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Romance*TM

ABIGAIL GORDON

The Village Nurse's
Happy-Ever-After



Abigail Gordon
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Серия «Mills & Boon Medical»

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About the Author

ABIGAIL GORDON loves to write about the fascinating combination of medicine and romance from her home in a Cheshire village. She is active in local affairs and is even called upon to write the script for the annual village pantomime! Her eldest son is a hospital manager and helps with all her medical research. As part of a close-knit family, she treasures having two of her sons living close by and the third one not too far away. This also gives her the added pleasure of being able to watch her delightful grandchildren growing up.

The Village Nurse's Happy-Ever-After

Abigail Gordon

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About the Publisher

Chapter One

PHOEBE HOWARD had moved into the apartment above The Tides Medical Practice, in the coastal Devon village of Bluebell Cove, on the first day of January. She'd looked around it sombrely and thought it was adequate in a basic sort of way—it would have to do.

Looking down at the toddler in her arms, she'd said, 'It has one advantage, Marcus. Your mummy won't have to travel far to work as she's based right here. We have Ethan to thank for this—him, and your Aunt Katie and Uncle Rob, who took me in when I was a lost soul. They are the ones who've always been there for me and I will be forever grateful.

'But now Ethan has found the happiness he so much deserves, and is going to live in Paris with his lovely family. At the same time Katie and Rob are moving up north to be near his elderly father, so it's just you and me from now on, little one. Oh, and with a new head of the practice to get used to thrown in for good measure!'

That had been a couple of weeks ago and today Phoebe was at the airport, along with other folk from Bluebell Cove, to say goodbye to the Lomax family as they departed for their new life in France.

In her role as district nurse at the village surgery, she'd arranged her home visits to her patients to leave her free for this

moment. Once she'd seen the aircraft take off, it would be time to pick Marcus up from the Tiny Toes Nursery where he was being cared for while she was working.

It had been a wrench, taking him there. They'd spent barely any time apart since the day of his birth. During the months of her maternity leave, she'd lived with her sister Katie and brother-in-law Rob in the bustling market town near Bluebell Cove. On the rare occasions when she'd left Marcus, they had cared for him as lovingly as she did herself, but all the time she'd known it couldn't last. And even though she'd accepted that she had no choice, she still hated leaving him behind every day.

She knew she was fortunate, however, to have such a job. Her sister had seen the vacancy for district nurse in the nearby village of Bluebell Cove advertised on an NHS website. It had become reality from the moment that Ethan Lomax, the likeable head of the practice, had offered her the position. She'd worked there for the last few months of her pregnancy, until she'd started her maternity leave, staying with Katie and Rob.

But as they were moving up north to be near Rob's father it had meant that she'd had to find somewhere else to live. When Ethan had suggested she rent one of the two apartments above the surgery at a nominal rate, she'd been only too eager to accept.

After the noise and bustle of London—and the hurt she'd received there, she was as happy as circumstances permitted in Bluebell Cove. It had seemed strange when she'd first moved there, but it hadn't taken long for the peace and beauty of

the place to charm her. She'd soon begun to feel a degree of contentment that she could never have expected so soon in her disrupted life. Now she no longer wept endlessly for what might have been. She was taking control of her life again as best she could, and if she had to hand Marcus over to others to be looked after while she was working, then that was how it would have to be.

As Phoebe watched, the Lomax family waved their last goodbyes and disappeared from sight. Soon the aircraft would be lifting off the runway, leaving yet another vacuum in her life. Suddenly holding back tears, Phoebe went to find her little car and drove off into the cold January afternoon.

At the end of the long flight from Australia, Harry Balfour gazed down sombrely on to the patchwork of towns, motorways and countryside that came into view as the pilot began the descent from the sky.

He was returning to the place of his birth, seeking solace and hoping to find it among the rolling green fields and magical coastline of Devon. It was where he'd always belonged, until five years ago when he'd met a feisty Australian girl. After a whirlwind romance, he'd married her and gone to live in her country with high hopes of happiness and job satisfaction.

The latter had been easy enough to find, but over recent months he'd been in a desolate kind of limbo, as if he didn't belong anywhere or to anyone. It had been a phone call out of the blue that had brought about the decision to return to Devon.

The man who hadn't smiled once during the flight hadn't gone unobserved by some of the female passengers. He was an attractive member of the opposite sex. A big man with a lived-in sort of face, dark russet hair above cool hazel eyes, and a physique that lots of men would die for.

But for any of them who had smiled in his direction, or tried to chat to relieve the tedium of the flight, the verdict had been that he was an unsociable character, and Harry knew they were right. It was what he'd become, and he didn't give a damn.

The last thing he wanted to do was make small talk to strangers. He'd already told the woman who had persuaded him to return to Bluebell Cove that he didn't want to be met at the airport. It wasn't as if he didn't know where he was bound for. He'd lived there for the first thirty-two years of his life.

It was a couple of days after the Lomax family had flown to France and midnight was approaching. Marcus was asleep in his cot in the smaller of the two bedrooms of the apartment, and Phoebe was up a ladder in the sitting room, her long brown hair stuffed inside an old sun hat and wearing a pair of her brother-in-law's cast-off dungarees.

She was painting the ceiling in an attempt to brighten up the place when she heard footsteps on the stairs that led up from the surgery. She became still, with the brush dangling loosely from her hand. Either there was an intruder in the building or...

It had only been that morning she'd discovered that the new head of the practice was going to be living across the landing

from her in the second of the two apartments above the surgery. For days on end, the departure of the much-loved and respected Ethan Lomax had dominated every conversation among surgery staff and villagers alike. In contrast, the arrival of his replacement had been spoken of only rarely, so when the senior practice nurse had mentioned casually that he would be moving into the other apartment, it had come as a shock to her. She'd groaned inwardly at the thought of how embarrassing it could turn out to be.

