas when she herself felt so bleak, her thoughts tracked back to Andy… But how were they going to cope with Christmas?

Didn't the very word conjure up togetherness?

Joy and laughter and sharing…

Happiness, and hope for the future…

Could they carry on with Christmas celebrations as if nothing had ever happened? Sit at one of their tables—just the two of them—with silly paper hats on their heads, reading even sillier jokes?

The ache in Ellie's heart deepened, but suddenly she knew.

She couldn't do Christmas, not here, not with Andy—she couldn't go on with things the way they were. If she advertised now, she might find a young doctor, fresh out of GP training, who'd like the challenge of working in the bush. Or a skilled, well-qualified migrant, happy to spend three years working in the country before applying for permanent citizenship.

She was sure there'd be someone.

She wouldn't actually get a new appointee until January, when

staff changes were generally made, but if she stayed until just before Christmas, then Andy could manage any emergencies for a week or two.

She'd go—

Where would she go?

Where the hell would she go?

Back to the city?

To what?

Ellie shook her head. That idea had zero appeal to her.

And she'd grown to love this town and its people so maybe she should go to another country town—one without Andy in it!

Ellie could feel her heart weeping at the thought, but she had to accept they couldn't go on as they were.

'What's Andy up to with this soccer club idea of his?'

Maureen interrupted her gloomy thoughts as she pushed the final tack into place on the tinsel and fetched Ellie the mail.

Ellie shook her head, clearing Christmas—and leaving—from her mind.

Why *had* Andy started the soccer club? Had he told her while she was busy checking out all the familiar bits of the man she knew so well?

Loved, even?

'I know he's having a barbecue for them on Saturday; our side veranda seems to have become the unofficial clubhouse. And some of the kids I've seen coming and going are far from athletic types, so I guess he's doing it to raise their fitness levels.'

'My Josie's joined,' Maureen said, 'and you know the worry I have with her weight. I would have thought she'd be the last person picked for any team, so maybe fitness is behind it.'

Ellie thought of the motley lot she'd seen on the side veranda from time to time, and for the first time wondered just what Andy *was* up to with this soccer club he'd started. The ones she'd noticed were a very mixed bunch.

There were a couple of gangly Sudanese lads from the group of refugee families who'd been re-settled in the country town, a young teenage girl who was often in trouble with the police, two girls from a remote aboriginal settlement who boarded in town for schooling, and a rather chubby lad she suspected was bullied at school…

Ellie took the mail through to her consulting room, aware yet again of the painful arguments that had split their oneness, and the gulf that had widened between them. Once Andy would have shared his interest in the team, and she'd have shared his enthusiasm…

This was no good, she needed to focus on work.

Ellie scanned the patient list, surprised to see Madeleine Courtney back again. Madeleine was a puzzle—one she would have shared with Andy had things been different.

But they weren't, she reminded herself sharply, stamping down on the little kernel of unhappiness inside her before it could open, overwhelming her with memories and grief…

Only one other name stood out—Chelsea Smith. She frowned,

trying to remember a patient of that name, then rubbed at her forehead because she knew she'd be frowning and it wouldn't be long before she had permanent frown lines, and became known as Grumpy Doc Fraser.

'Who's this Chelsea Smith?' she called to Maureen.

'She's a new patient. She phoned earlier so I put her in that space you leave every morning for emergencies.'

Thanks a bunch, Ellie thought, but she didn't say it. New patients always took longer to treat as Ellie had to gather as much information as possible from them.

But Maureen had done the right thing, they made a point of never turning anyone away.

Shrugging off her rambling thoughts, she sorted through the mail, setting bills aside and tossing advertising bumf into the bin.



Andy sat in the tiny space that was his hospital 'office', scanning the internet for videos of soccer coaching, although images of Ellie as she'd sat in the kitchen again kept intruding. The hospital was quiet—too quiet—leaving him far too much time to think of Ellie and the mess their marriage was in.

Shouldn't losing a child have brought them closer together, not thrown up a wall between them?

It was because thinking of Ellie caused him physical pain that he had thrown himself into establishing a Maytown soccer team, allowing soccer to block out all but his most insistent thoughts.

Would their son have played soccer?

The wave of pain that accompanied *that* thought sent Andy back to the videos.

How could he not have known how much it would hurt—losing the baby, losing his son?

He took a deep breath and went back to the videos. He needed to do something constructive and worthwhile.

The call to the emergency room—hardly big enough to deserve the name 'department'—sent him in search of work, which was an even better diversion than the soccer team.

Although the ghost of Ellie always worked beside him, for this had been their dream: to work together in the country, bringing much-needed medical services to people who'd so often had to go without.

The patient was a child, a young boy—maybe twelve—bravely biting his lip to stem the tears while he clutched at his injured side.

'Bloody fence strainers broke,' a man Andy assumed was the father said. 'The barbed wire whipped around him like a serpent. I'm Tim Roberts, and this here's Jonah.'

Andy shook hands with the pair, then leant over to examine the wound. A red weal showed where the wire had hit the boy, but the serious wound was just above his right groin.

'Bit of a barb got in there, but the wife pulled it out with tweezers and put some cream on it last night, but you can see how it is now.'

The area was red, swollen, and obviously infected.

'I'll need to open it up,' he said. 'We'll just give Jonah light sedation and clean out the wound.'

There was no need to mention there could be damage to the bowel, but Andy would have to look carefully, which was why he'd chosen to give an anaesthetic over a local pain injection.

His mind ran through the roster of staff on duty. Tony was a good theatre nurse but Andrea—who was the only nurse trained to give anaesthetic—was off duty. He'd have to phone Ellie to come in and do it.

And the stupid flip of his heart when he even thought her name reminded him that the love he felt for his wife had never gone away.

Yes, they'd parted—pushed apart by the pain of loss—but the love he felt for her was as strong as ever.

Or was it longing more than love…?

'I won't be able to operate until later,' he told Tim. 'If you've other things to do in town, Jonah will be quite safe here. In fact, he'll probably be thoroughly spoilt by the nurses.

* * *

Ellie was about to tackle her first patient of the day when her cellphone rang.

Her heart leapt when she saw it was Andy.

'Sorry, El, love, but could you grab a half-hour later in the day to do a mild anaesthetic for me? Kid with infection just

above the right groin. X-ray shows foreign object in there. He's had breakfast so I'm happy to wait a few hours. How's your day looking?'

Ellie switched back to her patient list.

'I could do eleven-thirty,' she said. 'That would run into my lunch break so there'd be no rush.'

'Grand!'

And he was gone, so suddenly that Ellie found herself peering at her cellphone as if *it*, rather than Andy, had caused the abrupt farewell.

Grand?

How could their love have grown so cold that 'grand' had become 'goodbye'?

She was being silly, of course. It had been months since a telephone conversation had finished with 'love you'.

Although he *had* called her 'love', the way he always had done…

That was just habit, she told herself firmly and hauled her mind back to work.

For all their separate lives at home, their professional lives had barely changed, their work lives remaining stable as they followed their usual routine, assisting each other when needed, discussing patients they shared.

They were even enjoying the togetherness of that side of things—well, Ellie did and she thought Andy seemed to…

Although that would stop—and soon—if she went ahead and

moved.

Even thinking about it caused her pain.

Putting the mail aside for later, she powered up her computer, checked test results that had come in, then switched to her appointments list.

Back in work mode, she speed-read down the appointments, putting asterisks against the patients who'd be coming in for test results so she could be sure she'd re-read the results before the patient arrived.

Busy with the list, she barely heard the outer door open, but Maureen was greeting the first arrival, no doubt handing her the patient information forms to fill in.

She pressed the buzzer, and heard Maureen tell Chelsea to go on through.

It was a pregnant young woman who came in. A *very* young, not *very* pregnant woman, slight and blonde, who seemed strangely familiar.

'Don't I know you?' she asked, smiling at the obviously nervous young woman.

A nod in response.

Ellie smiled again as she asked, 'Do I have to guess how, or will you tell me?'

Another nod, then Chelsea drew in a deep breath.

'I thought Andy might be here,' she said, 'although Aunty Meg always worked here and Uncle Doug at the hospital.'

Aunty Meg, Uncle Doug: Andy's parents?

Light dawned.

'Of course I know you! You're Chelsea Fraser. I'm so sorry I didn't recognise you, but you've kind of grown since you were flower-girl at our wedding. Did you come here to see Andy?'

Chelsea frowned.

'Well, I came to see both of you really. I'm pregnant, you see, and I wondered whether I could stay with you until I have the baby, because you probably heard Mum and Dad split up and Mum's gone off to find herself, whatever that means. She's in India, or maybe Nepal, and Dad's gone to Antarctica again, and Harry—you remember my older brother Harry?—well, he's supposed to be looking after me but he's at uni most of the time or out partying so he's never there.'

'You're all on your own?' Ellie asked.

'Well, Alex—that's my boyfriend—he comes over…'

Tears began to stream down Chelsea's face, and Ellie left her chair to walk around and wrap her arms around the unhappy, lonely child. Ellie held her tightly and let her cry out her tension, handing her the box of tissues when the sobs became hiccups as the tears dried up.

'I didn't mean for this to happen,' Chelsea whispered, patting the bump. 'But I was so lonely and Alex loves me, and I was on the Pill but must have forgotten to take it or something and then I wasn't sure, you see… But of course I *was* pregnant and Alex wanted to tell his parents and have me come and live with them, but then they might think Mum and Dad are really awful parents,

and they're not, you know, they've just kind of lost their way.'

