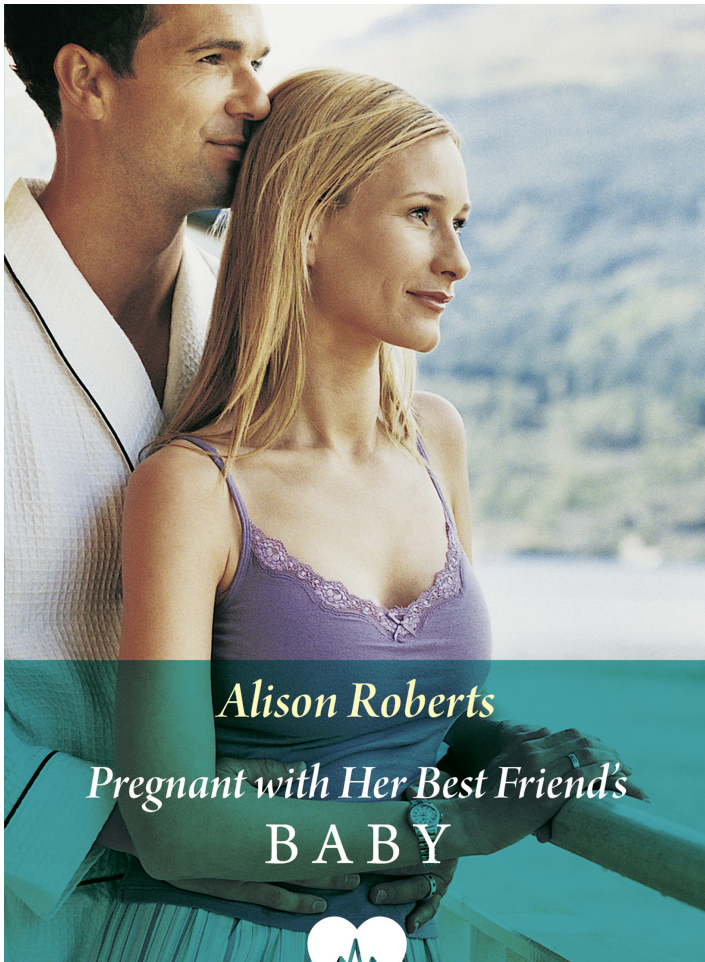




Alison Roberts

Pregnant with Her Best Friend's

B A B Y



MILLS & BOON
MEDICAL

Alison Roberts
**Pregnant With Her
Best Friend's Baby**
Серия «Mills & Boon Medical»
Серия «Rescue Docs»

Аннотация

From best friends...to parents! Aratika Rescue Service Paramedics Maggie and Joe are best friends. Until an adrenaline-fueled rescue leads to one unexpected night of passion! The consequences are life-changing – but can Maggie and Joe ever be more than just good friends...?

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From friends with benefits...

To parents!

Paramedic dream team Maggie and Joe aren't just crewmates in the Aratika Rescue Service, they're also best friends. Until a particularly perilous, adrenaline-fueled rescue leads to one hot night in the shower! But Maggie discovers their unexpected and intensely passionate encounter had life-changing consequences. Now with a baby on the way, she can't help but wonder, can she and Joe ever be more than just good friends?

ALISON ROBERTS is a New Zealander, currently lucky enough to be living in the South of France. She is also lucky enough to write for the Mills & Boon Medical Romance line. A primary school teacher in a former life, she is now a qualified paramedic. She loves to travel and dance, drink champagne, and spend time with her daughter and her friends.

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Pregnant with Her Best Friend's Baby

Alison Roberts

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PREGNANT WITH HER BEST FRIEND'S BABY

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MILLS & BOON

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CHAPTER ONE

‘DO YOU KNOW what the French word for a midwife is, Joe?’ Maggie Lewis jammed her helmet over her blonde curls but let the ends of her chinstrap dangle as they strode swiftly out to the helipad.

‘What’s that got to do with anything?’ Maggie’s crew partner, Joe Wallace, pulled open the side door of the helicopter, briefly obscuring the logo of Wellington’s Aratika Rescue Service emblazoned on the side of the aircraft.

‘We’re going to a woman in labour.’

‘Ah...is that what it is? Hasn’t come through on my pager yet.’

‘Prolonged first stage,’ Maggie added. ‘And the midwife has called for assistance because she’s now caught up with another patient who’s having a miscarriage and she can’t get back to check on this woman anytime soon.’

Joe stood back to let Maggie climb on board first. Their pilot, Andy, was already in the cockpit, well into an automatic pre-flight routine with the crewman and co-pilot Nick sitting beside him. The rotors were gathering speed and the downdraught was enough to make Joe push his sun-streaked brown hair back off his forehead and out of his eyes before he pulled his helmet on. How was it that he always managed to look as if he was overdue for a haircut?

Maggie fastened her chinstrap as she sat down and then pulled

her harness over her shoulders. ‘Anyway... I’m sure you don’t know what a midwife is in French, so I’ll tell you. It’s a *sage-femme*. Direct translation is actually “wise woman”.’

‘Ah...’ Joe was grinning as he pulled the door shut behind him. ‘I see where this is going. You want to take the lead on this one, don’t you, even though it’s my turn? And even though you had all the fun of the post-cardiac arrest case we just finished?’

‘It was a good case, wasn’t it?’ Maggie smiled back as she pulled down her microphone, responding affirmatively to Andy’s query about whether they were good to go and then watching the ground recede as they lifted into the air. She was still thinking about their last mission, however. ‘It’s not often you get to bring someone back to life enough to have them cracking jokes with the ED staff when we get there.’

‘But you want this one, too.’

‘I was a midwife, once upon a time, you know. One of those wise women.’

‘Last century, you mean?’

‘Hey...you’re older than me, mate. I wouldn’t go making ageist jokes if I were you.’

‘At least I knew I wanted to be a paramedic from the get-go. You had to be a nurse and then a midwife before you saw the light and found your true calling.’

‘I must have been crazy,’ Maggie muttered. ‘I could be working in a nice, fully equipped maternity unit with colleagues who appreciate me and...*whoa*...watch out for those potholes,

Andy.'

'Sorry.' But their pilot chuckled. 'It might be a bit of a bumpy ride today. That's Windy Wellington for you.'

'I *do* appreciate you, Maggie,' Joe said a few seconds later. He sounded perfectly sincere but Maggie could still hear a grin in his voice. 'You know that, don't you?'

She shrugged. Joe had been one of the first people she had worked with on the base when she'd joined the crew five years ago. 'You've put up with me long enough, I guess.'