Phoebe knew he'd been employed at The Tides Practice some years ago, so wouldn't be a stranger to everyone, but he would be to her. Why wasn't he moving into somewhere more salubrious? she'd thought uncomfortably. The last thing she wanted was to be coming across him every time she opened her door.

She'd asked if he was bringing a family with him and had been told that he was a widower without children. So at least there would only be just the one person living across from her, which was some slight relief. And now, if the noise on the stairs *wasn't* an intruder, it would seem that he'd arrived. But she had to be sure before she called it a day and went to bed.

Putting the chain on and opening the door a crack, Phoebe peered out onto the landing. Deciding that the man in designer jeans and a smart jacket who was entering the opposite apartment fitted the role of new senior partner rather than burglar, she started to close the door quietly to avoid being observed. He turned suddenly, as if aware that he was being watched, and said, 'Hello, there.'

She opened the door a fraction wider and said through the crack, ‘I heard you come up the stairs and was just checking who it was before I went to bed.’ Unable to step out and face him in her ghastly get-up, Phoebe closed the door and locked it in one movement. Then, leaning against it limply, she thought she hadn’t handled *that* very well.

But she was too tired to dwell on it—her arms ached from the painting and it had been a long day, with some of her calls way out in the countryside. She was in no mood to get excited about the new arrival, even though she had noted when peering through the crack that he was quite something as attractive men went.

But so was Darren, and ever since he’d disappeared from her life she’d agreed that the old saying ‘handsome is as handsome does’ often applied to good-looking men. Even though she’d survived the hurt *he’d* inflicted on her, if she never saw him again she wouldn’t complain.

They’d lived together in London, when he’d been a rising star, determined to get to the top in a big city bank. She’d always been supportive of his career ambitions but had never expected them to come before starting a family. A child to love and care for had been something she’d been looking forward to so much, and she hadn’t been prepared for his reaction when she’d fallen pregnant.

They’d discussed starting a family a few times and she’d noted that his interest had been lukewarm, but had assumed that once Darren held his child in his arms, he would be lost in wonderment.

Instead, to her horror and dismay he'd gone berserk at the news, insisting he wanted to get to the top in his profession before lumbering himself with kids. He'd then suggested that she have an abortion. That had been a step too far and, heartbroken, she'd given in her notice at the London medical practice where she'd been employed as a district nurse.

Leaving him unrepentant, she'd moved to be near her sister and brother-in-law, her only relatives, and had filed for divorce. Clearly marriage to a man whose career meant more to him than his unborn child had been a big mistake. She and Darren hadn't spoken since and were not likely to.

She'd written to tell him he had a son when Marcus had been born but had received no response. A phone call from one of the girls at the bank had explained why. He was living with the daughter of the chairman of his bank and soon there would be wedding bells. It was to be hoped that wife number two was aware of his aversion to family life, she'd thought wryly, but was sure that a grandchild for the chairman of the bank would be much more welcome than one whose mother was just a mere nurse.

When she'd taken off the dungarees and freed her hair from under the sun hat, Phoebe went to stand by her baby's cot. Marcus was sleeping in pink and gold perfection, and planting a butterfly kiss on his smooth cheek Phoebe knew that her ex-husband was the loser in all of this.

As he placed the large case he'd humped up the stairs inside

a small hallway, and closed the door behind him, Harry thought, *What or who was that?*

The voice had been that of a woman, so had the big brown eyes observing him warily through the narrow opening. But there had been no hair visible, and he'd caught a glimpse of what looked like paint-splashed dungarees.

Not a very good beginning, Harry, he thought. His aunt had abided by his wishes that there should be no fuss on his arrival, but clearly hadn't thought to inform him that he was going to have a strange neighbour.

He'd let himself into the surgery building, which he'd last seen five years ago, with one thought in mind—to get some sleep. The last thing he wanted was to still be under the covers the next morning when he was due to make his first appearance in the practice.

Putting from his mind how the privacy of his arrival had been butted into by some cautious, brown-eyed gremlin, he went to check out the kitchen before having a shower and then going to bed.

There was food in the fridge and the kitchen cupboards—fresh bread, scones, milk, cheese, bacon, eggs, and in pride of place a large carton of the clotted cream so famous in Devon and Cornwall.

He smiled for the first time in hours. His aunt, Barbara Balfour, who had instigated his return to Bluebell Cove, might be less of the woman she had once been, but she would definitely

be behind all this, he thought.

Then he explored the bedroom, and came upon the welcome sight of a big double bed made up with fresh linen. When he crossed over to the bedroom window, a winter moon was shining above the village. In the distance, the lights of the house on the headland where his aunt and uncle lived glistened and flickered in the fresh breeze that had been the first thing he'd been aware of as he'd paid off the taxi that had brought him from the airport. As he'd breathed it in, it had been like wine after the dry heat of the country he'd just left.

The next morning, the travel alarm that Harry had brought with him fulfilled its function and he was down in the surgery before eight o'clock, just as the cleaner was leaving. By the time he'd introduced himself to the rosy-cheeked, middle-aged woman called Sarah, who informed him smilingly that her next task was to see her young ones safely off to school, and had renewed his acquaintance with the familiar layout of the surgery, the other staff were arriving.

Dr Leo Fenchurch, his second in command, was the first to arrive, followed by three practice nurses, three receptionists, a practice manager and the local midwife, who was based at the surgery.

As half past eight was approaching, and the surgery would soon be open to the public, Harry called them all together to have a brief chat and introduce himself. Picking up on the atmosphere, which was slightly lukewarm, he thought that Ethan Lomax was

going to be a hard act to follow.

The two men had been friends and colleagues in the past, working at The Tides Medical Practice after qualifying. At that time the formidable Barbara Balfour, his aunt, had been senior partner, and no doubt would still have held that position if her health hadn't started to fail.