Tell me about it! Ellie thought, but didn't say, although she did think Chelsea's mother could have waited a little longer to find herself. She shook the thought away and pressed Maureen's buzzer twice to warn her the next appointment would be late.

'They brought us up to be independent,' Chelsea explained, 'and to think for ourselves, but I didn't want everyone at school to know about this, or the cousins and all, so I thought if you and Andy let me stay here until the baby's born, then I can go back to school and no one would know.'

Except there'd be a baby somewhere, Ellie thought, but didn't say.

'No one back home knows because it's been cold and I've been able to wear baggy jumpers back at home. I told my friends my uncle needed me out at his place in the bush and here I am.'

She'd so obviously practised what she was going to say that it came out in a slightly garbled rush, and Ellie had to be careful not to smile.

'Does anyone know where you are?'

Chelsea nodded.

'I told Harry and he thought it was a good idea. He said there wasn't anything Mum or Dad could do to help at the moment and at least I'd be safe with you and Andy.'

'Of course you will be,' Ellie assured her, then, after a niggle of doubt, added, 'I'll have to talk to Andy, but I'm sure he'd be happy to have you. It's not as if there aren't plenty of bedrooms

in the old house.'

'And there's the little flat downstairs. We often stayed in it when we came for Christmas.'

My little flat.

And with Chelsea here how long would it take for word to travel along the family grapevine and Andy's parents to realise things had gone wrong between her and Andy? They'd kept it from them while Meg had been going through chemo for breast cancer and they hadn't wanted to heap more worries on her head.

Meg had become more of a friend than a mother-in-law for Ellie, who'd known from the first time she'd met Andy's family that she'd love to be one of their warm, happy household. Her own father was dead, and her mother drifted from one country to another, one man to another, much as Chelsea's mother appeared to be doing. Family had been a big gap in Ellie's life.

So upsetting Meg with the story of their split had never even been a consideration.

And now here was Chelsea, and there was no getting away from it, despite the current circumstances, the Frasers were Ellie's family now, so Chelsea was her responsibility as well as Andy's.

'I should be examining you, not chatting,' she said. 'Do you want to hop up on the couch? Nothing invasive, I just need to feel what's going on then we'll take some blood for tests, and check your blood pressure and pulse, and Maureen will make an appointment for you to come in for a scan later in the week.

'Relax!' she told Chelsea as her patient lay rigid on the couch. 'Do you know how pregnant you might be?'

A quick shake of the head was the only answer.

'No worries!' Ellie told her gently. 'We can do a measure of what we call the fundal height and that will give us an approximate time. It's not entirely accurate, and is a better guide after twenty weeks, but let's see.'

The measurement of fourteen centimetres gave her a gestation period of twelve to sixteen weeks.

'Does that seem about right to you? Can you remember when you had your last period?'

Chelsea shook her head.

'I was so sad and lonely when Mum went away, and then Dad did, too. Alex has been my boyfriend for ages, and he comforted me and stayed over a few times and it just happened.'

Of course it did, Ellie thought, but didn't say. Poor kid must have been totally lost, with her parents not only breaking up but taking off. Mum heaven knew where, and Dad—who Ellie remembered now was a climatologist—heading off to the ice and snow at the very bottom of the world.

I need to talk to Andy.

This thought had passed through Ellie's head earlier, but now it became insistent.

'Well, you seem totally fit to me,' she told Chelsea, 'and as you know there's plenty of room for you. How did you get here? Did you bring clothes?'

'Train, and not much, to answer both your questions. The train got in this morning, and as far as clothes, I knew it would be hot, and I didn't really know what to get.'

Of course, the train had come in this morning; it was the big weekly event in the town, for it not only brought people but fresh fruit and vegetables.

'Well, how about you go upstairs and choose a room along the back veranda—Andy uses the side one for his soccer club and people come and go along the front one. Have a shower and then, if you're up to it, you could walk uptown—it's only two blocks—and check out the limited array of clothes in the general store. I'll phone them and tell them to put anything you want on our account.'

'Oh, no, I've got my own credit card,' Chelsea protested. 'But I'd like to get a few things.'

'Great! And when you get back you can help yourself to anything in the kitchen. There's bread and ham and cheese for sandwiches, and plenty of salad things. I might be late back for lunch as I have to help Andy with an op, but just look after yourself. And come and see Maureen down here if you need to ask anything. I know that doesn't sound very hospitable, but I've got patients all morning. Will you be okay?'

To Ellie's surprise, Chelsea flung her arms around her neck and hugged her hard, tears in her voice as she said, 'You've been so kind. I know I don't deserve it, but I'm really grateful!'

'Of course you deserve it,' Ellie said, a little choked up herself.

‘You’re family!’

How best to help her?

What would Andy advise?

CHAPTER TWO

SHE SET ALL thoughts of Chelsea—*and* Andy—aside as she went through her list of morning patients, pleased with some, concerned about others, mostly elderly men who seemed more aimless and depressed than ill. In other places, they could have a community garden or an allotment to work on, but out here, where water was a very scarce commodity, such a thing would be a luxury.

But her thoughts returned to Chelsea as she walked briskly to the hospital, sighing as she went in through the side entrance, where more Christmas decorations were already in place.

But Christmas cheer was the last thing on her mind as she considered the discussion she'd have to have with Andy.

Not right now, when there'd be other people around, but later on they would definitely need to talk.

Chelsea's arrival had thrown their arrangement into disarray. It had seemed sensible to live separately within the house, mainly to avoid gossip and speculation, but Chelsea would pick up on it immediately, and word would spread around the family, and Ellie knew it would cause distress to Meg.

She pushed into the theatre changing room and found Andy already waiting for her.

'Sorry, I was held up on my first patient and I've been late all morning,' she explained.

* * *

His beautiful Ellie looked so tired and stressed that Andy wanted nothing more than to take her in his arms and hold her—to find their way back to where they'd been. But pain and grief and too many harsh words had opened up a gulf between them, and as yet, he could find no way of bridging it.

And did he even want to?

He shook his head. That was a stupid question when there was a patient waiting.

Of course he wanted to! The thought of living without Ellie was…well, inconceivable.

'The patient is a young lad who got hit by a strand of barbed wire when he was helping his father repair a fence. Apparently, the fence strainers snapped, the wire flicked back, and a piece flew into his lower abdomen. They got it out, and cleaned and dressed the wound, but there's a bit still in there—one of the barbs, I'd say—and it's badly infected. I need to go in and clean it out before it develops into sepsis. He's on IV antibiotics, and I'll leave a drain in place for a few days if it looks at all dubious.'

Andy watched as Ellie greeted Tony, a nurse who loved theatre work, then checked the drugs and instruments he'd laid out for her.

Once upon a time, in what seemed like another life—in another country, for that matter—they'd worked together like this. The lack of specialist doctors in some of the African

countries where they'd lived meant you had to do whatever was required of you, and often it was surgery—he cutting while Ellie did the anaesthetic—basic though it had been.

He held back a snort, disgusted that he could be distracted by such trivial thoughts. All that was so far in the past it was history now.

Yet how could he not watch as she spoke quietly to the boy, explaining how he'd be getting sleepy, checking the cannula already attached to the back of one small hand and smiling gently. She was so good with children—the children they would never have…

Satisfied that all was well, Ellie took up the prepared anaesthetic, and with a nod to Andy injected it, waiting until the boy dozed off before securing the oxygen mask over his mouth and nose.

How many times—?

Enough!

The past belonged in the past. Here and now, he needed one hundred percent concentration on Jonah. Electrodes already attached to his patient's body told the monitor everything was stable, and Ellie would keep an eye on it while he cut carefully into the pale skin on the lower abdomen, Tony beside him to mop the blood and cauterise any small bleeders.

Andy glanced across the table, and by chance met Ellie's eyes above her mask. She winked at him—something she'd done a thousand times before—a 'going well' kind of wink, but the sight

of such a silly, insignificant facial tic brought an arrow of pain into his innermost being. One he tried to ignore…

The infection was obvious, the culprit a small piece of metal—a tiny scrap had broken free from a barb on the wire. No wonder the boy had been complaining of pain.

Andy irrigated the wound and searched for any secondary sites of infection, but everything was clean and clear.

'I won't leave a drain,' he said, as much to himself as to the staff around the table. 'In that position it could be easily dislodged, especially considering he's an adventurous young boy.'

He closed the wound, and nodded to Ellie to reverse the anaesthetic, then stood back while Tony did the dressing.

He should go and change. This team knew what they were doing. The boy would be transferred to a bed and wheeled through to the small recovery room. Ellie was in charge of him now and would be watching over him until he was fully conscious and aware of his surroundings.

But sometimes Andy needed to watch his wife—to watch and wonder what had happened to them to end up on either side of what was now an abyss.

Was it his fault?

Those final, hurtful words about the state of their marriage had certainly marked the end of life as they'd known it, but what had brought them to that?

Did he still feel a lingering resentment about the money the IVF had cost?

But it had been he who'd first suggested IVF, so it couldn't be that that burned inside him.

Yet *something* did.

He'd been keen to have a family—as keen as Ellie was—but that had been back before he'd known about the pain of loss; how much each failure would hurt, although that was nothing compared to the terrible piercing pain of losing the baby.

But worst of all had been watching Ellie's pain and being unable to take it away from her. *That* was the part he'd found so bloody impossible…

It wasn't that she'd pushed him away at the time, more that she'd wrapped herself inside it—made a cocoon of her pain—and had no longer been part of him, no, of *them*, cutting their oneness…

Now Andy watched Ellie sadly as she followed the trolley out of the theatre, before heading for the shower. There was nothing like water to wash away pointless suppositions and what-ifs that were too late…

* * *

Ellie waited as the youngster came around, checked he was sufficiently conscious to be given a few sips of water, and tell her who and where he was, then she departed, hurrying now, as she'd been due to see a patient at one-thirty and it was already close to two.