'And there I was thinking it was you who was putting up with me.'

For a second, they caught each other's gaze, with the ease and familiarity that only came after a friendship had had years to gather strength along with the kind of depth that could only come from shared experiences that often involved a life or death struggle. Their banter might push the limits occasionally but the trust and respect between Maggie and Joe was rock solid.

'Actually...' Andy's voice coming through the in-built headphones in their helmets broke that moment of connection. 'It's me who's had to put up with both of you for years now. Years and years of listening to you bicker about who gets to lead which job.'

'We're the dream team,' Joe informed him. 'As well you know.'

'Yeah, yeah... I'm going to toss a coin when we land. Whoever gets heads gets to lead, okay?'

Maggie and Joe shared another swift glance. They both knew it wouldn't actually make any difference. Neither of them had the kind of ego that interfered with clear communication or with deferring to someone who was more skilled in a particular area. They really were a 'dream team' and, while there were many medics on the Aratika Rescue Base that Maggie loved to work with, Joe was definitely her favourite.

'It's not as though we're likely to have to deal with a delivery, anyway,' Joe added. 'If the mother's had a prolonged first stage she'll be exhausted and may not be anywhere near fully dilated. She might end up having a Caesarean. It's the midwife's call to get her into hospital instead of continuing with a home birth. I guess she's requested a chopper because it's an isolated property.'

'Long, unsealed road to the nearest highway, too,' the crewman, Nick, put in. 'I don't imagine a bumpy road like that would be very good for a woman in labour.'

Another pocket of turbulence made Maggie reach for a handhold. 'At this rate, the ride with us into hospital might speed things up as much as a road trip could.'

'We should be out of the worst of it when we get up north a bit,' Andy told them. 'ETA's twenty minutes.'

Maggie peered down at the rugged, forest-covered hills and nearby coastline beneath them.

'Isn't that the Castle Cliffs resort down there?'

'Where Cooper and Fizz are having their wedding?' Joe leaned sideways to see where Maggie was pointing to a group

of buildings half-hidden by forest on the edge of a cliff top. Cooper had started working at the base six months ago after emigrating from Scotland and Fizz was one of the emergency medicine specialists who were part of Aratika's elite staff.

'I think it must be,' Joe nodded. 'Certainly looks like the only way to get to it is by four-wheel drive or chopper.'

'I might take my bike.'

'What—you're not going to wear a dress?' Joe sounded shocked.

Maggie sighed. 'I suppose I'd better. I hadn't thought about it yet.'

'The wedding's next weekend. You'd better get on with it.'

'I know. It's just happened in a bit of a rush, you know? I really wasn't expecting Fizz to suddenly get so formal. She told me not so long ago that she was never going to get married again.'

'I guess finding out they're going to have a baby changed things. Not that that's the best reason to decide to tie the knot.' There was an odd note in Joe's voice.

'It's as good a reason as any,' Maggie responded. 'And I've never seen either of them looking so happy.'

Joe's grunt was reluctant agreement. 'Yeah... I would have thought Fizz would have been more upset having to give up her shifts at Aratika but I've not seen the smile drop from her face once.'

'Mmm...' Maggie closed her eyes for a moment. She could imagine how happy Fizz was feeling. Not just because she'd won

that life lottery of finding the person she wanted to be with for ever—something Maggie had failed to find yet—but with the anticipation of holding their first baby in her arms in the near future. Maggie's own arms were loosely folded in front of her and she could actually feel an emptiness there. An ache of longing...

It was getting stronger, that longing. The ticking of a biological clock. One of Mother Nature's tricks to persuade women to reproduce before it became too late and, at nearly thirty-six, Maggie knew that her window of opportunity to become a mother easily was starting to close. She'd been envious of Fizz when she'd heard the news. Dead jealous, if she was really honest with herself.

'That's the road we're looking for down there.' Andy's voice broke into Maggie's thoughts a few minutes later. 'We'll follow it but keep an eye out for a farmhouse with a red ute parked in front of it. Apparently there's an empty paddock by the road that we can land in.'

'I'm getting an update.' Joe was reading his pager. 'Our patient is a thirty-one-year-old first-time mum. No problems with pregnancy and she's full term. Name's Kathy Price.'

It wasn't Kathy who met them at the door of the house a few minutes later but her husband, Darren, who looked like he'd just come in from working on the farm. He had a checked shirt on over a pair of shorts and he dropped a pair of boots onto the veranda of the farmhouse before inviting the paramedic crew to come inside.

‘Dunno what all this fuss is about,’ he said, as he led them through to a bedroom. ‘I could have driven Kath in to the hospital. We don’t need all these bells and whistles.’

‘I think Kathy’s midwife was a bit concerned about how tired your wife was sounding,’ Joe said calmly. ‘And it is quite a drive.’

Maggie was slipping her arms out of her backpack straps. She crouched down beside the bed.

‘Hi, Kathy. My name’s Maggie and that’s Joe. We’ve come to take you into hospital to have your baby on your midwife’s advice. Are you happy with that decision?’

The exhausted-looking young woman nodded. ‘I’m just so tired,’ she whispered. ‘It’s been going on since the middle of last night.’

‘Your midwife checked you this morning, yes?’

‘Yeah...and I was two centimetres dilated at ten o’clock. She came back after lunch at one o’clock and I’d only got to four centimetres by then.’

‘So...’ Maggie checked her watch. ‘That’s about four hours ago now. How often are you having contractions?’

Kathy rolled her head from side to side. ‘I’m not sure. It feels like every couple of minutes and...and it hurts. I know I said I didn’t want any pain relief in my birth plan but I didn’t know it was going to hurt this much.’

‘We can give you something for the pain.’ Maggie glanced at where Joe was opening their packs and readying the equipment that they might need. A birthing pack that included neonatal

resuscitation items like the miniature airways and bag mask. IV gear. Their small tanks of oxygen and Entonox. 'We'll start with some Entonox but we'll put a line in your hand, if you're happy with that, so we can give you something stronger if you need it.'

'He's a big baby.' Darren sounded proud. 'They said that at the last scan.'

'Oh?' An alarm bell sounded a warning for Maggie. 'How big?'

'Not too big,' Kathy said. 'My midwife said it was below the limit for it being a problem for a home birth and we both wanted that.'

'Birth's a natural process.' Darren nodded. 'Why go near a hospital if you don't have to?'

'You can't just tie a rope around a hoof and pull it out,' Kathy snapped at her husband. 'I'm not one of your sheep. Ow...it's starting again.' She dropped her head back against the pillows and groaned. 'It *hurts*...and...and I feel *sick*...'