He had severed his connection with the place when he'd married Cassie, but Ethan had stayed on until recently when he'd given in to his wife's wishes and the family had moved to France.

Following in Ethan's footsteps didn't daunt him. He had no qualms about the job—he knew his own strengths when it came to that. More challenging were the other reasons behind his return. It was a case of hoping that somehow, in Bluebell Cove, he would find some ease from the grief that had been dragging him down during the last six months.

Harry looked over his new staff keenly—after all, they were the nucleus of the practice, so named because of the stretch of golden sand below the cliffs and the surging sea that came and went endlessly into the cove.

As it was his first morning, he was not aware that there was someone missing.

But while he'd been chatting to the cleaner, Phoebe had come down the back staircase that led to the apartments with Marcus in her arms, and had driven off to the nursery where he would be cared for until she'd finished her calls.

His baby buggy was in the boot, where it had been left the day

before. In the short time that it took to unload it and pass her little one into the arms of Beth Dryden, who was in charge of Tiny Toes Nursery, Phoebe was acutely aware that she was running late. Marcus, who was teething, hadn't wanted his breakfast or been his usual contented little self while she'd been dressing him, all of which had been time consuming.

But he was smiling now, she thought thankfully. After explaining his earlier teething fretfulness to Beth and receiving her reassurance that she would give him some breakfast and would keep an eye on him, she drove back to the surgery where an explanation for her lateness was due to the new senior partner. After last night's uncomfortable few moments of meeting, she wasn't looking forward to it.

If it had been Ethan she wouldn't have needed to explain. He'd been kindness itself to her ever since she'd joined the practice—even while she'd been on leave after Marcus's birth he'd still kept in touch. Harry Balfour, however, was an unknown quantity.

When she hurried into the surgery he was standing by Reception on the phone. Lucy, the senior practice nurse, said in a low voice, 'Harry's talking to Ethan. What kept you Phoebe, baby's teeth?'

'Yes, he was really fretful this morning, today of all days.'

The elderly nurse nodded and looking towards the newcomer said, 'He's very sombre, not the guy he used to be. Harry was always happy and carefree but, then, he *has* just lost his wife in tragic circumstances. Why don't you go and sort out your

calls while he's on the phone and introduce yourself to him afterwards?'

'Harry, it's Ethan here,' the voice at the other end of the line had said when the receptionist handed him the phone. 'Clearly you've arrived safely and are already on the job, so every good wish from all of us here! It gives me a good feeling to know that you are taking up where I left off.'

'It's kind of you to say so,' Harry told him. 'I'd forgotten how lovely it is here. With regard to the practice, I've gathered all the staff together and introduced myself. I'm also very happy with the apartment, it's really smart. Am I right in thinking that my aunt has been involved in the make-over?'

'Yes, you are,' was the reply. 'Have you spoken to Barbara yet?'

'No. I intend to go to Four Winds House this evening if she and Keith don't show up before then.'

'Fine, but prepare yourself for a shock when you see her. Barbara's mobility is very limited and her heart isn't good. She's being treated for that by her new son-in-law, my friend Lucas Devereux, who is a heart surgeon. He and your cousin Jenna were married a year ago and have a baby girl called Lily.'

They'd continued the conversation for a little while longer and by the time Harry was replacing the receiver Phoebe was almost ready to set off on her home visits. First, however, she needed to make herself known to him in a proper manner after the strangeness of their first meeting, if it could be described as that.

He'd turned away from the Reception desk and as she moved towards him, the first thing he observed about her was the pale perfection of her skin. After spending years in a country where women were often very tanned by the sun, it was breathtaking.

Trimly dressed in the dark blue dress of her calling, Phoebe had taken her hair off her face into a neat coil held back by a comb. It wasn't until his gaze met hers that Harry thought there couldn't be two pairs of big brown eyes like that on the surgery premises. But that was the only similarity to the ragamuffin who'd been watching him unlock the door of his new home the night before. He put out a feeler.

'I think we've already met,' he said dryly, before she could explain why she was late. 'Am I right?'

'Yes, you are,' she told him, holding out a smooth, ringless hand for him to shake. 'I'm Phoebe Howard, the district nurse attached to the practice. Last night you caught me in the middle of painting the ceiling—I'm afraid when I heard you coming up the stairs I had to check as it's been rather spooky with just the two of us up there.'

And what was that supposed to mean? he wondered. If she was living with a husband or partner one might expect that they would do the decorating. Yet a vision of Cassie came to mind. She'd been good at that sort of thing, said it kept her occupied when he was working long hours at the hospital where he'd been employed for most of his time in Australia.

She used to have a go at anything, had often been reckless, but

it had seemed as if she'd had a charmed life. Until one Saturday morning, when they'd had words because he hadn't been free to do what she'd wanted which was to try out her new car.

He'd been on duty at the hospital, and as far as he'd been concerned, his patients had come first, so Cassie had set off in a huff and while driving along a remote road in the outback, the driver of a large oncoming truck had swerved into her path. The consequences had been disastrous—he'd lost his wife in a matter of seconds.

The accident had been six months ago and coming to terms with it had been grim. Thankfully they'd had no children to be left motherless. They'd both been of a like mind, that there had been plenty of time for that, though for very different reasons.

On Cassie's part, it had been because she hadn't been quite ready to give up what she'd seen as her freedom. But on Harry's part, it had been because he'd had a baby brother who had died from a genetic illness when he had been just a child himself. Yet, he'd been old enough to experience the frightening feeling of loss, and growing up as the remaining child of grief-stricken parents, the fear of bringing a child into the world and then losing it always lurked in the recesses of his mind.

He'd seen his mother weeping and his father's permanently sad expression, and had thought that it was better not to have babies if the angels were going to take them up to heaven.

