



*Medical
Romance™*

SUE MACKAY

The Dangers of Dating
Your Boss



Sue MacKay

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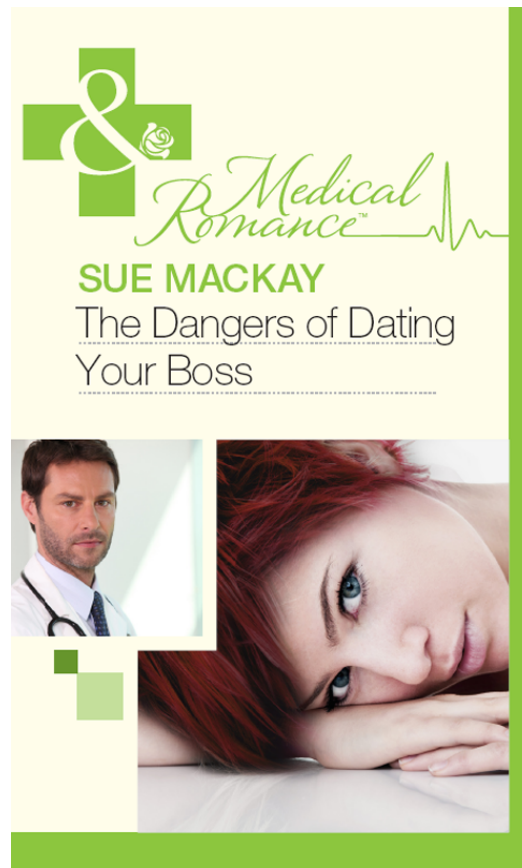
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The Dangers of Dating Your Boss / S. MacKay — «HarperCollins»,

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Jack's hands slid over her back—a caressing movement that stole the air out of her lungs, nullified the common sense trying to take hold of her mind.

When he wrapped his hands over her shoulders and tipped her slightly backwards she knew he was going to kiss her and she was powerless to stop him. She wanted it. Forget right or wrong. This was Jack and she was finally kissing him. Common sense was highly overrated.

His mouth touched hers: softly, tentatively. Seeking what? A connection from the past? A new beginning? She thrilled as his lips moulded with hers. And when she opened her mouth under his her tongue tasted him. Jack went from slow and quiet to fast and hot in an instant. His kiss deepened so quickly Ruby was spinning through space. Her arms gripped him tighter for support, trying to keep herself firmly in the here and now as she tilted further back to allow Jack better access to her mouth.

At last. She was kissing Jack Forbes again. Memories of other kisses flooded her senses. Nothing over those years had changed. They fitted together. They were two halves that needed their matching piece to be complete. And yet this kiss felt different from every other kiss she'd shared with Jack. Filled with need so long held in abeyance. Filled with the promise of new beginnings ...

Dear Reader

Welcome to Wellington, New Zealand's capital city. Affectionately known as Windy Wellington, the city sits on the edge of a large harbour where ferries regularly ply back and forth across the wild Cook Strait to the South Island.

I haven't set a story in a large city before, and have only touched on a very small piece of this one. I love using real settings that I know, because the moment I sit down to write I'm transported to that place. I can share the memories of wandering along a certain beach or walking through a busy street or cycling in the hills.

Ruby and Jack both love Wellington—it's just taken Ruby a long time and some life-changing experiences to realise that. Coming home to settle down is exciting for her, while Jack's finally decided there's got to be more to life and it's probably not in his home town.

I hope you enjoy the journey these two take to overcome their previous broken relationship and to find common ground for starting over ... together.

Cheers!

Sue MacKay

About the Author

With a background of working in medical laboratories and a love of the romance genre, it is no surprise that **SUE MACKAY** writes Medical Romance stories. An avid reader all her life, she wrote her first story at age eight—about a prince, of course. She lives with her own hero in the beautiful Marlborough Sounds, at the top of New Zealand's South Island, where she indulges her passions for the outdoors, the sea and cycling.

Also by Sue MacKay:

SURGEON IN A WEDDING DRESS

RETURN OF THE MAVERICK

PLAYBOY DOCTOR TO DOTING DAD

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The Dangers of Dating Your Boss Sue MacKay



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Behind every author is a great editor.

Thank you, Megan Haslam,
for your patience and wonderful encouragement.