Joe was right beside Maggie now. He raised an eyebrow. 'Transition?' he suggested quietly.

Kathy was shaking as the contraction subsided. 'I need to go to the toilet,' she moaned.

'It's okay, Kathy,' Maggie said reassuringly. 'I think that perhaps you're a bit closer to having your baby than we thought. I'm going to get your clothes off and see what's happening, okay? Joe's going to take your blood pressure and things and...' She caught Joe's gaze. 'Let's get some oxygen on, shall we? And it would be great to get a foetal heart rate.'

‘What’s going on?’ Darren asked as they worked over Kathy. ‘I thought you were just going to take us in to the hospital.’

‘That was the initial plan,’ Maggie replied as she cut clothing clear. ‘But we can’t transport Kathy if a birth is imminent. We can manage things a lot better here than in the back of a helicopter.’

‘Crikey...’ Darren’s face became noticeably paler. ‘It’s happening now?’ He moved to the head of the bed to lean over his wife. ‘You okay, hon?’

‘No...’ Kathy grabbed at his hand. ‘Where’s that gas? I can’t do this... I need to *push*...’

‘Wow...you’re crowning, Kathy.’ Maggie could see the dark whorls of damp hair on the baby’s head. ‘Your baby’s almost here... Keep pushing—you’re doing great.’

Joe had the blood-pressure cuff wrapped around Kathy’s arm and the bulb in his hand but gave up trying to take a reading as he leaned to see what Maggie was watching.

They both saw the moment that it happened. The baby’s head was almost born and then it pulled back like a turtle retreating into its shell.

‘Turtle sign,’ Maggie said very quietly. She glanced up to catch Joe’s gaze. They both knew that this had the potential to become an obstetric emergency in a very short space of time.

‘Don’t push any more for the moment, Kathy,’ Maggie said calmly. ‘Try and pant for the rest of this contraction. Darren? Can you take Kathy’s pillows away? We need to get her lying as flat as possible.’

Maggie was going to hold the baby's head and apply some gentle traction with the next contraction. Kathy was red-faced and gasping as she pushed. This time the baby's head came a little further but then it stopped.

'What's going on?' Darren looked fearful as he looked up from the baby to meet Maggie's gaze. 'Why isn't it coming out?'

It was an effort to keep her voice this calm, especially as Kathy started sobbing. 'Baby's shoulders are just a bit caught behind the bones at the bottom of Kathy's pelvis.'

Darren put his arms around his wife. 'It'll be okay, hon. These guys know what they're doing.'

'Why is this happening?' Kathy cried. 'After all this time and it's been so hard...it's not *fair*...'

'It could be a positional thing,' Maggie said. 'Or maybe your baby's a bit bigger than the scan suggested. Don't worry, we have several ways we can help.'

And less than five minutes in which to do so.

Joe was right beside her and they were able to talk quietly for a few moments as Darren tried to comfort and reassure Kathy as she sobbed.

'We can only spend about thirty seconds on each manoeuvre to deal with shoulder dystocia,' Maggie said. 'I know the protocol but I'd like to get some expert obstetric backup on the radio.' She lowered her voice even further. 'We need to be prepared for a neonatal resuscitation, too.'

Joe reached for the radio clipped to his belt but he was still

listening to Maggie. ‘We’ll try the McRoberts manoeuvre first. If that doesn’t work, I’ll need you to provide traction while I put on some suprapubic pressure.’

Maggie turned to Darren. ‘Help me move Kathy down towards the end of the bed,’ she told him. ‘And, Kathy? I want you to pull your knees up to your chest and then push as hard as you can with your next contraction.’

Even as she was encouraging Kathy to push and telling her how well she was doing, Maggie’s brain was racing through the next steps, which would mean applying pressure to try and move the baby’s shoulders both externally and then internally. If that didn’t work she would have to follow guidance from one of the consultants in the maternity wing of Wellington’s Royal Hospital. She didn’t want to have to think about the more drastic measures that might need to be taken or the risks to both baby and mother.

Joe caught Maggie’s gaze as the sounds of the effort Kathy was putting into pushing began to fade into exhausted groans. Maggie nodded and they shifted positions, with Joe gently taking hold of the baby’s head and Maggie moving to the side of the bed where she could feel for the position of the baby’s shoulders.

‘You’re going to feel me pushing this time as well,’ she told Kathy. ‘We need the biggest push you’ve got this time.’

‘I can’t,’ Kathy moaned. ‘I can’t do it...’

‘Yes, you can.’ Darren was lying across the top of the bed, holding both of Kathy’s hands. ‘Hang on tight...you’ve got this...’

Maggie could feel the curve of the baby’s back beneath her

fingers and then the lump of the tiny shoulder. She locked her hands by weaving her fingers together and then put the heel of one hand just above the shoulder. As Kathy's next contraction gathered strength and she started to push, Maggie pressed down on the baby's shoulder. Joe was applying traction. At one point during the tense thirty seconds of effort, Maggie and Joe held eye contact with each other. They co-ordinated a rocking motion as Kathy's contraction began to recede and, finally, Maggie could feel the movement beneath her hands as one shoulder and then the other was freed.

'Keep it going,' she urged Kathy. 'Just a little bit more... Baby's coming... *Push, Kathy...push...you can do it...*'

And there was the baby, in Joe's hands. Looking...alarmingly limp. Maggie reached for the clamps and sterile scissors from the birthing pack roll. They needed to cut the cord fast if resuscitation was needed.

'Is he okay?' Kathy was trying to push herself up onto her elbows. 'What's happening...?'

'He's breathing,' Joe told her. 'And starting to move. I'm just going to check his heart rate.'

The baby was moving and screwing up his little face as though he wanted to cry but couldn't find the energy yet. They were both good signs but his colour wasn't great, with his extremities a dark shade of blue, and Maggie wasn't sure that his breathing was adequate. Joe wasn't looking too worried, however. He was smiling down at the baby as he dried it off with a soft towel.

‘Hey there, little guy. You going to tell us what you think about all this?’

Maggie had the cord clamped and the scissors in her hand but, if an urgent resuscitation wasn’t needed, she didn’t have to rush.

‘Darren? Do you want to cut the cord?’

‘Apgar six at one minute,’ Joe told her. ‘Heart rate is over a hundred but the resp rate is on the slow side and he’s pretty blue.’

By the time Darren had cut through the cord, the baby was starting to make sounds. The first warbling cry came a few seconds later and Kathy burst into tears and held out her arms.