'I'm sorry I was late arriving,' the young nurse beside him was saying apologetically, and bringing his thoughts back to bear on

why he was standing there, Harry said briskly, 'That's OK, just as long as it isn't a habit.'

Hoping that in days to come the new senior partner wouldn't feel that unavoidable came into the same category as a habit, Phoebe managed a strained smile. Then picking up the case that held what she needed for her patients, she went quickly out through the main door of the surgery.

Her first call of the day was to the home of a man who had just been diagnosed with insulin-dependent diabetes. Frank Atkinson was a newly retired forestry worker and she'd explained the procedure of injecting himself the previous day. Now she was on her way to check if he was having any problems.

Always a frightening ordeal at first, most people soon got into a routine and accepted the inevitability of it. Sure enough, when she arrived at a pretty thatched cottage on the coast road she found that he had coped and was less agitated than on the day before.

As was often the case, there was hospitality on offer. His wife Betty, who knew something of the circumstances of the young district nurse, had coffee and shortbread waiting when Phoebe had finished dealing with her husband.

'I won't say no,' she said thankfully. 'My little one is teething and was really out of sorts this morning, so I didn't have time to have any breakfast. I mustn't linger, though. We have a new doctor in charge of the practice and I've already made a poor start by being late, so don't want to transgress any further! He

has the look of a man who doesn't suffer fools gladly.'

'Surely he will make allowances for you being a single mother,' Betty protested.

'I suppose he might if he knew, but we only met last night. He doesn't yet know I have a child, and when he does I won't be expecting any favours. It wouldn't be fair to the rest of the staff.'

When she was ready to go, Betty walked to the bottom of the garden path with her. Wistfully she said, 'Under any other circumstances, Frank would have been holding forth about trees this morning—they're his favourite subject—but not any more. I used to weary of it sometimes, but now I'd give anything to hear about the oaks and the elms and the sycamores.'

'I'm sure that you will be hearing about them again soon, Betty,' Phoebe told her consolingly. As she left, she said reassuringly, 'I'll call again tomorrow and for as long as it takes for Frank to be completely confident when injecting the insulin.'

There was another new patient on her list of calls, and as she pulled up in front of a shop across from the harbour that sold fishing tackle, it was clear that its owner had been on the lookout for her. The moment she stepped out of the car, a young blonde guy with a beard came striding out and without wasting a second said, 'I'm Jake Stephenson and the patient is my young nephew Rory. He's staying with me for a while as both his parents are in hospital after a car crash.'

'Rory was hurt too, but to a lesser degree. However, he has a nasty leg wound that I've been told he mustn't put any weight

on for the time being. The hospital phoned the surgery to ask for a district nurse to come and dress the wound, and keep an eye on it.'

He was leading the way back into the shop and Phoebe followed, not having been able to get a word in so far. But she was used to anxiety creating a non-stop spate of words, and had listened carefully to what he had been saying.

'Here he is,' he said, opening the door of a sitting room at the back of the shop. A young teenage boy, with a bandaged leg resting on a stool in front of him, looked up from the computer game he was playing for a moment and then went back to it.

'Switch that off for a moment, Rory,' the harassed uncle ordered, and the boy obeyed reluctantly.

'Hello, there,' Phoebe said. 'I've come to have a look at your leg, Rory.'

He nodded sullenly but didn't speak, and kneeling beside him she gently removed the dressing.

When the injury was revealed she saw that a deep gash had been stitched, most likely from when he'd first been taken to A and E after the crash. However, the skin around it over quite a large area had been scraped off and was looking sore and weepy, so she hesitated before using more of the cream he'd been given by the hospital.

'It's my dad's fault,' the youngster grumbled as he looked down at his leg. 'He always drives too fast. I hate him. Supposing I can't play footie again!'

‘Shush,’ she said gently. ‘It would have to be much worse than this for that to happen. I’m going to ask one of the doctors from the surgery to come and look at your leg.’ Signalling to Jake to go back into the shop so they could talk, she smiled at Rory reassuringly and followed his uncle as he led the way out of the room.

‘If only Rory wasn’t so difficult,’ he said when they were out of his hearing. ‘He isn’t usually like this.’

‘He’s feeling frightened and insecure,’ she told him. ‘The poor boy has been involved in a car crash, which must have been terrifying. Even though from the sound of it his parents were the ones most seriously hurt, all he can see at the moment is what it did to him.’

She was reaching for her mobile phone. ‘I’m going to see if Dr Fenchurch is back from his rounds. I need a second opinion before I treat the leg again with the same procedure as before.’

‘I’m afraid Leo isn’t here,’ Millie on Reception told her when she answered the phone. ‘His car broke down as he was leaving his last house call, and he’s out there waiting for the breakdown services to show up. But Dr Balfour is here, and if you give us the address, he says he’ll be right with you.’

Phoebe almost groaned out loud. Since he’d arrived back on his home ground, she’d met the abrupt man twice in the space of twenty-four hours. And each time she *hadn’t* come out of it as the epitome of efficiency.

He was bound to think that she should be able to deal with this

sort of problem with her eyes shut, she thought rebelliously. But Rory was an injured youngster who was frightened and hurting because of his family's carelessness, and if he couldn't rely on his father to do the right thing by him, he could rely on her. She knew he needed a second opinion on that leg of his so grudgingly, she gave the address.

When Harry Balfour came striding into the cluttered shop premises ten minutes later, he found Phoebe drinking the coffee that a grateful Jake Stephenson had insisted on offering her, and he frowned. It didn't look much like an emergency at first glance, he thought. But she put the cup down immediately and took him into the sitting room where Rory was, and he had to change his assumption.

As soon as he saw the boy's leg, he knew that the district nurse had been right to send for a doctor.

'How long is it since they sent Rory home from the hospital?' he asked as he scrutinised the wound.