But her thoughts remained firmly stuck on Andy.

His skill as a surgeon was undeniable, and while still at university he'd even considered making a career of it, but during their time in Africa he'd realised that his skill lay with people; with helping them, comforting them and, yes, healing them when it was humanly possible.

And it had fired his determination to return to the isolated regions of Australia—areas always crying out for doctors—where his patients would be people he would get to know and care about, not simply a person needing an appendectomy or a new knee.

Ellie caught up as she worked through the afternoon's patients, so had seen the last one out when Chelsea returned, laden with bags and filled with excitement.

'You should rest,' she told the young woman as she locked the surgery door then walked up the front steps and along the veranda to the room Chelsea had chosen.

It had belonged to one of Andy's sisters, and although Ellie had put fresh sheets on the bed in case of unexpected visitors, she'd done little in the way of redecorating, so it still had posters of old rock bands on the walls and a bookcase full of science-fiction books that the whole Fraser family had loved to read.

Ellie half-smiled, remembering how she'd felt an utter alien herself among people who knew a genre she'd never read as well as the Frasers knew sci-fi.

After depositing Chelsea's few possessions, Ellie showed her the nearest bathroom, then led her into the kitchen.

'You'll probably remember that the kitchen is the centre of the house, it's where we mainly live,' she said, adding rather ruefully, 'That's when we're actually at home.'

And living together… She *had* to talk to Andy!

She'd barely finished the thought when her cellphone buzzed in her pocket.

'Can you come back up, Ellie? Jonah's temperature has shot up, and his heart rate is ninety-five. I'm afraid I must have missed something and he could be heading into sepsis.'

'I'll be right there.'

She looked at Chelsea, new in town, still uncertain of her welcome, and crossed the room to give her a hug.

'I hate having to leave you like this on your first day here but I have to go up to the hospital, and from what Andy said I could be a while,' she said. 'There's food in the fridge, or you could walk up the road and get a burger and chips. The TV in the sitting room only has a couple of channels, but feel free to use it, and there are plenty of books around the place. Do you think you'll be okay?'

'Don't worry about me,' Chelsea assured her. 'I sat up all night on the train and I'm exhausted. If it's all right with you, I'll just get a drink of milk and a sandwich and go straight to bed.'

'Bless you,' Ellie said. 'But I'll leave both my and Andy's numbers and if you're at all worried about anything, please phone one of us.'

'I'll be fine,' Chelsea assured her. 'I *have* stayed here before

and I know my aunt and uncle were often called out at night. You go and do your work.'

But as Ellie walked swiftly up the road to the hospital, she couldn't help thinking of the young woman alone in the big house, and wonder just what she was thinking, not to mention what Andy was going to make of it all…

* * *

She arrived to find Andrea, a senior nurse who had specialist anaesthetic training, already in Theatre.

'I'll need you to assist,' Andy said, as Ellie walked in. 'There's gear set out in the ante-room, and Tony will help you scrub.'

Ellie took a deep breath. It wasn't that she hadn't assisted in operations before. It was part of their medical training, and they'd done a lot in Africa, but surgery had always made her feel anxious, as if she had no business having her hands in someone else's body. It was impersonal, yet at the same time deeply moving.

Shaking away the thoughts, she changed, scrubbed her hands and arms and held them up for Tony to slide on the gloves. He tied an extra apron around her waist, and she was ready.

'Will you enlarge the wound you made earlier?' she asked Andy as she took her place beside him.

A quick headshake.

'It was big enough, but I must have missed something.'

The tightness of his voice told her how stressed he was—

stressed because he felt he'd somehow failed the boy.

'There was nothing obvious,' she reminded him, 'and you didn't want to interfere with his bowel by poking around under it.'

She paused then added, in a deep, terrifying voice, 'Never touch the bowel.'

Andy laughed. Her mimicry of a lecturer they'd had in third year had always been good, and the words took him back to when, as students, they and their friends had used the words in more earthy ways.

It broke his tension and he opened the wound, holding it for her to clamp so he had a clear view.

'Think about the barb,' he muttered, and although she knew he was talking to himself, she understood what he was getting at. The barb could have pierced a muscle, tendon or even the bowel, and infection had developed in the second site.

But there was nothing obvious. Lecturer or not, he was going to have to touch the bowel.

He gently lifted the nearest coil of the large intestine, checking all around it for damage.

Nothing.

They irrigated the wound again, and closed it up, then all stood frowning at the monitor, which had no good news for them.

'Hang on,' Ellie said. 'Didn't someone say he was fixing a barbed-wire fence? Imagine what happened. The fence strainers broke, the loose wire would have flicked back, one barb would have pierced his skin. How far apart are the barbs on barbed

wire?

'Roughly a hand span.' It was Andy who answered, catching on quickly to Ellie's train of thought.

So some things hadn't changed…

'That means the next barb would be here,' he said, measuring across the boy's abdomen with his hand.

They all peered at the spot but there was no sign of damage to the skin, or any indication of infection.

'Imagine him with clothes on,' Ellie said. 'Jeans, most likely, and low slung how the kids wear them these days. That barb would have hit the double layer of the pocket, possibly even a stud, so the next barb would be here…' She used her hand to measure the distance, brushing Andy's hand then glancing up, meeting his eyes above his mask—a flash of something as sudden and powerful as lightning flashing between them. 'If the wire wrapped around him.'

They found the wound beneath their patient's left hip, a tiny pinprick of a mark, surrounded by swollen, angry redness.

While Tony went for the portable X-ray machine, Ellie and Andy propped the boy on his side, careful not to touch each other after whatever it was that had flashed between them earlier.

'From the size of it, it's just an infection rather than another foreign object,' Ellie said, and Andy nodded, although she could tell he was furious with himself for not checking more carefully earlier.

She opened her mouth to say, 'You weren't to know,' but

Andrea beat her to it.

Not that Andy would have found any comfort in the assurance. He prided himself on his physical examination of all patients, although earlier this morning the pinprick of a mark could have been all but invisible.

The X-ray showed no foreign matter in the wound, but Andy opened it up anyway. Clearing out the infection already there would lead to a quicker recovery for the boy.



'Do you still hate it?' Andy asked Ellie as they left the hospital an hour later. It was only when she didn't reply that he looked around to find she'd halted, twenty or so paces behind him, and was gazing up at the night sky.

'Still gets to you, huh?' he teased as he walked back to join her, resting his hand on the small of her back as he had so often in the past. Often just a touch in passing, often a prelude—but he wouldn't go there.

She smiled at him.

'I just cannot believe how many stars there are. I know they are there, in the city and we just don't see them for the other lights, but out here…'

She waved her arms around as if to encompass the beauty she couldn't put into words.

'And all yours,' Andy said, wondering if she remembered his promise to give her the moon and the stars…

And looking at her, her clear skin luminous in the starlight, her golden-brown hair framing a face he'd always thought perfection, he wanted to take her in his arms again, take her back to that time, make her really his once more.

'Did you ask me something?'

Her question broke the moment, although he knew the moment he'd felt had never been possible.

Thought back to his question.

'Oh, I just wondered if you still hated surgery?'

She'd started forward but now paused again, turned back to him.

'I've never really *hated* it so much as felt very uncomfortable. It seems so intrusive to be fumbling around inside someone else's body.'

Ellie sighed, and shook her head as if to chase the thoughts away.

'And speaking of bodies, I really need to talk to you about something that came up today. Shall we get a pizza and sit in the park to eat it?'

'You've hidden a dead body somewhere, and need my help to bury it?' Andy said, hoping the teasing words hid a sudden panic inside him.

Was she tired of their pretend marriage?

Was she leaving him completely?

Did she want a divorce?

Nonsense! he told himself. She'd mentioned bodies. It was

something from work she wanted to discuss.

But the tension she'd aroused remained with him as he ordered their pizza, half with anchovies and half without, took extra paper napkins as they'd be eating in the park, and waited while Ellie chatted with the young girl behind the counter, blithely unaware of the torment her words had caused him.

Their marriage as a marriage might be virtually over, but could he live without the woman he loved?

The woman, he was fairly certain, who still loved him?

And could their marriage really be over?

He thought of the times when they'd tried to talk about it, as two intelligent people working out their differences. But the problem with loving someone was that you knew their sore and vulnerable spots—knew the words that would stab them in those places…

Worse still, you used those words as weapons.

So not talking had seemed easier, although Ellie deciding to make the move downstairs had left him feeling hollowed out inside. He was aware it could be a prelude to her leaving altogether for all she'd said they both needed their own space for a while.

Andy carried the pizza up to the park, which was deserted at this time of night, and set it down on a table, aware as he always was of Ellie's warmth by his side.

But worry about this 'talk' now nibbled at his mind so, as he placed a piece of pizza—from the anchovies' side—on a napkin,

and passed it to his wife, he said, 'Okay, talk. What's up?'

Ellie turned, questions in her night-dark eyes, and he realised he'd spoken too abruptly.

'Right!' she began, apparently reading his anxiety in his face. 'Chelsea arrived this morning—your cousin Chelsea—and she's pregnant and wanted to get away from home and people who know her until after the baby's born. Apparently both her parents are off somewhere and Harry's been looking after her—'

'Not very well, if she's pregnant!' Andy muttered. 'Does he know she's here?'