‘Can I hold him? Please?’

Again, Maggie and Joe shared a glance. And a smile this time. This situation was under control now with the emergency delivery successfully managed. Kathy still needed careful monitoring because she was at more risk of a postpartum haemorrhage after the complication with her baby’s delivery, and she needed to transfer to an obstetric unit as quickly as possible. But keeping the baby warm was also a priority and the best way to do that was to have him skin to skin with his mother and to cover them both with warm blankets.

It was Maggie who scooped up the infant to place him in Kathy’s arms and, as she felt the weight of the newborn in her own arms and against her own breast, she felt oddly close to tears. Because it was a reminder of that ache of emptiness she’d been so aware of earlier when she’d been thinking of the baby her friend Fizz was going to have?

No. These were more like tears of joy. How precious was this new life? Especially this one, after giving them all a fright on his way into the world, but all babies were just amazing and the joy of being part of a delivery was something that would never grow old.

This was more than a purely professional satisfaction, however. Maybe there was an echo of that ache of longing. Of the emptiness. Not in her arms that were still full of this new life but somewhere further down in Maggie's body—in the space where a baby of her own might grow one day.

Her smile was definitely a bit wobbly as she helped Kathy move her clothing and gather her baby onto her chest.

'He's just gorgeous,' Maggie murmured, stepping back to let Darren get close to his wife and baby for a few precious minutes of family bonding time as she and Joe got packed up and ready for the transfer to hospital.

Darren sounded a lot closer to tears than Maggie was. 'Looks just like his daddy, I reckon,' he said. 'How 'bout that?'

Maggie checked her watch as she rapidly assessed the baby again before turning away to give this brand-new family just a moment of relative privacy. 'Apgar score eight at five minutes,' she told Joe.

He nodded, grinning, and then stripped off his gloves and unclipped his radio. 'Andy? We'll be ready to go inside ten minutes. Crank up the central heating in the cabin, we've got a baby to keep warm on the way home.'

Darren overheard him. 'Will there be room for a dad in the helicopter as well?'

'Sorry, mate.' Joe shook his head. 'It's going to be a bit crowded. You'll need to follow us by road.'

'Don't worry,' Maggie added, to soften the blow. 'We're going to take very good care of both Kathy and the baby.'

* * *

A medical team, including Fizz Wilson, was waiting on one side of the Royal's rooftop helipad to take over Kathy's care as soon as they landed and lifted out the stretcher.

'Third stage happened en route,' Maggie told Fizz. 'Oxytocin was administered on scene after the birth but I would estimate blood loss with the delivery of the placenta was still around three hundred mls with ongoing but slower loss now. She's on her second litre of normal saline. Blood pressure's one hundred and five over fifty.'

'I feel fine,' Kathy said. 'Just a bit tired, that's all.'

But Fizz took note of the low blood pressure and the urgent need to control any ongoing bleeding.

'Let's get moving,' she instructed the ED staff with her. 'Maggie, can you bring the baby, please? We've got a paediatric team waiting for him downstairs.'

Maggie followed Kathy's stretcher with Joe walking beside her. 'I could get used to this,' she said.

'What? Having full-on cases with successful outcomes? That's two today.' Joe was smiling. 'I could get used to it, too.'

‘No... I mean *this*...’ Maggie looked down at the tiny sleeping face visible amongst the folds of blanket in her arms. ‘Carrying a baby around. I think I want one.’

Joe made a shuddering sound. ‘Rather you than me, mate. Hey...’ He increased his pace as the stretcher was slotted into the rooftop elevator. ‘Is there room for us in there, too?’

They squeezed in.

Fizz was right beside Maggie. She had her gaze fixed on monitor screen of the life pack, taking in as much information about Kathy’s condition as she could, but she slid a quick sideways glance at the baby a moment later.

‘Any problems?’

‘Not at all. He was a bit flat to start with but he picked up quickly. Apgar score was ten at ten minutes.’

Fizz was smiling as she turned back to her patient. ‘He’s so cute,’ she told Kathy. ‘Have you decided on a name yet?’

‘I like Aiden,’ Kathy said. ‘But Darren wants him to be Patrick, after his dad. We decided we’d wait and see what suited him more.’ She twisted her head, trying to see her baby’s face. ‘I think he looks like an Aiden, don’t you?’

Maggie smiled. ‘Aiden’s a great name.’ But so was Patrick, she thought. One of her favourite boy’s names, in fact. She wondered if Fizz and Cooper had already started discussing possible names for their baby or if they knew whether it was a girl or a boy.

The elevator doors opened again as they reached the ground floor and Fizz stayed by the head of the stretcher as it was swiftly

rolled towards a resuscitation area in the emergency department. Kathy would have no idea that her doctor was pregnant, Maggie thought. And here she was, with baby Aiden or Patrick still in her arms. It was baby overload today, that was for sure.

Her head was still full of it when she and Joe finally got to take a break and sat down in the staffroom of the Aratika Rescue Base.

‘I haven’t finished the paperwork for the post-cardiac arrest case yet, let alone for the birth,’ Maggie sighed.

‘It won’t take too long,’ Joe said. ‘I’ll do the cardiac one.’

‘Because it’s half-done already?’

‘No. Because you’re the one who wants a baby. This way, you get to enjoy the case all over again.’

‘Hmm...’ Maggie shook her head. ‘It could have turned out to be not very enjoyable at all. I was so relieved the moment I felt that shoulder start to move.’

‘I’ll bet.’ Joe pulled the folder of paperwork towards him and took a pen from the pocket of his overalls. ‘Keep it in mind when you choose the father of your baby. You’re so short, it might be wise not to marry a solid, over six foot tall farmer like Kathy did.’

‘Five foot four is not short. I’m average,’ Maggie countered. ‘And I don’t even know any farmers. Or any potential baby daddies at all, in fact.’

‘They’re out there. In droves. You just haven’t been looking.’

‘That’s because I got fed up with relationships that were going nowhere fast.’

Including the one she'd been in with Richard, years ago, when Maggie had first started working at the rescue base. One that had had a promising start but had ebbed into being nothing more than flatmates. Friends. And it hadn't been enough for either of them.

'Maybe that's because you go into them expecting them to *be* going somewhere. That can scare guys off, you know. It would scare the hell out of me, that's for sure. In fact, it's precisely why I'm currently single again.'