'Last night,' Jake told him.

'How long since the accident?'

'A couple of days before. His parents are still in there, both with concussion, broken legs and pelvic injuries. Once they'd seen to Rory's leg, the doctors decided that he would be better out of hospital and sent him to me, his uncle, for the time being.'

So far Phoebe hadn't spoken. Harry Balfour had that effect on her, making her clam up when she should be showing him that she was no pushover. When he turned to her after he'd finished

examining the leg, he found himself looking into her wide brown gaze and seeing a defiant kind of wariness there.

Yet not for long. It quickly turned to surprise when he said crisply, 'You were right to send for one of us. I'm of the opinion that Rory is allergic to the antiseptic cream they gave him at the hospital. Although it is highly recommended by most doctors, I have heard of the occasional case where the patient has had an allergic reaction to one of its components, so we will change the ointment and check the condition of the injury once again after twenty-four hours.'

He was writing out a prescription as he spoke and said to Phoebe, 'I see there's a chemist two doors away. If you would like to pop in there and get this made up, perhaps Mr. Stephenson might have another cup of coffee on offer before I depart.'

Chapter Two

SO HARRY BALFOUR was human after all, Phoebe thought while the chemist was making up the prescription. Not as approachable as that nice guy Jake maybe, but not quite as scary and abrupt as she'd at first thought. Although, of course, it was early days. He didn't yet know there was a teething infant just across the landing, and his reaction to that might depend on just how much he valued his sleep!

When she returned to the shop, he'd departed, leaving a message to say he'd gone back to the practice to prepare for the second surgery of the day. So once she had put the new antiseptic cream on Rory's leg and placed a clean dressing over the infected area, she bade uncle and nephew goodbye, promising to return the next day to check on the effects of the new cream, and proceeded to the next housebound patient on her list.

She was back at the surgery by half past three. After updating her patients' records, Phoebe was about to depart just after four when Harry came out of his consulting room. Observing that she was dressed for going out into the cold January day once more, he asked, 'Have you had another callout?'

She smiled weakly. 'Er, no. I finish at four. Ethan agreed that I could.'

'I see,' he commented. 'And you didn't think fit to inform me of an arrangement you'd made with my predecessor?'

‘It is in my records, Dr Balfour.’

‘Maybe, but I only arrived back in Bluebell Cove late last night. Since I presented myself here in the surgery at a very early hour this morning, there have been many things I needed to get to know. As you might imagine, checking staff records is low on my list of priorities at the moment.’

‘I’m sorry. It was remiss of me not to mention it,’ she said, uncomfortable in the knowledge that he hadn’t the slightest idea why she was allowed to finish early, and probably wasn’t going to be over the moon when he found out.

Ethan had agreed to her finishing at four each day when she’d started work at the end of her maternity leave, and she’d been most grateful—it had meant she’d been able to collect Marcus from the nursery earlier than she’d expected. The normal finishing time for surgery staff was six-thirty, so the early finish gave her an extra two and a half hours each weekday evening with her baby. It had meant less pay but time with Marcus came first.

‘So you’d better be off, then, hadn’t you, if that’s the arrangement?’ Harry said into the middle of the awkward moment. ‘We’ll have a chat regarding your hours when I’ve had the chance to settle in properly.’

She nodded and went hurrying off. Watching her go, he wondered what it was about her that brought out the worst in him.

Was it because she was so strangely beautiful...and alive?

When Phoebe arrived at the nursery the report on Marcus was that he’d been a little fretful but otherwise fine. She breathed a

sigh of relief. There was no indication that the tooth that was bothering him had come through but at least, from what Beth had said, he hadn't been crying all day.

Teething, walking, talking...they were all natural processes in the normal growth of a child, she thought, but could still prove to be times of anxiety for the parent until they had been safely achieved.

From half past six onwards, after the surgery had closed, Phoebe was listening for the footsteps on the stairs, but all was silent. She wondered if Harry was still down there catching up with more information regarding the running of the surgery, or if he had gone out somewhere.

Marcus had been asleep for hours and she was about to slide under the covers herself when she heard him come upstairs. It was gone ten o'clock, and Phoebe felt herself relaxing. They may not have had the best of introductions, the single mother and the abrupt widower, but it was good to feel that she wasn't on her own above the sprawling surgery complex.

Barbara Balfour had rung Harry late that morning to pass on a word of welcome, and to enquire if everything had been in order both below and above when he'd arrived the night before.

'Yes,' he'd told her, 'everything is fine.'

'So will you come and dine with us tonight, Harry?' she'd said. 'We are both so pleased to have you back here in Bluebell Cove. It seems a long time since you and Jenna used to take your surfboards down to the beach for hours on end.'

‘That’s because it *is* a long time, Aunt Barbara,’ he’d said with one of his rare smiles. ‘It seems strange to think of Jenna married with a baby.’

‘Strange or not, it is so,’ he’d been assured. ‘Her husband Lucas is a cardiac surgeon. I’m one of his patients, as a matter of fact. Our son-in-law is also a great friend of Ethan. He and Francine are godparents to our little Lily.’

‘It all sounds very happy and cosy.’ he’d said lightly, relieved that she hadn’t been able to witness the envy in his expression.

Nonetheless, he’d accepted Barbara’s invitation. Having been warned by Ethan about the physical deterioration of his hostess, he had concealed his dismay when he saw her, while at the same time taking note that the razor-sharp mind was still very much in evidence.

After a pleasant evening with his relations, he’d left, promising Barbara that he would keep her informed about what was going on at the practice. At the moment of departure he’d paused and asked, ‘Did you know that the other apartment is occupied, Aunt Barbara?’

Her expression had said she hadn’t known and her husband Keith said, ‘It will be an arrangement that Ethan will have agreed to before he left—probably a member of the staff.’