'Apparently so,' Ellie said, 'although I will phone him when we get home to tell him she's arrived safely. I tried earlier but his phone was switched off.'

'But where's her mother, for heaven's sake? I know her father's probably off saving whales somewhere, but her mum? And Harry's what? All of nineteen, I imagine, and far more involved in his own life at university than caring for his sister. Of all the irresponsible—'

He realised he was yelling now and it really wasn't Ellie he should be yelling at, but she simply smiled at him and said, 'She's off finding herself, apparently.'

'Mad, they're both mad, they always have been. How Dad and Ken can possibly be brothers beats me. And as for Jill, why isn't she at home, looking after a kid who's barely out of childhood? I would have thought teenage years were when young girls, in particular, needed their mothers around.'

'She's sixteen,' Ellie told him, 'and twelve to sixteen weeks gestation. A bit hard to be precise at that stage and she has a very slight build.'

She paused, and Andy wondered what worried her about the situation. Apart from it being Chelsea. Teenage pregnancy was far from uncommon these days.

Was she thinking of their arrival here in town—of the coincidence of her being sixteen weeks pregnant when they'd first begun their move to Maytown?

Andy watched as Ellie ate her slice of pizza, chewing and swallowing it before she smiled at him, then shrugged as if uncertain where to begin.

'I can understand her turning to a boyfriend for comfort, with her parents gone, and that the pregnancy was an accident, but I didn't want to push her to talk too much about the future.'

He saw the worry in the little crease between her eyebrows, and read it in her voice.

'The thing is, Andy, we'll take her in, I was sure you'd agree with that, but I wondered if she—if we…'

It was so unlike Ellie to be this hesitant over something that he reached out and took her hand, feeling her fingers curl into his, warm and sticky from the pizza but accepting his support.

'I wouldn't like your mum to find out about our marriage right now and be upset, which she will if I'm downstairs and you're upstairs while Chelsea's with us. I mean, it's a bit like shouting it to the world.'

Her head lifted so she could watch his face as he considered it.

'Easily fixed,' Andy said, barely suppressing his delight because the top part of the house was desperately empty without Ellie in it. A cool, contained and even frosty Ellie was better than no Ellie at all.

If only he'd realised that before she'd made the move downstairs. He should have talked to her about feeling shut out; about his own pain, and how much it had frightened him; about feeling cast adrift after she left —

'You'll move back up? I'm still sleeping in Dad's old room, so you can go back into Mum's.'

She half smiled and he guessed that life in the downstairs flat hadn't been entirely joyous either.

'I didn't take all that much,' she said, 'but, yes, I think that would be best.'

'And Chelsea? Has she planned anything beyond escaping to Maytown for the period of her pregnancy?'

Ellie shrugged.

'We barely talked, and right now she's confused, and lost, and really needs to know she's safe and loved and cared for. I do wonder about Jill going off like that when Chelsea is still so young. Do you think because her husband is always off somewhere, she felt it was her turn?'

Andy grinned at her.

'Who knows what goes on in other people's relationships?' he said, and she responded with a small smile, turning her fingers

so she could squeeze *his* hand.

'Too true. Look at ours!' she said with a smile.

The smile and something in her tone of voice suggested there was more hope than defeat in the words but before he could pursue it, Ellie was talking again.

'Well, all we can do is be there for her. I can only help her with her pregnancy at the moment, and perhaps you and I can both talk with her about the future. About the baby, maybe—'

'No!'

The word seemed to echo around the park, far too loud, far too strong, far too emotionally charged…

Andy breathed deeply, counted to ten then another five, and regained a semblance of control over the dark fear that had seized him.

'I know she's family and I'm happy to take her in, but just what is going to happen to the baby when it arrives? Will you want to keep it, too? Is this your way of getting back at me for refusing more IVF? How long before you start thinking of it as your baby?'

Obviously, the counting hadn't helped because he was shouting now. Ellie's face looked white and strained in the gloom.

The silence that fell between them was somehow louder than his words, broken only when Ellie stood up and said quietly, 'I was only thinking we might help her. Yes, take her in, she's family. It's up to her to decide about the baby but while she's with us we might both be able to help her find a path ahead—at least

begin to plan for her future.'

She stepped backwards away from the bench she'd been sitting on, and turned away, pausing only to say, 'And it was *our* baby I wanted, Andy, not someone else's.'

CHAPTER THREE

HOW HAD THEY gone from hand-holding to being back at war? From what had felt almost like old times to cold apartness?

Andy caught up with her as she stormed away, his long strides easily covering the ground he'd lost.

But getting past his careless words wouldn't be as easy. There'd been no mistaking the raw pain in her voice, even months after they'd lost their baby.

'I'm sorry,' he began, wondering why the words sounded less meaningful than they would have if his arms had been around her, holding her as he whispered them into her ear.

But he did touch her shoulder, draw her closer, so he could look into her eyes.

'Of course we'll help Chelsea decide what she wants to do.' He ploughed on, realising this wasn't such a great idea as Ellie's lips were right there in front of him, and so damn kissable.

He needed to take a deep breath and walk on.

He needed to walk and talk, not stop and kiss…

'I imagine she'll be at school during the day, and hopefully she can make some friends before the end of term.'

But Ellie, he realised, was no longer by his side. This time she'd stopped several paces back and was muttering to herself.

'You okay?' he asked.

'Yes!' Ellie caught up with him. 'I just hadn't thought about

school. Chelsea's only sixteen so of course she should still be at school.'

She hesitated again.

'Although maybe sixteen is an acceptable age to leave school—I'll have to find out. And will going to school, being pregnant in a place full of strangers, be frightening for her?'

Andy imagined a pregnant Chelsea having to brave it up in front of a room full of teenage strangers. Guilt at his earlier reaction ate into him. Wasn't their profession meant to be a caring one?

Then he smiled as the answer came to him.

'Well, if she's with us for the weekend, she can join in the soccer barbecue. Most of the team are at the high school. They're all good kids, they'll look after her.'

'Oh, Andy! That's a wonderful idea,' the woman he loved replied, with such enthusiasm that she threw her arms around him and gave him a hug.

It was just a quick hug, and maybe it was the shock of it that stopped him returning it, or the thought of it turning it into something longer, more intimate. There was that kiss idea again…

The mere thought of kissing Ellie made his head spin.

But it was not to be. Although it did seem to Andy that maybe they could make their way back to being friends—something that had seemed impossible when the emotion-driven arguments had sent her off to sleep downstairs two long months ago.

Back then, he hadn't realised just how broken things had become between them, possibly because his mother had often sought refuge from her loud and boisterous family by escaping to the downstairs flat. Even when they had both been upstairs, his parents, in his memory, had never shared a bedroom, his mother being a light sleeper and his father often being called out in the middle of the night.

After a while he'd accepted it was easier this way—easier to have Ellie in a separate space even if he lay awake at night wondering if she, too, was awake.

Wondering if she, too, was thinking of their first night together, of their wedding night…

Sharing a bed and not sharing love, *that* would have been impossible…



'You're really okay about having Chelsea to stay?' Ellie asked, linking her arm through Andy's as they walked through their gate, down the path, and stopped at the bottom of the steps that led up to the veranda.

'Of course I am. Though we should do something about one of the girls' rooms to make it comfortable for her.'

'Or let her do it up how she wants it. It will give her something to do over the holidays and I think she'd probably enjoy it.'

'You're a good woman, Ellie Fraser,' Andy said, his voice curling into her ears, the deep tone finding its way into her heart.

'You're not so bad yourself, for a bloke!' she parried, afraid, because what was happening inside her felt a little bit like falling in love, or the tentative, fragile, beginning part of falling in love, *again*.

She'd worked out, back when their world had crashed, that it was okay to still love Andy—that would never change—but it would be better not to be 'in love' with him, because that would make the gulf between them too hard to bear.

'You might want to check on Chelsea, while I move my things back into your mother's room,' Ellie said. 'She was going to grab something to eat and go to bed, but if she's awake I know she'd like to see you and know you're happy to have her here.'

And being downstairs, packing what few things she'd actually moved, would give Ellie time to think about her feelings for Andy, something that was easier to do when he wasn't around, his body sending messages to hers, reminding her of what they'd had.

She had to think, too, about the decision she'd made so recently—the one to give up and go back to the city.

She could hardly do that with Chelsea here, and become yet another person leaving her in the lurch!

She watched Andy take the steps two at a time and turn along the veranda, peering into rooms to find their guest.

She'd shower downstairs then gather up her things. Upstairs, they'd share the en suite bathroom, as they had when he'd shifted into his father's room.

Back then, in the beginning of the separation, any physical contact between them had actually seemed uncomfortable—dangerous even—but these days, close proximity, particularly in a hug of all things, was reminding her body of the passion they'd shared, and sending little flares of desire skittering along her nerves.

Had he felt it, too?

He certainly hadn't hugged her back, or swung her around the way he used to…

He'd smelled like Andy when she'd hugged him, the faintest lingering scent of his aftershave reminding her—

The thoughts followed her to bed, where she lay wondering about love and loving and sex and Chelsea until, in the middle of a totally unconnected thought about her mother's recipe for Christmas pudding, she fell asleep.

* * *

Having found his young cousin fast asleep in one of his sister's rooms, Andy headed for the kitchen and made a cup of tea. He momentarily considered calling to Ellie to see if she wanted one, then remembered the way his body had reacted when she'd hugged him.