Maggie snorted. 'It's a baby I want. A partner would be a bonus, of course, but I'm running out of time to jump through all those hoops.' She was only half joking. It really did feel like she was running out of time, given how many dead ends she had already come up against in the search to find someone to share her life with. 'And who says you have to *marry* someone to have a baby, anyway? You might marry someone and end up being a single mother anyway—like Laura.' Her flatmate had escaped what she suspected might have been an abusive relationship years ago when her son, Harrison, was only a tiny baby.

'So you're going to do the independent professional woman thing and go to a sperm bank or something?'

Maggie blinked. 'D'you know, I hadn't actually thought of that.'

'Why not? You read about people doing it all the time. Especially older, professional women who choose not to get married or realise they're running out of time. People just like you. And it seems like a great way to get a designer baby. You

could practically choose its hair colour and how smart it'll be.' But Joe was frowning now. 'Of course, you're going to provide the other half of the genes so it might just come out with blonde hair and blue eyes and to be not very...' His lips twitched.

Maggie threw her pen at him. 'Are you trying to tell me that I'm not very smart?'

Joe had already caught the pen. 'I was only going to say you're not very tall.'

Maggie narrowed her eyes. 'Not sure I believe that. And what did you mean by "something"?''

'Huh?'

'You said a sperm bank "or something".'

'Oh...' Joe picked up his coffee cup and took a swallow. 'You could just pick someone you liked the look of, I guess, lay on the charm and lure them home and hope that he's not too careful about birth control.'

'*Joe...* How irresponsible would that be?'

'Irresponsible on the part of the guy, that's true.' Joe shook his head. 'I'd never relinquish that responsibility.'

'I couldn't get pregnant and not tell someone that they were going to be a father. That's just not right.'

'I guess.' Joe was focussing on the paperwork in front of him now. 'Do what I read about a gay couple doing recently, then. The women asked one of their good friends and he agreed to be the donor. He said he wanted them to have their family and he was happy to be a kind of uncle but never wanted to be a father.'

They both concentrated on the paperwork for a while but, even as Maggie filled in the precise details relating to the obstetric case that was clearly going to be the last job for their shift today, another line of thought was ticking along somewhere in the background of her brain.

Thoughts about sperm banks. How easy was it to get accepted for treatment and how expensive it might be. And how it worked. Did you have a wish list of things to tick off, like physical characteristics of height and hair colour or evidence of intelligence such as a university qualification? What about more important attributes like whether someone could make you laugh or how kind he was?

Thoughts about the other things Joe had suggested circled in her mind, too. Randomly picking some guy with the intention of seducing him and possibly lying about being on birth control was not an acceptable option but...but the idea of using a co-operative friend, now that *was* interesting...

* * *

So interesting that it was the only thing Maggie was thinking about as she kicked her bike into life and threaded her way through the city traffic not long after her conversation with Joe.

By the time she was getting into bed that night, it had started to feel like it was her own idea.

And, out of all the men she knew, there was only one that stood out as a perfect possibility.

Joe Wallace.

The thought of broaching the subject was a bit nerve-racking. Enough so to keep Maggie awake for quite some time. On the positive side, he'd had a half-smile on his face when he'd said 'rather you than me' when she'd been holding Kathy's baby, and had said she wanted one as well, so maybe he was on the same page as that co-operative friend he'd told her about—who didn't want to become a father but was happy to be a kind of uncle.

On the other side of that coin, however, was the fact that she'd be stepping into a realm that had never been there with Joe and that was why their friendship was so solid. They'd both been in long-term relationships when they'd first met as colleagues. By the time they were single, they were already good friends and Maggie had learned the hard way that friendship was not enough to base a long-term relationship on. Joe was off limits and he clearly felt exactly the same way and that had never been a problem. But baby-making, no matter how you ended up actually doing it, had everything to do with sex and even the thought of opening that conversation with Joe was enough to make Maggie blush.

But it wasn't enough to make her dismiss what seemed to be a perfect plan. As she drifted off to sleep Maggie's thoughts were tumbling, interwoven with memories that went back so far they were no more than misty glimpses. She'd had an old-fashioned child-sized pram when she was very little and she would cram every doll and teddy bear she owned into that pram and wheel it everywhere.

My babies, she would tell everyone.

When she was older she had her fashion dolls that gave her a mother and father figure and she would add smaller dolls as their children. Lots and lots of children because that was what made a ‘real’ family. It wasn’t that she hadn’t been happy and loved as an only child, it was just that she knew it was a case of the more the merrier. Her parents had desperately wanted more children and had been sad that it hadn’t happened but it hadn’t dented the rock-solid love they shared. They would be the best grandparents ever.

That was something else that Maggie wanted, of course. A relationship that was as perfect a match as her parents’ one was. The ‘love at first sight’ whirlwind romance like the one they’d told her about so many times and starting a life together that would get better and better as they got older. It wasn’t that Maggie hadn’t found the ‘love at first sight’ type of thing, it was just that any whirlwind romance eventually crashed and burned and she’d been let down so many times that, for the moment at least, she was giving up.

That desire for a family of her own had never vanished, though. In the last moments before sleep claimed Maggie, she could feel the intensity of that longing that morphed from a pram full of beloved toys to the feeling of holding a real, live baby in her arms, as she’d done today.

* * *

There was something a bit weird happening.

Joe couldn't put his finger on it but, as the day wore on, he wondered if it was because Maggie seemed even bouncier than normal. More enthusiastic. More...smiley...

Several times, he caught her opening her mouth as if she was about to say something and then snapping it shut and throwing herself into whatever task she was doing on their downtime, like reading a journal article or washing up some dishes. It wasn't until they were in the locker room, when their shift had finished, that Joe finally gave up. The way Maggie was looking at him felt like the heat of a laser in the middle of his back as he pulled what he needed from his locker.

He turned his head. 'You've been staring at me all day. What's going on?'

'Sorry...' Maggie smiled brightly at him. 'There's something I wanted to ask you, that's all. I was...um...waiting for the best moment.'

'Now's good.' Joe smiled back. If Maggie wanted a favour, then he was her man. Always. 'Shoot.'

'Um...' She was fishing in her locker, putting things into a shoulder bag. Her voice sounded as if she was trying hard to keep it casual. 'It's about what you said. Yesterday. When I was talking about wanting a baby?'

'What did I say?' Joe tried to think back. 'Oh...you mean about sperm banks?'

'No...' Maggie's hands stilled. 'About asking a friend.'

'Oh...' He liked that she'd liked his idea. It was always great

to find a solution to a mate's problem. 'Glad I could help.' He unhooked his jacket from the back of his locker. 'So who's the lucky guy, then?' He raised an eyebrow in Maggie's direction when she didn't answer. 'Your potential baby daddy? Is it Jack?'