‘That’s correct,’ Harry had told him. ‘Her name is Phoebe Howard, she’s the district nurse.’

The retired doctor had shaken her head. ‘Although I take a great interest in the practice, I’m afraid I don’t know every

member of staff, Harry. She must be someone new.'

'Yes, I suppose that could be it,' he'd agreed, and after saying his farewells had disappeared into the winter night.

And now he was back at the apartment and wondering if history would repeat itself, if the door opposite would be opened a crack to observe him. But it remained closed and there was silence all around, which was how he preferred it to be, wasn't it?

It was two o'clock in the morning and there was silence no longer. He'd been awakened by a strange sound and was lying wide eyed against the pillows, trying to identify it. It wasn't a cat yowling out on the tiles, he told himself, or someone who'd had too much to drink breaking into song as they went past the surgery building.

He sat up suddenly. It was the loud cry of a baby that was shattering the peace and he was out of bed in a flash, quickly throwing on a robe.

The door opposite was still closed when he went out onto the landing but he had no doubt about where the cry was coming from. Phoebe had a baby in there and from the noise issuing forth, it was not a happy one. The doctor in him simply couldn't not check if everything was all right.

The crying stopped for a moment and he knocked on the door, but it still remained closed. In case the district nurse had a husband or partner with her who might be bristling at the invasion of their privacy, he called, 'I've no wish to intrude but can I help?'

There was no response and he was in the process of knocking

again when the door opened suddenly and he almost fell on top of Phoebe. The baby she was holding observed him with tear-drenched brown eyes as she said apologetically, 'I'm sorry we've disturbed you, Dr Balfour. I'm afraid that Marcus is teething.'

He glanced around the room and still poised on the threshold asked, 'Are you living alone up here with a young baby?'

Phoebe hesitated and as if on cue the infant in her arms began to cry again. She stepped back reluctantly to let him in and said, 'Yes, I'm afraid there are just the two of us. If you want to help, could you possibly hold Marcus for a moment while I make him a bottle? It usually soothes him back to sleep. And, Dr Balfour, the reason I didn't tell you I had a baby was exactly because of nights like this. I didn't want us to disturb your privacy, but I should have known better.'

Harry had stepped inside and was observing her doubtfully as she held out the baby for him to take from her. She smiled and told him, 'He won't bite you. He's only been protesting because he's teething. Look, he's smiling now.' He looked down at the small warm body that he was now holding close to his. Sure enough, there was a little smile coming in his direction from the child with the same pale skin and wide brown gaze as his mother.

She was moving towards the kitchen to make the bottle, and Harry said in a low voice, 'Do I take it that his father isn't around?' 'Yes,' she said quietly, not looking at him. 'We're divorced.'

He nodded, and looking down at the child in his arms said wryly, 'And this is the reason why you finish early? Why on earth

didn't you tell me that?"

'Yes, Marcus is the reason,' she said steadily. 'I take him to a nursery in the village before I start at the surgery on weekdays and have to pick him up at four o'clock. I suppose one of the reasons for me not telling you was because I don't want anyone seeing me as disadvantaged. I chose the kind of life I'm living and have no regrets. It was Ethan's suggestion that I finish early and I was hardly going to refuse when it gave me some extra time with my son.'

'So how long have you lived here?'

'Only since New Year. My maternity leave was up at the end of December. I'd lived with my sister and brother-in-law before that,' and with a tired smile. 'So now you have the story of my life.'

'Not entirely, I would imagine,' he said dryly. He looked down at Marcus who was getting ready for another weeping bout. 'If that bottle is ready, now might be the moment to produce it.' With a feeling that he was out of his depth and had served his purpose, he said, 'If you're sure he's going to settle, I'll leave you to it.'

'Yes, we'll be fine,' she said hurriedly. 'I feel that I've been taking advantage of your good nature, Dr Balfour.'

'I haven't got a good nature to take advantage of,' he informed her shortly and then pausing in the doorway, amazed himself by saying, 'Before I go, why don't *I* make *you* a warm drink? Coffee maybe?'

‘Er, yes, please, that would be lovely, and do make one for yourself,’ Phoebe said meekly, wanting to pinch herself to make sure she wasn’t dreaming. She couldn’t remember what it felt like to have someone do something for her, and of all people it was the unpredictable new head of the practice who was waiting on her in the middle of the night.

Marcus had been fed and changed, and was now sleeping peacefully in his cot. On the point of finally going back to his own apartment, Harry said, ‘Just one thing—if ever you need any help like tonight, feel free to call on me.

‘I would rather you did that than me having to lie there imagining you struggling on your own. And by the way, Nurse Howard, why is this place so much less attractive than mine?’

‘I’m not sure,’ she told him, ‘but it isn’t going to be like this for long! And I will only ever disturb you if it’s an emergency—when we move house we can’t choose our neighbours, can we? They come as part of the package.’

Harry wondered if that was in the form of an apology, or letting him know that she wasn’t all that keen on having him living so close.

But if she’d been expecting a reply, there was none forthcoming and as tiredness took hold of her, she wished him goodnight and bolted the door behind him.

When she went back to bed exhaustion was there, but not sleep. Her mind kept going over what had turned out to be the strangest of days. It has been full of highs and lows between

Harry Balfour and herself, then had ended with him knocking on her door and offering to help with Marcus. She'd been so tired and frayed at the edges she'd welcomed him with open arms and thrust her little one at him.

Yet there was no way she was going to take him up on his offer by using him as a standby in times of stress. The odds were that he wouldn't have taken the apartment across the landing if he'd known that his neighbours were going to be a single mother and her baby.

Despite his offer of help, he hadn't exactly seemed very comfortable around Marcus. Lucy, the elderly practice nurse, had told her on the day he had been due to arrive that he hadn't any family to bring with him, which maybe explained his reluctance to hold Marcus and his eagerness to be off once he had been satisfied that calm had been restored.