It was far better to concentrate on soccer, and focus his mind on doing his best for the makeshift team he was building…

He closed his eyes and cleared his mind, then sat down at the kitchen table with a large notebook in which he was

devising soccer practice strategies for his team. With the help of numerous internet videos, he felt he was getting closer to being able to call himself a coach.

At least Andy had help from Madeleine Courtney, one of the high-school teachers, who claimed to have learned soccer coaching. But as her system seemed to consist of dividing the participants into two teams and letting them go at it, he had his doubts about its effectiveness.

His soccer club had started as something he could get his teeth into to stop himself thinking about Ellie and the mess their life was in.

For the first few weeks he hadn't bothered too much about skills or techniques, concentrating on getting the participants interested enough to keep coming. Which had simply meant playing.

But now he wanted more of them than that. There was an inter-town competition beginning in the New Year, with a trial game this weekend, and he wanted them competitive, keen to win, but able to lose gracefully.

Some of these kids had had very little discipline at home, and too much time on their hands. The local police sergeant had introduced him to five of them, so in reality they were doing time for misdemeanours. If he, Andy, could get them fit and interested in the game, who knew where it could lead?

Three others, two girls and a boy, had been brought to Outpatients by their parents because his father had started a

weight-loss group and he, Andy, had been prepared to continue it.

But in his opinion, playing sport would not only help their weight loss and build healthy muscle, it would improve their self-esteem as well.

It was win-win, all the way…

But it was up to Andy to get it right. And for that he needed practice strategies for dribbling and passing, things he could easily demonstrate to the kids so they could practise them in their correct positions. And, of course, he needed to teach them the rules. It was one of the reasons he'd arranged the barbecue—so they could have a sit-down session on the veranda going over the rules, and the importance of them in the game, before they ate.

And played.

Should pregnant women—girls—play soccer? Another player would even up his numbers. Even if Chelsea only stood in goal, she'd be handy.

He'd have to check.

Or maybe he could ask Ellie…

He was an idiot. He was only plunging himself into this challenge so he didn't have to think about Ellie.

Or the mess he'd made of things between them…

It would be impossible to have her on the team.

He should think about soccer, not Ellie.

It had become a kind of mantra to keep him sane.

Andy divided up his players into two teams and marked

out their positions—four defenders, four midfielders and two forwards, plus a goalie for each team, or for one team if he couldn't persuade their new housemate to play.

He wrote out a programme for warming up, some aerobic exercise, and then the drills he wanted them to do. If they worked this way two days a week, they could then have a game after warm-up on Friday. This would be a practice game—a rehearsal for Saturday afternoon—when more and more parents and other spectators were turning up to watch the newly minted Maytown Soccer Team.

In fact, they could do some of the drills on the old tennis court area here at home, which would mean they'd be less likely to skive off into an impromptu game.

And he'd appoint Rangi, one of the Sudanese lads, as his offsider to run the programmes on afternoons he couldn't make it or was running late.

Satisfied that he had, at last, brought a little structure to the group, Andy put away his notebook and headed for bed, wondering if Ellie might get interested in the team even if she wasn't playing. Pictured them together on the sidelines, as one again…

He sighed as he went to bed—alone—and shut his mind against all the questions that were too dangerous to consider: all the *what if I'd done this or said that*, all the useless, totally impossible, ever-haunting *what-ifs*…

Although knowing Ellie was back in the bed they'd shared

helped chase the dark thoughts away.

He had nearly kissed her, and he could practically hear her breathing…

* * *

Ellie woke early, showered, and dressed for work, then went to check on their new lodger.

Chelsea was up and dressed, sitting on the bed as if uncertain what to do next.

'Come on,' Ellie said to her. 'You'll have to learn to treat this house as your home, and to a certain extent look after yourself because Andy and I are often called out and you'll starve if you can't manage.'

She opened the pantry and pointed to a range of cereal, tea-bags, coffee, even drinking chocolate.

'And there are always eggs and bacon in the fridge if you like a cooked breakfast, but it will be a case of help yourself because we tend to get up, eat, then go to work.'

Chelsea settled on cereal, while Ellie made toast for herself and a pot of tea that she set on the table, along with mugs, milk, and sugar.

'Will you be okay here on your own while we're at work?' she asked, and Chelsea smiled at her.

'I'm just so happy to have a home. Ours was so lonely without Mum and Dad. Harry was hardly ever there. I'll sort out my things then sit on the veranda and read a book. From what I've

seen, the Fraser passion for sci-fi is alive and well in this house.'

Ellie shuddered.

'It was totally foreign to me when I first met Andy, and I've never got caught up in it, although I have read some of it.'

At lunchtime, when she and her new boarder sat together in the kitchen, Chelsea explained she was old enough to leave school but she really hadn't wanted to. She'd always wanted to be a scientist so she desperately wanted to finish her schooling, and if possible get into a university.

'How much school have you missed now?' Ellie asked her.

The girl frowned as she worked out her answer.

'About three—maybe five—weeks,' she said. 'I just sat around wishing it would all go away.'

'And if you went back to school here, could you make that up?'

'You mean now, this year, before the end of term—with this?'

She patted her bump.

'Why not?' Ellie said. 'Even if you go back long enough to get some work to do over the Christmas holidays that will catch you up, then you can go back full time next year.'

'And when the baby comes?'

Ellie sighed.

'That's going to depend on what you want to do about the baby. You don't have to make any decisions right now, but there are really only two choices.'

'Keeping it or adoption?'

Tears filled the girl's eyes.

'We've plenty of time to sort that out,' Ellie told her. 'We'll talk about it, you and me, and Andy. Your boyfriend, Alex, too. Talk to him. He should have some say. Between the lot of us we'll work out what's best for both of you.'

Ellie pushed back her chair as she stood up, needing to get back to work and not yet ready for tearful discussions about the baby's future.

Any baby's future…

'If you wouldn't mind clearing away our plates, then you could have a good look at your room, maybe take down the old posters. You'd better roll them up and put them away somewhere in case they turn out to be precious to their former owner. We can get some paint to freshen up the walls and some new bed linen for you.'

The tears Ellie had been hoping to avoid arrived in full flood, along with mutterings of 'too good to me,' and 'you're too kind'.

But Ellie was already heading down the steps.

'Have a shower and a lie down. You'll feel a lot better after you've had a rest.'

The afternoon was blessedly free of any drama, and she even had one cancellation, which gave her a few minutes to think about her concern for the elderly men in town. Her grandmother had regularly attended a sewing, knitting, and craft group once a week in the hall at a local church, going along for a chat more than the knitting or sewing. The Country Women's Association —an institution in Australia—provided for the women as well,

but finding something for the men might prove more difficult.

Many of the local farmers retired to houses in the town, leaving their sons to run the property, and things like indoor bowls or card games might be too tame for them.

A Men's Shed, that was what she needed, but one with a purpose. She'd talk to Andy about it tonight.

And the ease with which that thought came out startled her enough to spend the rest of the afternoon with her mind focussed fully on work.

Which was just as well, as her next patient presented with a racing pulse and a pallor that would make cream look suntanned. Bill Stevens had a history of atrial fibrillation which was usually controlled by his medication. He'd sensibly bought an app for his phone that could tell him when he was in AF, so he could take three more tablets, upping his medication from one hundred to a total of four hundred mgs.

'It usually works for me,' he told Ellie plaintively.

'Well, maybe it still will,' she told him, 'but I'd prefer it if you were in hospital. If it doesn't settle down, they can give you the drug intravenously, and keep you on a monitor so they know what's happening. How did you get here?'

'My wife drove me. She's doing some shopping while she's in town.'

The 'while she's in town' reminded Ellie that many of her patients came from properties up to eighty miles away, and although she knew Bill was closer than that, she certainly didn't

want him out there with his heart still playing up, risking a stroke unless they stabilised it. She pressed the buzzer that would bring Maureen into the room.

'Would you please phone an ambulance for Bill, then keep an eye out for his wife. She'll be back when she finishes shopping and we need to let her know he's gone to hospital.'

'Will I phone and let them know he's coming?' Maureen asked.

'No, I'll do it. Andy can access Bill's file there but I'd like to fill him in on today's situation.'

* * *

'And if we don't get it back in rhythm with medication?' Andy asked, when Ellie had explained that Bill was on his way.

'Are you up for a cardioversion or will you fly him out?'

Andy peered at the phone for a moment. Was Ellie really asking him that?

Okay so he'd trained in the use of the defibrillator—hadn't they all? He'd even used one to re-start a patient's heart. But the difference with cardioversion was that it had to be synchronised to a particular point in the heart's rhythm, and although the machine itself did that job quite efficiently, as long as you pressed the sync button before shocking, he felt uneasy about it.

If something were to go wrong—if Bill had a seizure when they shocked him—what back-up did he have? One anaesthetic-trained nurse and Ellie at a pinch. No cardiologist for hundreds of miles.

'Send him to the coast,' he heard Ellie's voice say, coming from afar as he still had the phone in his hand in front of him, not up to his ear. 'Presumably he's had lunch, which means you can't anaesthetise him for a few hours, so far better to have a specialist do it. He should be at your hospital by now, I'll send his wife on there. She can either fly out with him or drive to wherever they're taking him. Maybe do neither. If all goes well, they'll send him back tomorrow or the next day, whenever they have an ambulance car coming this way.'

Andy was grinning as he hung up. Ellie was so far ahead of him in some ways, you'd think it was she who'd grown up in the bush with its limited facilities, not him. But everything she said made sense. The state-funded ambulance system had several helicopters used for ferrying patients from outlying districts to specialist hospitals.