'Jack's my flatmate. How awkward would that be?'

'Don?'

'Shh...' Maggie threw a glance over her shoulder, checking that they were still alone in the locker room. Her cheeks had reddened even at the idea of their boss being involved.

'Who, then?'

He could see the way Maggie swallowed hard, as if what she was about to say was terribly important. He could see how wide her eyes were as well. Shining with something that looked very like hope. The hairs on the back of his neck prickled as they rose.

'You, Joe,' she whispered. 'You're the person I'd choose out of everybody I've ever known.'

He should have seen it coming, perhaps, but he hadn't and it hit him like a steam train. The blast of remembering what it was like to be a child that hadn't been wanted. The absolute determination to never, ever be on the other side of that coin—the father who hadn't wanted that child.

Joe could feel the colour draining out of his face. He could see the reflection of his own horror in Maggie's eyes. She knew she'd made a terrible mistake but she had no idea how to go about fixing it. He could solve this problem. Just make a joke and brush it off.

Except he couldn't. The words had been said and couldn't be unsaid and they had touched such a very deep chord within him. The idea of him casually—*deliberately*—fathering a child was hanging in the air between them. Totally abhorrent. Totally unacceptable. Joe couldn't begin to find any words to let Maggie know just how shocked he was but maybe he didn't need to. She was looking rather pale herself.

Embarrassed. Mortified, even.

For once, Joe had no inclination to make her feel any better. He shook his head, slammed his locker door shut and was walking out as if it was simply an ordinary end to their run of days working together.

'See ya,' he muttered, without meeting her gaze. 'Enjoy your days off.'

CHAPTER TWO

‘WOW...CHECK YOU OUT, Maggie. You’re wearing a *dress...*’

‘Hi, Jack... Yeah, I know... I’m just trying to decide if I want to keep it.’

Maggie had spent half her afternoon off today shopping for something suitable to wear to a wedding but it felt very odd having all this loose fabric brushing against her lower legs. Just how long had it been since she’d tapped into her feminine side and worn a dress instead of her uniform or jeans or the leather pants she wore for protection when she rode her beloved Harley-Davidson sportster motorbike with its sky-blue fuel tank and mudguards?

She turned back to where their other flatmate, Laura, was sitting on the couch, Harrison snuggled up beside her. They were both staring at her thoughtfully so she did a bit of a twirl, one way and then the other. That was enough to make her wonder how long it had been since she’d been anywhere near a dance floor. At least a year, she decided. About when her last relationship had faded into oblivion after a few months had made it obvious it should never have got going in the first place. That ‘love at first sight’ wasn’t to be trusted. Maggie stifled a sigh.

‘So...what do you think?’

‘It’s perfect,’ Laura pronounced. ‘That blue is exactly the

same colour as your eyes and I love the little daisy print. Very summery.’ She ruffled her son’s hair. ‘What do you think, Harry? Doesn’t Maggie look pretty? Isn’t it fun that we’re all going to get dressed up for the wedding tomorrow?’

Harry wrinkled his nose. ‘I don’t want to get dressed up.’

‘You don’t have to get *really* dressed up. It’s not a fancy wedding where you might have to wear a suit, but you have got an important job to do. You get to carry the rings.’

‘I’d get dressed up,’ Jack told him, ‘if I could go. I’d wear my very best jeans and a shirt.’

‘A T-shirt?’

‘No, a real shirt. With buttons. Maybe even a tie.’

‘Why can’t you go?’

‘I wish I could but I have to work, buddy. Someone has to be ready to go up in a helicopter or off on a bike and look after the people who get sick or injured.’

And Jack probably hadn’t even tried to juggle his roster to take time off. He’d only recently succeeded in winning one of the hotly contested paramedic jobs on the rescue base and his excitement was still palpable.

‘Who were you crewed with today?’ Laura asked. ‘I didn’t see anyone from Aratika come into Emergency during my shift.’

‘It was a really quiet day. Joe and I got a bit bored, to be honest. And we ate far too many of Shirley’s cookies. I’m meeting him at the gym as soon as I’ve collected my gear to try and burn some that sugar load off.’

‘How come Joe was working?’ Maggie asked. ‘He’s on the same roster as me.’

‘He was covering for Adam, who called in sick. Food poisoning or some kind of gastro bug. I hope he’s back on deck tomorrow. Joe said he could come in again but he wouldn’t want to miss the wedding.’

‘No...’ But Maggie could hear the doubtful note in her own voice.

Maybe Joe had a reason that meant he wouldn’t be too upset to miss the wedding. Or rather, to miss having to spend any time with Maggie.

She hadn’t seen him since the last shift they had worked together. Since that awful moment when she’d made the cringeworthy mistake of telling him that she wanted him to father a baby for her.

‘I reckon if Cooper had decided to have a best man, it would have been Joe,’ Jack added.

‘Yes,’ Laura agreed. ‘And then Maggie would have been a bridesmaid for Fizz.’

Thank goodness their friends weren’t going down such a traditional format for their wedding. How awkward could that have been, with everyone they worked with watching them? Someone would have picked up on the odd vibe between the best man and the bridesmaid and maybe asked what the problem was, which would have only ramped up this odd tension.

There hadn’t been any chance to try and convince Joe that the

notion of him being a sperm donor had only been a joke because the night shift crew had been outside chatting to their pilot as Maggie had followed behind Joe, who had got into his car and simply driven past, with a casual wave. Maggie had texted him later with what seemed a slightly awkward attempt to tell him he had nothing to worry about but the response had been a terse ‘Forget about it, I already have’, which didn’t quite ring true.

It was probably unfortunate that their days off had meant they hadn’t had to work together the following day. It would have been so much easier to brush off and genuinely forget about it if they hadn’t both had a couple of days to think about it.

Because Maggie was quite sure that Joe *would* have been thinking about it, even if it wasn’t filling his mind to quite the same extent as it was hers. Who wouldn’t have to give it some thought, when confronted by something you would never have expected your friend to come out with? Something that had clearly shocked him. She couldn’t text him again, either, because that would be making it into a bigger thing than it actually was. All they needed was to be in the same space, an opportunity to make a joke about it and then they could go back to the way things had always been—a friendship that made it possible to work and socialise together and to always feel perfectly safe.

‘Anyway...’ Maggie pasted a bright smile on her face. ‘Even though I’m not a bridesmaid, I think I will wear a dress. *This* dress.’

‘Good choice.’ Laura encouraged Harrison to slide off the

couch but kept hold of his hand as she got up. 'Want to help Mummy decide what she's going to wear?'