Yet he'd lingered long enough to make her the hot drink she'd been gasping for, and had made one for himself, as she'd suggested. But those had been things unconnected with her child...A last thought struck as her eyelids began to droop. Maybe his reaction on discovering there was a baby living only feet away wasn't all that strange, as it clearly wouldn't be every man's idea of heaven.

Across the landing Harry's thoughts were moving along different channels. Seated in a chair by the window, looking out bleakly at a starlit winter sky, he was remembering a time long ago when a baby precious to him and his parents had been lost,

and how nothing had ever been the same afterwards.

Only small himself, he'd been left lonely and unloved while they'd tried to cope with their grief by spending all their time in their business, running stables in Bluebell Cove. Ever since, he'd been reluctant to take on the responsibility of bringing a child into a world where nothing was certain and loss could bring with it such pain and loneliness.

So family life wasn't something he was familiar with due to his childhood. Marriage to a woman who had been in no hurry to start a family had also left his wariness of it unchanged.

Yet Phoebe across the landing had opted for it without the support of a husband or partner and seemed content, so which of them had the right idea?

Breakfast and getting Marcus to the nursery went smoothly the next morning, and Phoebe was at the surgery in good time, although with an uncomfortable feeling inside whenever she thought about her nocturnal meeting with Harry.

She shuddered to think what she must have looked like in a crumpled cotton nightdress with an old robe over it and her hair all over the place, yet it didn't really matter. He'd been in her apartment for just one thing and there'd been nothing sensual about it. He'd come to assist in the hope of bringing back the peace that had prevailed before Marcus had begun his tantrum, and she'd do well to remember that!

Leo Fenchurch, the other doctor in the practice, had been out on an early call and appeared while she was making the usual big

pot of tea for the staff before the day commenced. He brought a blast of cold air in with him and while warming his hands around a mug of the welcoming brew he said, 'So, what do you think of the new guy, Phoebe?'

He was a fair-haired six-footer with a charm that appealed to most women, but not to her she thought. He was an excellent doctor but a bit lightweight for her to succumb to his charms.

'I'm not sure,' she said in answer to his question. 'I feel that he isn't going to be an easy person to get to know, that he is very much his own man. Yet I'm sure he will be good for the practice, even if he can be somewhat unpredictable on occasion.' *And of that I have on-the-spot experience*, she thought.

'But, Leo, we have to remember that Harry has lost his wife in tragic circumstances. I'm not sure how, but it was an accident of some kind, and for a marriage to end like that must have been horrendous.

'Mine fell apart because of a huge divide in our priorities, but we at least we had a choice, not like Harry.'

'Wow!' he exclaimed. 'That summing-up comes after him having spent just a short time among us? You must have seen more of him than we have.'

She wasn't going to enlighten him on that and almost dropped the mug she was holding when Harry's voice said from behind her in the passage, 'Is there any tea on offer, Nurse Howard?'

As she reached for the teapot, Phoebe was praying that he hadn't heard her discussing him with Leo. It would be just too

embarrassing if he had, but his expression was serene enough, and once she'd poured him the tea, he returned to his room without further comment. As the rest of the staff were appearing in varying degrees of haste for their early brew, she tried to put the incident out of her mind.

She wouldn't have been able to if she'd seen Harry's expression as he sat gazing into space behind his desk with the tea untouched. It would seem that little Baby Bunting's mother had him well and truly catalogued, he thought dryly.

Thankfully his visit to her apartment in the middle of the night hadn't been mentioned—it would have gone around the surgery like wildfire! Noting that it was almost time for the day to start, he went out into Reception to have a word with Phoebe before she left.

She was halfway through the main door when he called her back. He saw her shoulders stiffen and almost smiled. What did she think he wanted her for, to tell her that he'd heard what she'd said to Leo?

'Did you manage to get some sleep after I left?' he asked in a low voice.

'Er...yes,' she replied, looking around her quickly to make sure no one was near enough to jump to any wrong conclusions. 'Marcus was fine this morning. It seems as if the tooth might have come through.'

He was smiling and she thought how different he looked when he did, but a second later he was the man in charge as he said,

‘You’ve got young Rory down for a visit, I hope.’

‘He’s top of my list, Dr Balfour,’ she said stiffly. ‘If I am still concerned about his leg I will be asking for your presence or that of Dr Fenchurch.’

‘Good,’ he said briskly, as if he hadn’t picked up on the drop in temperature. ‘Hope you have a good day after a not-so-good night. I see that the waiting room is filling up so must go.’ And off he went, wishing that he hadn’t come over as quite so bossy with Phoebe. He wouldn’t be surprised if she had him labelled as a control freak!

Conversely, as Phoebe drove the short distance to the fishing-tackle shop she was thinking that the man was only doing his job. So why had she let him get to her like that? He’d been kind and supportive in the middle of the night, even though she could tell that he wasn’t used to babies. It was ungrateful of her to take offence at what, to Harry, would just be part of the job.

The infection around the sutures on Rory’s leg had improved overnight, and with it the boy’s mood. As she changed the dressing, with his uncle looking on anxiously, Phoebe told him, ‘Make sure that he takes all the antibiotics he was given when he left the hospital, Jake. That and the different kind of ointment we’re using now should do the trick.’

He breathed a sigh of relief. ‘The last thing I would want to tell my sister is that her boy isn’t well, so that’s good news, Nurse.’

‘How are his parents progressing?’ she questioned.

‘Not bad, but they have a way to go yet before Hunter’s Hill

will be ready to send them home. So it's just the two of us for a while, isn't it, Rory?' he said to his nephew, who was still in his pyjamas.

'Yes, Uncle Jake,' he chirped. 'And don't forget, as soon as my leg is all right, we're going out in your boat.'