CHAPTER ONE

‘IF I DON’T eat in the next five minutes I’m going to slip into a coma,’ Ruby Smith told her boss and crew partner, Dave.

‘Yeah, yeah. Heard it all before. Didn’t you have breakfast?’ Dave stacked the two medical packs at the helicopter door, ready to be taken into the storeroom and replenished.

‘That was hours ago.’ She glanced at her watch. ‘Six hours ago, to be precise.’ A call had come through as she’d been about to sit down to a hot steak pie from the local bakery. Now they’d just returned from an MVA on State Highway One. They’d airlifted a young man with both femurs broken and one femoral artery torn to Hutt Hospital.

‘Hey, Red, is that you?’ A deep, male voice with a slight rasp called from down on the tarmac.

Ruby’s heart leapt into her throat. Jack? Even after years apart, that voice was as familiar to her as her own. And it still had the power to unravel her carefully put-together resolve to keep him at arm’s length. That voice had been what had first attracted her to Jack, the only man she’d ever loved. The man she’d walked away from. For the dumbest of reasons.

But what was Jack doing here? Today? He wasn’t due to start until Monday, when she’d have been prepared. Right now she was still getting her head around all the ramifications of working with him. Would it be like old times? Jack the consummate professional watching her like a hawk, always teaching her, helping her improve her nursing skills? And would she be listening impatiently, wanting to touch him every time no one was looking? A sigh tickled over her lip. Want to or not, she had to keep her hands to herself. She’d go around with them jammed in her pockets if necessary. She’d moved on, grown up, knew her worth. So if there were a few blips between them as they got used to working together again, she’d survive.

There was no choice. Wellington was home now. Never again would she toss her few possessions into her pack and head away. She’d even burnt that pack against the day wanderlust struck again. She’d done her searching, found what she’d been looking for and sucked up the pain from knowing she’d wasted years of her life because of it. To let Jack back under her skin would risk her newfound and fragile contentment.

She peered out into the glittering winter sun, gripping the doorframe, her knuckles white. Jack, tall and slim, emanated strength in his stance as he stared up at her. Her mouth dried. Solid need sliced through her, heating and freezing her all at once. Need she believed she’d finally wrestled into submission. Jack Forbes. Her new boss and crew partner. Her old lover.

She couldn’t do this. She had to do this. ‘Hi, Jack,’ she managed feebly. *Hi, gorgeous*, her brain mocked her.

He grinned his well-practised, impish grin that had always got him everything he wanted, including her. ‘Get your butt out of that flying machine and come say hello to an old mate.’

So that was how he was going to play it. Mates. She could work with that, and it was a better start than she’d hoped for. Ruby jumped down onto the tarmac, grimacing as she jarred her bung knee. Tugging her shoulders back tight, she strode towards the moment she’d been both looking forward to and dreading since returning home to New Zealand. She strode towards Jack, apparently her friend. She hadn’t been sure if she was as over this man as she should be. And now? The jury was out.

‘Jack, it’s great to see you.’ Talk about the understatement of the year. Of her life.

‘Great to see ya, ruby-red girl.’ His old greeting. The one he’d shouted out as he’d come in the door at night, when he’d rolled over in bed in the morning.

Ruby’s heart tripped. Ruby-red girl. Did he even realise what he’d said? She blinked up at him, saw his Adam’s apple bob and shoved down the sense of drowning brought on by that greeting. Fixing a tight smile on her face, she desperately hoped she’d managed to hide the shock blowing through her at the close-up sight of him. Jack had always been a handsome dude, but three years on and wow.

Her fingers tingled. Her stomach crunched. Lust, pure and simple, hot and complex, bubbled through her. Oh, boy, this reunion wasn't supposed to be filled with desire and temptation. Mates, remember? 'To think you're going to be working on the helicopters.'

'Why wouldn't I?' His grin faded. 'I was blown away when I saw *your* name on the staff list. I didn't know you were back in the country, let alone Wellington.' His eyes narrowed as he looked her over with a familiar slow slide down her body that made her blood race and lifted goose-bumps on her skin. Made her want him. Badly.

The whole thing about having to work with Jack had just got monumentally harder. She fought the flare of annoyance that he could make her feel like this so easily after such a long time. 'I know what you mean. To think you'd even consider leaving the emergency department came as a bombshell.' That was the truth.