'I'm tired...' Harrison was climbing back onto the couch. 'Can I watch TV?'

'I'll help Mummy choose,' Maggie offered. 'Let's both go girly with pretty dresses. How often do we get the chance to do that?'

'Almost never,' Laura said. She was smiling now, too. 'It's going to be a great day,' she added. 'I can't wait.'

Maggie had to stop herself crossing her fingers, the way she used to when she was a kid and believed that the gesture excused you if you were about to tell an outright lie.

'Me, too.'

* * *

'You're a brave man, Cooper Sinclair.'

'Why is that, Joe?' His colleague was grinning. 'Because I'm taking the plunge and getting married?'

'Nah... You're on a hilltop in famously windy Wellington and you're wearing a skirt.'

It was more than a hilltop. They were actually standing on the top of a cliff, with a spectacular view of the sea and islands through the archway that would frame the ceremony due to begin shortly. And, yes, while it was a gloriously sunny day, the currents of air were enough to be stirring the hemline of the kilt Cooper was wearing.

Cooper snorted. 'What else would a Scotsman wear for the happiest day of his life?' He wasn't looking at Joe, however.

His gaze was fixed on the Castle Cliff resort buildings and he obviously couldn't wait to catch the first glimpse of his bride coming to meet him. He glanced at his watch then—a nervous gesture that was completely out of character.

‘It's time...’

‘I'd better find a seat, then.’ Joe left his friend standing alone and headed for the far side of the last row of white seats that had been arranged in a semi-circle facing the archway. He wasn't at all bothered that the first rows were already full of settled guests. He was happy to be attending this celebration but he didn't want to be too close to the action. Weddings made him a little nervous, too. Didn't Cooper and Fizz realise what a huge risk they were taking? How high the chances were that it wasn't going to turn out to be happy-ever-after? And they had decided to get married because there was a baby on the way. Not that he was going to say anything but it felt a bit close to a death knell to Joe.

Just before he turned to sit down, he noticed another kilt-clad figure appear on an upper balcony of the resort building, a set of bagpipes cradled in his arms. At the same time, three figures were hurrying down the steps from the lower veranda, two of them wearing dresses. The other was a small boy and Joe knew that it must be Laura's son, Harrison, who was apparently in charge of the wedding rings. Laura had to be watching over her son, as she always did, and that meant that the other woman was most likely her flatmate and close friend. He didn't really need the glimpse of sunlight catching blonde curls to light them

up like a halo to confirm his guess.

Maggie...

Joe sat down with a thump and fixed his gaze on the scene ahead of him, where the celebrant had joined Cooper.

The level of discomfort Joe was aware of now was far greater than anything weddings normally engendered. He hadn't seen Maggie for days. Hadn't *wanted* to see her after that shocking conversation at the end of their last shift together, and as the time apart was increasing, so was the level of...what...awkwardness? Certainly tension, anyway.

It wasn't something he'd ever been aware of with Maggie. She was, in fact, probably the only woman he ever felt completely at ease with. Other than Shirley, of course, but the self-appointed housekeeper of the Aratika Rescue Base was a mother figure for everyone there, with zero risk of her wanting anything inappropriate from her relationship with Joe. He'd thought his friendship with Maggie was just as sacrosanct. That they were real friends who trusted each other and that there was no threat of the usual sexual tension that inevitably seemed to develop when he tried to be simply friends with a woman.

The other seats in this back row were filling up quickly from the aisle side as people realised the ceremony was about to start. Joe noticed Don, the base manager, take a seat and then Tom, one of the emergency department consultants at the Royal, took the next seat, leaving only two spaces. Tom was becoming more involved with the base, having taken over the shifts Fizz had

had to relinquish when she'd discovered she was pregnant. Laura went past Joe on the other side, holding Harrison's hand, leading him to where a seat had been saved in the front row, and then there was a swish of blue fabric right in front of Joe.

'Excuse me.'

He pulled his feet closer as Maggie edged past his knees. Seeing Laura and Harrison had been a reminder of the example of successful single parenthood that Maggie was inspired by and that was yet another sharp reminder of the awkwardness that now lay between them. The fact that she was choosing to sit beside him came as something of a relief. Perhaps they could get past what was threatening to be an elephant in the room when they next had the opportunity to talk to each other, let alone the next time they had to work together.

Except that a quick glance showed that the empty seats beside Joe were the only ones available and Maggie chose the one next to Tom, leaving an empty seat between herself and Joe. She flicked him a quick smile of greeting but then turned to say hello to Tom and the slightly nervous way she had avoided more than a split second of eye contact gave Joe an odd jolt of something that he couldn't define but which he definitely didn't like.

Wow...how could a simple, white chair that wasn't even solid suddenly feel like an impenetrable barrier?

The mournful wail of the bagpipe music starting in the background only added to the sensation that something had changed. Or been lost? Something potentially huge?

Like everyone else, Joe turned his head to watch Fizz come out onto the veranda and then walk down the steps towards the central aisle that led to the archway where Cooper was waiting. It was no surprise that she wasn't wearing a white dress. Joe knew that she'd been there and done that once already and that her first husband had been tragically killed in an accident on their honeymoon. Maybe it wasn't even surprising that she'd chosen to wear a bright red dress because that was Fizz all over, wasn't it? Daring as well as confident enough to pull off something so different. Her long, dark hair was hanging loose down her back and she looked gorgeous, Joe decided.

And *so* happy...

No wonder there was a collective sound like people were catching their breath around him. He thought he heard a happy sigh coming from Maggie, too.

Was *she* a believer as well? If she was, why hadn't she already conducted a successful husband hunt? She could have done it years ago and then she wouldn't have had to worry about the clock running out on her reproductive years. She wouldn't have had to even think about alternative routes to motherhood and she wouldn't have tried to involve *him* when bringing a child into the world was, without doubt, the last thing he would ever contemplate doing.

The celebrant welcomed everybody as the wail of the bagpipes finally faded.

'You have all been invited to attend today,' she told the

gathering, 'because you are the family, friends and colleagues of Cooper and Fizz and they want you to witness their commitment to each other and share the joy of that promise.'

Joe sucked in a deep breath. He wasn't feeling particularly joyful right now. It was more than awkwardness filling that space between him and Maggie.

He was angry, that's what it was.

Or maybe it was more that he was sad. He let out that breath in a long sigh. He knew that Maggie had heard that sigh because he could feel the sideways glance he received. Turning his head just a fraction, he could catch a reflection of what he was feeling in her own eyes.