He went to meet Bill and explain what was going to happen, asking Andrea, who was on duty in the small ED, to phone for the air ambulance.

'It'll fix itself, it always does,' Bill argued as Andy removed the ambulance leads, replacing them with hospital ones and attaching them to the monitor. Bill's heart rate was still spiking around the one hundred to one hundred and twenty mark, the line occasionally dropping down to ninety-five at the lowest.

'When did you take the extra dose?' he asked Bill, who looked mutinous for a moment, then finally admitted it had been first thing in the morning. That he'd woken with his heart bouncing

around in his chest.

'Well, that's what it always feels like,' he added, and Andy nodded, imagining how frightening it must feel even to people who'd experienced it before.

He saw Bill safely away, returning home much later to find Chelsea in the kitchen.

Oh, Andy,' she said, spinning around with a half-peeled potato in her hand and enveloping him in a tight hug. 'Thank you so much for having me. Ellie's been so kind, and I'll try not to be a nuisance, see…'

She held out the potato.

'I'm fixing the veggies for dinner!'

He eased out of her embrace and smiled at her.

'You don't have to earn your keep here,' he said gently. 'After all, we're family.'

Laughter greeted his pronouncement.

'I know but I love cooking, so if you and Ellie don't mind, I might do some now and then.'

'I'm sure neither of us will mind, we're often so tired it's a choice between Thai or Chinese takeaway.'

'It's bad for your health, too much takeaway,' his young cousin said sternly.

Andy laughed.

'You're right, but apart from cooking to keep us healthy, I'm hoping you might be a help to me in another way. Do you know anything about soccer?'

'I was in a team back home, and I played at school,' she said. 'Do you think it would hurt the baby if I played?'

'I'll check that out. I imagine the baby wouldn't be too happy being hit with a soccer ball. But you could be goalie. None of them are good enough to score many goals yet, but you could yell advice to them if they got close. And if a ball actually comes near you, you could always hide behind the post.'

'Not that I'll fit behind a post for much longer,' Chelsea said, and returned to peeling potatoes.

He watched her for a moment, then said, 'When you've finished those, would you mind sitting down with me to look at the drills I've been working out? I only know the game from school, where it didn't seem to matter what you did, but I've watched about a thousand internet videos on coaching it.'

She put down the peeled potato and came towards him, wiping her hands on an old apron of Ellie's she'd put on.

'Let's see what you've got.'

She stood over his shoulder and read what he'd set out, with stick-figure illustrations, and smiled.

'For someone who only played the game at school, that's excellent. You could probably give your forwards more goal-kicking practice. Your two forwards should be the best strikers and they really need to practise a lot so it comes more easily to them in a game.'

There was a slight pause, before she said, 'I used to be a striker.'

'You were?' Andy asked in delight. 'That's just perfect. Even if you can't play, you can take the striking practice, try to help them understand different tactics.'

He paused, then said, 'They're all misfits, Chelsea, my soccer players. A few of them are kids who badly need to lose weight and somehow getting them into something that would interest them seemed a better way than nagging them to diet. There are a couple of migrants and it's helping to settle them into the community, and two of the girls are recovering drug addicts so they're a bit tetchy at times.'

She smiled at him.

'Then a pregnant teenager should fit right in,' she said, and went back to the sink, to peel carrots this time.

As he, Ellie, and Chelsea sat down to a meal of lamb cutlets with mashed potatoes, peas and carrots a couple of hours later, he realised just how big an asset Chelsea could be. Not only by helping to prepare meals, but her cheerful chatter broke through the tension that usually reigned when he and Ellie were together.

Tonight they'd even laughed, teasing each other, remembering silly things, something that had become so rare it made his heart ache for what had been.

'You prepared the dinner, Chelsea, so I'll clear the table and stack the dishwasher,' Ellie announced.

'And I'll do the pots and pans,' Andy volunteered. 'Have you got something to do, something to read?' he asked Chelsea. 'Or feel free to use the television in the sitting room. Ellie might

have explained there are only two channels but you might find something you'd like.'

'I'd rather read and there are plenty of books in the bedroom.'

She paused.

'Whose room was it?'

Andy thought for a moment.

'The three girls were always swapping rooms, but I think it was Eliza who ended up in that one. They were definitely her posters on the walls.'

Chelsea disappeared, but as he washed the few pots and pans, Ellie by his side, stacking the dishwasher, life felt almost normal —like the *old* normal…

He waited until she straightened then slid an arm around her shoulders.

'It might be good for us, having Chelsea here,' he said, then he couldn't resist drawing her closer and pressing a kiss, not on her lips but on her temple. He felt her tremble in response, then ease herself away.

But the dreamy little smile on her face told him she hadn't minded…

* * *

Ellie woke suddenly, startled by something she couldn't immediately place.

It had been a phone ringing. It must have been Andy's mobile because she could hear his voice now.

Had he changed his ring-tone that she hadn't immediately recognised it?

But why?

Maybe she was just confused.

She lay awake, aware a phone call to a doctor in the middle of the night wasn't a good thing.

The talking stopped, then she saw his shadowy figure appear in the doorway.

'Did it wake you?' he asked quietly.

'Habit,' she said. 'Do you need me?'

'Only every day!'

The words were barely there, nothing more than a jumble of sounds, and probably she'd imagined it for now he was talking again. Asking about someone, a patient apparently…

'Yes, Madeleine's one of my patients,' she said, catching up with the conversation although the 'only every day' words still hovered in her head.

And heart…

'Has something happened to her?'

'Accident out on the Wyndham Road,' Andy said, pulling on the clothes he must have carried as far as the doorway. 'I don't suppose—'

'You need me to come? Why didn't you say so?'

Ellie was out of bed and pulling on the clean clothes she'd left out on a chair for the morning.

More mumbling from Andy—what was wrong with the man?

But her own guilt was more urgent now than whatever was worrying Andy. For weeks she'd been seeing Madeleine for what had seemed like minor and confusing symptoms—aches and pains, tiredness, night cramps.

Ellie had seen her so often without pinning down a diagnosis that thoughts of Munchausen's syndrome had flashed across her mind, but the symptoms had never seemed serious enough. Not that she knew much about the syndrome.

'She *has* been complaining of dizzy spells lately. Where is she?'

'Apparently, she ran into a tree. Someone saw the accident and phoned the ambulance so she should be at the hospital by now.'

'I'll come with you,' Ellie said, and was startled when Andy gave her a hug as he thanked her.

Although after that kiss, mild though it had been…

She followed him out to the car—rarely used as the hospital was only three blocks away—wondering what was going on. Could Andy also feel that they could make their way back together as they'd first begun their courtship?

With touches, shared glances, even a little kiss…

But if Andy was happy to have her company, Madeleine seemed less so.

'You didn't have to come,' she told Ellie as Andy completed the handover from the ambulance personnel.

'You're my patient,' Ellie said, hoping she sounded more sympathetic than she felt. 'I was worried about you.'

'Well, I told you I was having dizzy spells and what did you do?'

Quite a few investigations, Ellie would have liked to remind her, but this was hardly the time.

Though Madeleine seemed only a little the worse for wear. A graze on her forehead was the only visible injury.

'Did your airbag deploy?' Ellie asked.

'No, it didn't!' her patient snapped. 'The ambulance people insisted on bringing me here and calling Andy,' she said, 'although I'm really perfectly okay.'

'Best we keep you under observation for the night,' Andy said. 'I'll do a scan of your head to make sure there's no internal damage, and nurses will check you every two hours. You won't get much sleep as they have to wake you, as well as check your blood pressure and temperature.'

'You'll be here, won't you?' Madeleine asked. 'Just in case anything goes wrong?'

'I *could* stay,' Andy said, and Ellie raised her eyebrows. The woman was playing him—surely he could see that!

She stomped out of the cubicle, then heard Andy leave behind her.

'There's no way you need to be up here all night just to hold that woman's hand,' Ellie told him.

He looked slightly startled.

'I'll do an X-ray and a scan first and take it from there,' he said.

'It's a graze!' Ellie reminded him. 'She didn't hit the tree hard

enough for the airbag to deploy.'

'But there could have been whiplash,' he said.

'Believe me, there will be!' Ellie muttered. 'That woman comes to see me at least three times a week and I swear she's the healthiest patient I've ever seen.'

Andy looked puzzled.

'But if you don't like her, why did you come up to the hospital with me?'

She looked into the dark eyes she knew so well.

'I don't dislike her, and anyway, you asked me to,' she reminded him, which seemed to make him even more puzzled.

'I'll walk home,' she said, desperate to get away from the hospital and Madeleine Courtney, but most desperately needing distance between herself and Andy—distance so she could think…

CHAPTER FOUR

'I MIGHT JUST as well have stayed with you at the hospital for all the sleep I got,' Ellie grumbled as she bumped into Andy in the en suite bathroom next morning.

A freshly showered and shaved Andy. The scent of his familiar aftershave filling her with a sense of longing.

'I slept like a log in a spare room at the hospital,' he said cheerfully. 'The nurses knew to wake me if Madeleine's condition showed any signs of deterioration, but there was really nothing wrong with her. I saw from her file she'd been seeing you quite often—is there something specific, do you think?'

'Not that I and a battery of tests can find,' Ellie muttered, so distracted by her husband's proximity she could barely think straight.

Had Andy picked up on a terseness in her voice that he said, 'Well, she's been very helpful to me with the soccer teams.'

Ellie bit back the comment, *I'm sure she has*, which she'd have liked to utter, and backed out of the room. Maybe if she took a few deep breaths, the room would be vacant by the time she returned.

And had Andy always worn aftershave to work?