'I'm full of surprises.' Was that a hint of sarcasm in his tone?

'Maybe I've got a few of my own,' she retorted. Like the house she'd bought and the renovations she was doing to it, like her cute little friend sharing the place with her. If those things didn't astonish Jack then he must have turned to stone over the years she'd been away.

Then a memory swamped her, flattening her with shame.

Three years ago Jack's face had registered shock and disbelief over her biggest surprise ever. 'You're really going? Leaving Wellington? Leaving me?'

I have to. I'm never going to find my father by staying here, and since I've learned he's American it makes sense to go over to the States. Come on, Jack, try to understand. For the first time ever I've got a starting point. How could I not go?' Her hands had trembled so much she'd dropped her dinner plate and splattered her meal all over the floor. 'You could come with me,' she'd whispered in desperation.

'Sure, Red, just drop everything and leave. Like it's that easy. I've got nearly a year to go before I qualify as an emergency specialist. Stopping in midstream just isn't possible.' He'd taken her cold hands in his. 'You could wait for me.'

She'd shaken her head, beating down the urge to fling herself in his arms and hold on for ever. 'I can't. I've waited all my life to meet my dad and this is the closest I've ever got to finding him. This is so important to me. I have to go.' Jack had been just as important, maybe more, but she'd foolishly believed finding her parent had been paramount.

Jack's face had been bleak, his eyes dark with sadness. 'Until you do this you're never going to be completely happy, are you? Not even with me?'

She hadn't been able to answer him for the lump in her throat.

That was when the arguments had begun, almost as a defence mechanism to protect their shattering hearts. They'd agreed they had to make a clean break but the days before she'd flown out had been intense as they'd crammed as much loving as possible into the little time left.

Now Jack lifted a hand in a stop sign, worry darkening his all-seeing eyes. 'Hey, let's leave the past alone. After all, it isn't called the past for nothing.'

Ouch. 'True. This is a different job; we're probably different people now.' She certainly was. Forcing a smile, she asked, 'So how's life been treating you? You're looking pretty good for an old guy.'

His smoky grey eyes lightened, twinkled, the crinkles at their corners bunching up. That heart-stopping smile lifted his mouth. And cramped her stomach. 'Can't complain. And less of the "old guy" stuff. Turning thirty was an event, not a disaster.'

So why the sudden doubt reflecting back at her? Jack had always been confident, in control. Doubt hadn't even been in his vocabulary. These days she wasn't in a position to ask anything personal. Not that he'd tell her anyway. Talking about the things that bothered him wasn't in his make-up. He took everything life tossed at him and moved on with a nonchalance that hid his true feelings. He was a rock. The person everyone could, and did, rely on in all situations. He didn't ever ask anyone to prop him up.

So she knocked on her head in fun. 'Of course, you've had one of those big birthdays.' She did a quick tap dance on the spot, checked him out. 'I hope that means everything's okay with you, no bits rotting and dropping off your wrinkled old frame.'

'Heck, Red, I've missed your cheek. No one else is ever so damned rude to me.' Suddenly Ruby's feet were off the ground as Jack swung her up against his hard-muscled frame and engulfed her in a bear hug.

'So who's been keeping you in line, then?' she gasped against his chest. His heart pounded under her ear. Strong and steady, like Jack. His arms were muscular and warm around her back. Just like old times. As her bones liquefied with longing, she wriggled to be set free in case she did something dumb like press in against him and hold on for ever.

Jack tightened his grip, but he didn't answer her question. 'You're looking good, girl. Even with that weird spiky hair and the glaring scarlet colour you've dunked it in,' he murmured against her ear, sending thrilling shivers down her spine. 'What happened to that beautiful, sherry-coloured mane?'

It had reminded her of Jack too much. Every time she'd looked in a mirror after they'd broken up her heart had snapped in half all over again. 'It was a nuisance whenever I put my headpiece on in the 'copter.'

'Fair enough.' His disappointed sigh blew against her cheek. His arms tightened further. 'Pity, though.'

She murmured against his jacket, 'You would say that. You didn't have to look after the darned stuff.' But he had spent hours brushing the waist-length hair that had been her one vanity. She quickly added, in case he thought she was stirring up trouble, 'It was a full-time job.'