That hint of sadness.

There weren't that many things in life that you could be certain of and a true friendship was one of the most precious things there was. Maggie Lewis had been his favourite person to crew with ever since he'd joined the Aratika Rescue Base and the foundations of that trust between them had been rocked the other day. Possibly even damaged beyond repair judging by the aftershocks. All by a few words. There had been more than sadness in that swift glance they had just shared, however. An impression of something else was lingering. Regret? Along with a desire to put things right?

A flash of guilt threw itself into the confusing mix of emotions that was unsettling Joe right now. It wasn't as if Maggie had done anything wrong. After all, he'd been the one who'd thrown

that anecdote of people using a friend as a sperm donor into the conversation. He just hadn't expected it to come back and bite him and it had only bitten that hard because it had touched a raw spot.

He'd overreacted, hadn't he?

Cooper and Fizz had written their own vows for this ceremony and the message that was coming through loud and clear was the deep friendship that was the basis of their relationship. The trust. How rare and special it was to find someone who felt the same way about you.

That was so true.

Not that Joe wanted to marry Maggie, of course. He had no desire to marry anybody. And he'd never been sexually attracted to her. He could acknowledge that she was a very attractive woman—she just wasn't his type. They had started out as colleagues and had become friends. Just because Cooper and Fizz had added benefits into their friendship that had taken them to a very different level didn't mean that his relationship with Maggie was any less valid.

All too often, in Joe's experience, friendships could outlast marriages.

As their friends exchanged a rather passionate kiss to seal their vows and the congregation clapped and cheered, Joe turned his head to find that Maggie was doing exactly the same thing and turning her head towards him.

This time, the smile they shared felt genuine.

The friendship was still there and there was an astonishing relief to be found in that knowledge. All they needed to do now was clear the air and sweep away the remnants of that disturbing suggestion of him helping her to achieve her dream of motherhood, and what better place to do that than during a party?

* * *

There were photographs against the dramatic backdrop of the cliffs and islands and a spectacular sunset. A live band was setting up for when they were going to provide the music for dancing later on and, in the meantime, there was a great range of wine and beer at the bar and delicious food that wasn't offered in any traditional kind of wedding breakfast. A spit roast was happening in the courtyard garden with an amazing range of vegetables or salads to accompany it and inside one of the reception rooms of the resort a taco station had been set up on a long trestle table.

'It's because we loved the taco nights at your place when Cooper was still living with you,' Fizz told Maggie.

'Yum...' Maggie had opened the lid of a huge container. 'That's proper pulled beef...'

'The taco shells are keeping warm as well.'

Harrison was already holding a shell and Laura was helping him to add shredded lettuce and grated cheese from the bowls further along the table.

'No tomatoes,' he told his mum. 'I hate tomatoes.'

'Sauce?'

‘Only tomato sauce, not that hot stuff.’

Maggie laughed. ‘But you just said you hated tomatoes, Harry.’

The deep voice right behind her after she spoke made her jump. It also made her heart skip a beat. Good grief...when had she ever been nervous to be in Joe’s company before? But the way he’d looked at her when the ceremony had been getting underway—as if she’d done something completely unforgiveable—had made that tension between them feel like it was rapidly escalating. Mind you, the way he’d smiled at the end of the ceremony, when Fizz and Cooper were having their first kiss as husband and wife, had been a glimmer of hope. So was the amusement coating his words when he spoke now.

‘Tomato sauce is different, Maggie. Everybody knows that.’

‘Yeah.’ Harrison nodded, although he’d edged closer to his mother. ‘It doesn’t even taste like tomatoes.’

‘You can have whatever you want on your taco,’ Fizz told him. ‘They’re the rules today.’

‘And I get to stay up late, right?’

‘Let’s see how tired you get,’ Laura cautioned. ‘I don’t want you feeling sick tomorrow.’

‘I’m not going to get tired.’ Harrison was looking determined. ‘Because I know a secret about what’s going to happen later and I have to be awake.’

‘Oh?’ Everybody turned to look at Fizz.

‘Can’t say.’ She grinned. ‘It’s a secret. Harry only knows

because he did so well with his special job today.’ She glanced down at the wedding ring on her hand. ‘And now I’m going to find a beer and make sure my husband has one, too. Enjoy the tacos, you lot.’

Joe was right behind Maggie as she loaded salad and cheese onto the meat in the crisp taco shell. They both added sliced jalapeño peppers and chilli sauce.

Drizzling the super-spicy sauce made Maggie smile. Instead of putting the bottle down again with the other condiments, she handed it to Joe.

‘D’you remember the first time we ever worked together all those years ago?’

‘When we knocked over the chilli sauce bottle on the table because we were both reaching for it at the same time?’

‘And we discovered that there was someone else in the world who like putting hot sauce on scrambled eggs?’

The softening of Joe’s features told Maggie that he was remembering more than those scrambled eggs. That it had been more than a moment of bonding as new colleagues. *The hotter the better* had become a private catchphrase and had ended up becoming a kind of code of encouragement. How many times had they been dispatched to what promised to be a challenging situation and they’d used that code?

This could get hot.

That’s okay. That’s the way we like it, remember?

Yeah...the hotter the better...

She could see the way Joe stilled for a moment, the sauce bottle still in his hands. Then he caught her gaze with the most direct look they'd shared since before that awkward conversation.

'It was the start of a great friendship,' he said quietly.

'One that I hope we still have,' Maggie said, just as softly. It was more than a great friendship, it was the best kind of friendship it was possible to have. She loved Joe and she knew that he felt the same way about her. It was a bond that nothing could break.

'I'm really sorry, Joe,' she added. 'I just wish I could wind the clock back and that I never talked to you about any of that baby stuff.'

'It wasn't entirely your fault. It was me who put the idea into your head.'

'It's not there now. Can we pretend it never happened?'

It seemed that Joe was thinking along the same lines.

'Consider it forgotten,' he said. 'Never to be discussed again.'

'What were we talking about?' Maggie tilted her head. 'I've forgotten.'

They both laughed, reaching for paper towels for what looked likely to be a messy meal, and virtually all of the tension that had been there between them seemed to evaporate with the sound of that laughter.

Normal service had been resumed and thank goodness for that. Maggie could finally relax enough to really enjoy this party to celebrate the wedding of two of her closest friends.

They couldn't really forget about it. Maggie knew that. Some things just couldn't be unheard in the same way that images from things seen could never be erased from your memory cells. But they could pretend to pretend, couldn't they? And maybe that would be enough to make everything all right again.

If nothing else, it was a good start.

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