She didn't think so, given the variety of allergies doctors were likely to encounter in their patients.

Was that jealousy coiled like a serpent in her stomach? And,

if it was, did she have any right to be jealous? Whatever she and Andy had, it was hardly a marriage in the real sense of the word.

Not now. Not any more…

But I love him, a voice whispered in her heart, which she instantly dismissed as nonsense.

She was tired. She needed to have a shower, a quick breakfast, and get back to work. She must remember to phone the high school about Chelsea getting in there, probably starting next week as there were only a couple of weeks left in the term…

And she should give their guest some money for paint. The previous night, after some prodding and prompting, Chelsea had admitted she'd like pale green walls, and both Andy and Ellie were happy to go along with that idea.

Ellie would need to buy brushes and rollers, a tin for the rollers, and some plastic spreadsheets.

By the time Ellie was showered and dressed the list she'd been using as a distraction had grown so long she knew it would be easier to take Chelsea to the hardware store in her lunch hour with the car, so they could bring everything back home.

The gods had decided to be kind to her. She reached the kitchen to grab some breakfast, to find it was Andy-free.

'He only came home for a shower and some fresh clothes,' Chelsea explained to Ellie. 'He said he'd had a patient in a road crash last night so I suppose he was up all night.'

There was no point in disabusing Chelsea of that notion, no reason why she should be caught up in their marital stalemate…

Much better to concentrate on pale green walls.

'I should be home by twelve-thirty,' she told Chelsea. 'If you grab something to eat before then, we'll go down town and get what you need for decorating your room. Have you done any painting?'

Chelsea beamed at her.

'Dad taught me. He said girls should be useful around the house, so when I turned ten I got to choose what colour I wanted my room, and he showed me how to paint it.'

Not a totally absent father, then, Ellie thought.

Ellie's morning passed smoothly, although again, as she listened to some of her elderly male patients, she wondered what could be done to occupy their time.

Chelsea picked up on it when they were in the hardware store, where several older men were poking around, fiddling with bolts and nuts, lifting things and putting them back, looking, more than shopping.

'Don't they have anything to do?' she asked.

'Not a lot,' Ellie told her honestly.

'They need a Men's Shed,' Chelsea said, echoing what had only been a nebulous thought in Ellie's mind.

'What do you know about Men's Sheds?' she asked, and Chelsea smiled.

'My gramps—Mum's dad—belongs to one. They get old bicycles and old plastic chairs, sometimes from hotels, and turn them into wheelchairs that they send off to Africa and the Pacific

Islands—anywhere people can't afford fancy wheelchairs.'

'Does your gramps still do it?' Ellie asked, excited by the idea.

'Sure.'

'And would he send you instructions on how to do it?'

'I'm sure he would.

'Well, let's phone and ask him—you can use our phone.'

'I'll write to him,' Chelsea replied, 'because I'll have to explain why I'm here and not at home. He'll probably assume Mum arranged it before she went away.'

They collected all they needed, Chelsea insisting on paying with her credit card, and headed home, seeing more elderly men sitting on a bench outside the supermarket.

The Men's Shed idea was growing, but how many old bicycles and plastic chairs could they source in Maytown?



'Plenty!' Andy said, when they were discussing the idea over dinner. 'I bet you've never had a good look in our garden shed. I'd say there'd be half a dozen in there. We all had bikes as kids, and when we outgrew the small ones, we got bigger ones, or for the girls just fancier ones. The old ones always ended up in the shed—just in case we might need them later, or could give them to a friend or a cousin.'

'And I suppose the garden shed might also house any number of old plastic chairs?' Ellie said, with only a slight edge of sarcasm.

'Well, if you mean those white ones that stack easily, then yes, there'd be some. We always needed extra chairs when relatives came for Christmas, and Mum and Dad never threw anything away. You never know when it might come in handy, that's Mum's favourite saying.'

Ellie could only shake her head, but Chelsea was all for going down to explore the garden shed immediately.

'Not at night, my girl,' Andy said firmly. 'The place hasn't been opened for months and who knows what snake might have made his home in there. I'll go down in the morning and open the doors and bang the sides a bit so any nasties lurking in there will have time to get out before we explore.'

'Oh, well,' Chelsea said, 'I have to email Gramps anyway, so I'll do that now.'

'Just as soon as we've cleaned up after dinner,' Ellie reminded her, and Chelsea leapt to her feet and began to clear the table, Andy deciding that with two people already cleaning up, he could get on the internet and investigate wheelchairs made from old bicycles. The idea intrigued him, although how they did it, he couldn't imagine.

He paused in the doorway, looking back at Ellie, who was stacking the dishwasher.

'This Men's Shed is a good idea,' he said. 'I'll phone Ray at the pub about old plastic chairs.'

Ellie smiled at him, feeling that this was as close to normal as they'd been for many, many months.

Could working together on a project like this heal the breach between them?

Or was it simply because they had a third person around —someone with her own problems—that the tension between herself and Andy seemed to have eased somewhat?

* * *

Andy had barely left the room when his phone rang.

It was Madeleine Courtney, who was feeling faint and dizzy, and wondering if it could be delayed concussion.

'Are you at the hospital?' he asked.

'No, I didn't like to drive,' came the weak and plaintive reply.

'Then I'll let Ellie know and she'll come to you,' Andy said. 'She's your GP.'

He could hear Madeleine suggesting he'd be better, but he stopped the conversation, returning to the kitchen where Ellie was on her own, doing the last of the wiping down of the benches.

'It's Madeleine Courtney,' he said, aware that the name had come out as a growl. 'She thinks she might have delayed concussion.'

'She's at home?' Ellie asked, and he nodded.

'I'll go,' Ellie told him. 'But if there's any doubt at all she should be in hospital, shouldn't she?'

The frown on her face told him more than the words.

'*Is* there something wrong with her?' he asked.

'Apart from a maybe concussion that had her phoning you

rather than me?' Ellie muttered. 'I'm beginning to think she feels I've failed her. There's nothing I can find—or have found so far—but you know full well that we do miss things.'

She sighed, then gave a little shrug.

'I'll go and see her and if I'm worried I'll drive her to the hospital myself and ask the staff to do hourly obs. And maybe if she's in hospital you can run more tests on her to see if I've missed something. Her symptoms are so vague, and change from pains in the abdomen to pains in her shoulders, to general tiredness, fuzzy concentration and, really, there's something new each visit. I've done tests for a thyroid condition—both hyper and hypo—but nothing's come back positive.'

'Could it be some kind of lupus, do you think?'

'I really don't know. None of the blood tests showed indications it could be that, and her urine analysis was clear, but I'll keep looking.'

She sighed.

'Sometimes I wonder if she's just homesick, but she always talks quite happily about the school and all she's doing.'

Ellie sounded so depressed by the thought Andy wanted to hug her.

Damn it all, why shouldn't he?

He gathered her in his arms, holding her close.

'We'll work it out, I promise,' he said, then bent and kissed her, a feather brush, nothing more, on the lips.

Startled blue eyes looked into his as Ellie shuffled back,

turning towards the door, already on her way…

Escaping?

'I'll get her to the hospital. Should I ask for half-hourly obs? Quarter-hourly?'

She paused, looking up at him, doubt clouding her eyes.

Andy shrugged, then he remembered the light-hearted dinner they'd shared, the hug, the almost-not-there kiss, and swore softly.

'No, damn it all! Why should either of us be running all over town after her? I'll phone the ambulance to pick her up, and ask someone to call me as soon as she's settled, then I'll pop up and see her there. If there's any doubt, I can repeat the X-rays and scans we've already done, just in case there's something we've missed.'

'Are you sure? I'm happy to go.'

'No, let's get her to hospital, then tomorrow, when we've both had a good night's sleep, we can sit down with your notes and have a think about what the symptoms could indicate.'

'You've got soccer tomorrow,' she reminded him, and he was surprised she'd remembered.

'We'll do it after soccer.'

Andy phoned the ambulance and then the hospital, assuring them he'd be up to have a look at Madeleine, and ordering the X-rays of her head and neck.

He was about to leave when he thought of something, tapping on Ellie's door before going in. She'd had a shower and was

wrapped in a towel, her wet hair hanging straight down by her face.

How could he not remember times he'd have ripped off that towel and tumbled them both onto the bed? His voice was croaky when he said, 'If we can't find anything maybe we should send her to the city. They have the facilities—not to mention the budget—to run tests we couldn't attempt.'

Ellie smiled at him, exacerbating all the reactions going on in his body.

'You'd have to hope they find something—some of those tests cost a mint—and maybe it *is* nothing more than hypochondria.'

Andy didn't respond but Ellie knew he would be grumbling and growling under his breath.

Could it be hypochondria? Ellie wondered when Andy left, fixing her mind on her patient to try to still the excitement Andy's kiss earlier had left in its wake.

Unfortunately, there was a strong possibility there *was* something wrong with Madeleine, in which case both she and Andy would regret it if they didn't do all they could for her.

Andy wandered off, probably to walk up to the hospital so he could meet the ambulance when it arrived.

Ellie shed her towel and pulled on pyjamas, glancing with a little regret at the pretty lingerie that occupied the other end of the drawer.

She laughed at her own stupidity. As if seducing her husband in sexy night attire could mend a marriage that harsh and hurtful

words had ripped apart.

Ripped…

It was the strange word—describing well the seismic shift between them—that made her look through the more attractive negligees, down to the bottom of the pile where a dark blue, lacy, thigh-length piece of apparel still showed clearly that *it* had been ripped apart.