'There's no chance of me forgetting,' was the teasing reply. 'You won't let me!'

Jake turned to Phoebe. 'How about a coffee before you go, Nurse?'

She shook her head. 'No, thanks just the same, I've got a rather long list of patients to see and must be on my way.'

He was smiling. 'If I can't make you a drink, how about letting me take you for a sail when this young fellow is well enough to come along?'

'I don't think so,' she told him gently. 'You wouldn't want a young baby on the boat.'

'So you're married,' he said disappointedly.

'No. I'm a single mother,' she explained, and could tell from his expression that a possible relationship had just gone down the drain. Yet who could blame him? She couldn't help but think it would take a lot for a man to be willing to fill the gap of a father in the life of another man's child, however nice he was.

She'd also only met Jake for the first time the day before. It would take longer than that for her to want to know him better or introduce him to her son. But as a vision of Harry Balfour awkwardly holding Marcus safe and secure in his arms came to

mind, she thought that she'd only known *him* for a similar length of time, yet she would trust him with her child.

When she arrived at her next call, pulling up in front of the biggest farmhouse in the area, Phoebe was amazed to see the man who had been in her thoughts getting out of the brand-new red convertible he'd had delivered to the surgery that morning. The question was immediately there in her mind—was he checking up on her?

It seemed that he wasn't. Harry was already ringing the bell and called across to her, 'Well timed. We have an emergency.'

She was out of her car in a flash and hurried to the door, wondering what could be wrong at Wheatlands Farm.

She visited the place every week to put a fresh dressing on a varicose ulcer that was plaguing old George Enderby, the patriarch of the family. As far as she was aware, that was the only thing wrong with the cheerful old guy, but if what Harry was saying was correct...

'Is it George that you're here about?' she asked as footsteps pounded towards them from inside the house.

He shook his head. 'No. A call came through to the surgery to say his daughter-in-law Pamela had fallen downstairs early this morning and almost knocked herself senseless with a crack to her head. She was soon back working on the farm, until a few minutes ago when suddenly she didn't seem to know where she was.'

The door was being wrenched open as he spoke and George's

son Ian was there, his face taut with anxiety.

‘Thanks for coming so quickly, Harry,’ he said urgently. ‘I wasn’t expecting us to be renewing our acquaintance so soon. Pamela is upstairs resting with a huge bump on her head and isn’t very coherent.’

‘So let’s have a look, then,’ he said briskly, adding to Phoebe, ‘Come along, Nurse, you can see to your patient when we’ve sorted Mrs Enderby out.’

The swelling on Pamela Enderby’s head was huge and soft to the touch and her eyes weren’t functioning properly. Neither was her mind as Harry gently tried to get her to answer a few simple questions rationally.

Turning to her husband, he said in a low voice, ‘There is almost certainly bleeding inside the skull.’ He turned to Phoebe. ‘Phone for an ambulance, Nurse, and stress the urgency, while I check the patient’s heartbeat and pulse.’

She was about to confirm that the emergency services were hastening on their way when he said tightly, ‘Pamela’s gone into a coma.’ He placed his stethoscope against her chest. ‘There’s no heartbeat! Get ready to resuscitate!’

Together they worked on the patient until the ambulance arrived and paramedics stepped in with a defibrillator and then a faint rising and falling of the injured woman’s chest indicated that she was back with them.

Her husband had watched their efforts with tears streaming down his face and as the ambulance was leaving, with him by her

side and a paramedic monitoring her heartbeat, he said raggedly, 'Whatever the outcome of this, I will never forget what the two of you did back there.'

Before they could reply, he was gone with flashing lights and sirens wailing to warn other road users that the vehicle was carrying someone seriously ill or injured.

'That was good teamwork, Phoebe,' Harry said with one of his rare smiles when it had disappeared from sight.

It registered that he'd actually said her name, but there was no time for further thought as elderly George, the patient she'd originally come to see, appeared beside them looking distraught and decidedly unsteady on his feet.

'I've kept out of the way,' he said breathing heavily. 'At my age I'm no good in a crisis. So what's the verdict, Harry?'

'Not too good at this moment, George,' the doctor told him gently. 'They will have to operate to control a brain haemorrhage. But she is still with us, so why don't you let me make you a cup of tea while Nurse Howard changes the dressing on your leg? Or would you prefer a brandy under the circumstances?'

'Yes, I would,' he replied. 'My heart isn't too good and the last thing my son needs is me cracking up at a time like this.' He was gazing out at the immaculate farm buildings and the land that belonged to them stretching as far as the eye could see. 'All of this is great, Harry,' he said brokenly, 'but it means nothing when a life is at stake.'

Harry nodded understandingly. The Enderbys were obviously

very wealthy, but the old guy had his priorities right.

‘Can I leave you to see to George?’ he asked Phoebe. ‘I left patients waiting to see me when I dashed over here.’

‘Yes, of course,’ she told him, adding as he turned to go, ‘It was great working with you.’

The reluctant smile was back and she thought if he kept it up, he might actually manage a laugh one day. To her amazement he replied, ‘It was good to have you assisting me, Nurse Howard.’ And then he was gone to face the sighs and fidgets of those awaiting his presence in the surgery.

Having dealt with George’s dressing and left him in the charge of the farm’s housekeeper, Phoebe continued her home visits. When she arrived back at the surgery late in the afternoon, keen to see if the rapport between herself and Harry was still there or just a momentary thing, she found him closeted with one patient after another and it was still so when she left to pick Marcus up at the nursery.

With the tooth now through, he was back to his usual state of contentment, greeting her with a big smile and a happy gurgle, and in that moment the other part of her life took over. He was all she had, and if that was how it was always going to be, she wasn’t going to complain. She’d made her choice when she split up with Darren and had no regrets about *that*.

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