By passion, excitement, and a fiery need that could not be delayed…

And for a moment, holding it, she closed her eyes and remembered, awakening memories in her body as well, so she ached for Andy in a way she hadn't since they'd split apart…

Could they heal the rift—cross the abyss between them?

Had she been so wrapped up in her own pain she'd not considered his?

If so, wasn't it up to her to at least try to sort things out?

But where to start?

Determinedly putting aside such thoughts, she went in search of Chelsea. The teenager appeared to be coping well—talking enthusiastically about school and soccer—but the future of the child she would produce had hardly been mentioned.

Might she want to talk more about it?

And if so, should Ellie bring it up?

Doing so now, it would be as a friend. Or would it be better to do it at an appointment, as a doctor?

'Come and see,' Chelsea called to her as she dithered on the

veranda, and Ellie entered the room, the soft green walls making it seem bigger somehow.

'Do you like it?' Chelsea asked, her face alight with so much joy Ellie could hardly find fault.

Not that she did.

'It looks great,' she said. 'But you don't want to sleep with the paint fumes tonight, so take one of the other rooms, then, in the morning, Andy will give us a hand to move the furniture back in. Unless…'

She hesitated.

'You might like to paint the furniture as well. I'd say the bed and desk and dressing table were painted white years ago, but they might look shabby in here now. There's probably white paint in the shed. What do you think?'

Chelsea settled on the bottom rung of the ladder she'd been using for the top of the high walls. She studied Ellie for a while before she spoke.

'Are you this kind to all the strays who land on your doorstep?' she asked softly, her eyes now bright with tears.

'Not *all* of them,' Ellie said gently. 'Only ones who know how to paint, and can help Andy with his soccer team, and bring a lot of pleasure to our house with your smile and enthusiasm—especially your smile!'

She went to squat beside Chelsea as the tears that had shone in her eyes now trickled down her cheeks.

'Besides,' she said, hugging the girl, 'you're family and if

there's one thing Andy and I feel very strongly about, it's family.'

Her heart felt heavy as she said the words, but in spite of all that had happened, she knew family *was* important to them both.

'We'll do whatever we can to keep you safe and comfortable,' she said, 'and you can talk to either one of us about anything at all, but in the end everyone has to take responsibility for his or her own life, and that includes their own happiness.'

'And my baby?' The words came out as a quavery whisper. 'What should I do about that?'

Ellie hugged her.

'Let's wait and see,' she said. 'There's plenty of time to think about what you want both for yourself and for the baby. Have you thought much about it?'

She felt Chelsea nod against her chest.

'Only every day!' the girl whispered. 'It's my responsibility, isn't it, but what kind of life can I give a baby?'

She raised her head to look directly at Ellie, and added, 'But can I just give it away? As if it were an old bicycle I don't need any more? I'm not sure I could do that. Then I think that plenty of adopted babies grow up happy and contented and they bring joy to their new parents, so would I be selfish not letting it be adopted? Not giving the joy of a baby to someone who can't have one?'

The words cut into Ellie's heart. How easy would it be—

No! She mustn't think that.

Thrusting the thought away, Ellie drew Chelsea into her arms

again, dropping a kiss on the top of her head.

'There's a lot to think about but nothing has to be decided right now. Any time you want to talk about it, Andy and I are here to listen. But right now you've had a busy and probably exhausting day, so why don't you have a shower and go to bed? Remember you're helping Andy with his soccer team tomorrow.'

* * *

Andy had arrived at the hospital as the ambulance pulled in. He greeted Madeleine and walked beside her as the ambulance men wheeled her into the observation room in the hospital's small Emergency Department. Her health records were already up on the screen and he checked the tests Ellie had previously ordered, and read the results.

As she had said, there was nothing to indicate any underlying cause for Madeleine's various symptoms, but there was still the possibility of delayed concussion from the accident.

He watched as the nurse on duty hooked Madeleine up to the monitor and wrapped a blood-pressure cuff on her arm.

'This will drive you nuts,' the nurse said cheerfully. 'It inflates every hour to record your BP, and it's usually just as you're dropping off to sleep. But we have to know what your body's doing, and if there's any major change then bells and whistles will let us know you need attention.'

'Bells and whistles?' Madeleine said faintly, perhaps regretting her decision to phone a doctor.

'More like a loud beeping noise,' Andy told her, as the nurse dashed off to answer a loud beeping noise elsewhere. 'Are you in any pain?'

'Well, my neck and shoulders ache, but they often ache, and I took some paracetamol for my headache about an hour ago, but the pain's not so bad. I'm used to it. It's the dizzy feeling I've got that worried me.'

Andy felt her head, his fingers seeking any lump he might have missed earlier, but the only sign that there'd been an accident was a slight graze and a tiny bit of swelling on her forehead.

He checked Madeleine's eyes but both pupils reacted evenly to the light, and asked her some basic questions to test for confusion, but nothing obvious showed up.

'Try to get some sleep,' he said, and went back to the desk to go through Madeleine's file again.

Ellie arrived as he was checking the X-rays they'd done earlier.

'You'll be busy tomorrow and I thought we could go through her history together,' she said.

He smelt the bath soap she'd used, and felt her freshness against his shoulder, her head so close to his that a single turn of his head and he could kiss her again…

But he wouldn't. They were at work.

'I'm checking the X-rays—' as if she couldn't tell '—wondering if I've missed a hairline fracture anywhere.'

'There's nothing I can see. Are there scans as well?' Ellie asked.

But the scans showed Andy hadn't missed a bleed at the back of the brain from a contra coup injury. Ellie used a light beam to search every section of the brain.

Finding nothing, Andy shook his head, sorry Ellie had straightened up as he'd enjoyed her closeness.

'Well, all that's left is to go back through her medical history.'

Thanks to a government initiative, more than seven million people now had their health records available to doctors and hospitals all over Australia. Would Madeleine's be online?

It was, and this time Ellie squeezed onto the chair beside him. It was uncomfortable but, oh, so, comforting!

'As you can see,' Ellie said, 'she rarely visited her GP back in Sydney. She's had the usual flu vaccinations, scripts for oral contraceptives and apart from a bad case of laryngitis she suffered two years back, she's had no real health issues.'

'Until she came to Maytown,' Andy pointed out.

Ellie leaned over his shoulder again, resting her hands on the desk beside the keyboard.

She was so close he could feel the contours of her body against his back and was reminded of how they'd slept, spooned together.

'You can see everything seems trivial,' Ellie said, using the mouse to scroll down the visit list. 'Sore hip, bad neck, not sleeping, feeling of exhaustion even when she did sleep…'

But when Andy saw the battery of tests Ellie had run, he knew she was taking Madeleine seriously. He read on through the file, Ellie pulling up a chair and sitting beside him now.

Some months ago she had prescribed Madeleine a mild anti-depressant, which was good thinking when nothing could be pinned down clinically, but apparently the tablets had made Madeleine feel nauseous and hadn't improved her aches and pains.

An anti-anxiety tablet had had much the same effect, with no positive outcome.

Frustrated by the lack of clinical evidence, Andy went back to see his patient, who was now sleeping even as the blood-pressure cuff inflated on her arm.

If the symptoms had only begun when she'd come to the high school here in Maytown, maybe Ellie was right about her problem being psychological.

'Was she unhappy about the transfer?' Andy asked his wife, as she, too, peered down at the sleeping patient. 'Could she just be miserable?'

He could practically hear Ellie thinking.

'We *have* talked about it,' she said at last. 'It was easy to bring up because I'm a newcomer to Maytown myself, but she's always responded enthusiastically: about the town, the school, everything…'

'You're starting to sound uncertain,' he said, and saw the little frown line between Ellie's grey-blue eyes—a line she tried to rub away whenever she was aware of it.

Like now…

'She might have been too positive about it all,' she eventually

admitted. 'But, honestly, Andy, I think whatever she has is real. I've been thinking fibromyalgia but that's such a hard thing to pin down and I've never known a patient with it, so I've no comparison I can make.'

'It's a good thought, though. That or some other auto-immune problem,' Andy told her. 'And having something like that, which *is* difficult to diagnose, could make her more anxious about possible concussion.'

'Because she knows there's something wrong with her but if the doctors can't find what it is, could they also miss something else?'

Andy put his arm around Ellie's shoulders, thinking of the times when they'd been studying or working together, and their minds had been so aligned they could finish each other's thoughts.

How could something that had been so strong—so right in every way—break down the way their marriage had? How had grief pushed them apart when it should have drawn them closer together? Had he been wrong, not sharing his feelings at the time, not wanting to burden her with more angst?

He pushed the thoughts away, and focussed on his patient. His go-to strategy since the break-up…

'I think we should leave it for another day,' he said. 'I'll stay a while in case she wakes with more confusion, but I'll let you go.'

Andy suggested it because it had been a long day and he knew Ellie would be tired, but thoughts prompted by the words 'I'll let

you go' kept running through his head.

He walked back into the ward where Madeleine was still sleeping.

He *had* let Ellie go—quite literally—when the pain of the loss of their baby had been so overwhelming, so all-encompassing for him, he'd felt he hadn't been able to help her with *her* grief and despair.

Or done enough to get through the layers of protection she'd wrapped around her own grief.

So guilt had been added to his certain knowledge that he could never go through that anguish again—never face the hope and elation, the despair and pain…

'No, no, no!' he'd shouted when she'd suggested one last round of IVF. 'No more, not now, not ever.'

Then he'd killed any chance of redemption with his bitter, caustic words: 'If this marriage needs a baby to make it complete, then it can't be much of a marriage.'

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