When his fingers pressed a little harder into her waist Ruby felt a pull of the love they'd once shared. A steady love emanating from Jack's goodness, strength and caring. Added to by her quirky sense of humour and the wonder she'd felt at someone so smart wanting *her*. Not even her beloved mother had made her feel as good, as safe, as Jack had. And just as she'd done with her mother's love, she'd fought that feeling, turned it against herself, shunned Jack's love for her own needs, thereby ruining something very special and worth holding on to at all costs. Hindsight sucked. Big time.

Would she get a second chance?

Ruby breathed Jack in. The scent of pine needles teased her and brought back recollections of long, frenetic afternoons spent making love. So he still wore the same aftershave. What else did he do the same? Was he even the same person? Not if that doubt in his eyes was an indicator.

Then, as suddenly as he'd lifted her into his arms, he plonked her back on the ground. She stumbled as she struggled to maintain her balance. A firm grip on her elbow helped, until a zing of heat spiralled up the inside of her arm, warming the sensitive skin.

'Careful.' His tone was suddenly abrupt.

'Thanks.' Tugging her arm free, she rubbed hard to dissipate the heat he'd so easily generated. Looking up, she found Jack studying her with the same disconcerting expression in those eyes that had haunted her from the moment she'd walked away from him at the airport. The expression that said you didn't know what you had until you lost it. How true that had turned out to be.

Jack jerked his head up, looking beyond them, as though suddenly remembering where he was, who he was talking to. He would soon be in charge of the Wellington Helicopter Rescue base and she was a crew member. 'So you're now a paramedic on the rescue helicopters. That's quite a sideways step from the emergency nurse you desperately wanted to be.'

'Close enough to the same thing. Emergency department, ambulance crew.' Her spread hand flipped left and right. 'No different from what you're doing by taking up this position, I'd have thought.' She strove to avoid what he was really saying: that she never finished anything she started. How could she? She'd always been too busy moving on to stay anywhere long enough to see any project through.

But for the first time in her life she had completed something, something very important to her. A genuine certificate hung on her bedroom wall. Signed by the Chief of Ambulance Services, San Francisco.

Ruby Smith, Advanced Paramedic. Honours. Right alongside the citation for bravery during duty. And on the other side hung the nursing certificate she'd finally obtained in the States.

If only her mother could see those certificates. She'd have been pleased with her daughter for once. The only other person she'd wanted to share her success with at the time now stood in front of her and it was too late. He might know she'd finally qualified at something but he hadn't been there to share in the sheer wonder of achievement. Because of all her stupid mistakes she'd been alone.

From the day she decided to head back here she'd known she'd eventually catch up with Jack. This was the first city she'd ever returned to. She'd come back for Jack, because of Jack. Wellington was Jack. And yet she'd been dragging her heels about calling him. Afraid to find out he'd moved on and barely remembered her.

Ruby closed her eyes briefly. This was way too hard. *Be strong, be tough.* She repeated the mantra that had got her through the last few years, and then diverted the conversation to safe ground. Again.

'I didn't think you were starting with us until next week.' Ruby huffed out a breath and tipped her head back to stare up at him. 'Did I read the wrong memo?'

He grinned that grin, though his eyes were a little slow in keeping up. 'I've been at the aero club for a couple of hours. Since the club's almost next door I figured I'd cruise over here and meet whoever was on duty.'

'Aero club? Your brother still flying those little things?' She glanced across the tarmac at the tiny planes pegged down outside the clubrooms.

'No, Steve's on jumbos these days. It's me who's flying those Tomahawks you're staring at.' A deep chuckle rumbled through him. Another familiar, heart-warming thing she'd missed, desperately at times when she'd been terribly lonely.

'No way.' She grinned as she swivelled back to gape at him. Jack had never had time for play. 'Really? You're learning to fly?'

'And loving every minute I get in the air.' Another chuckle. But it sounded brittle. Something was wrong with this picture. Was happy Jack not really so happy?

'Can you take me up one day?' Bad question. Mouth on the run.

Taking a backward step, Jack told her firmly, 'Sorry, no passengers allowed until I've got my licence.'

He needn't look so relieved. 'How many hours have you flown?'

'Twenty-seven and I need at least fifty before my flight test.' He looked towards the helicopter. 'Want to introduce me?'

Yikes. She'd totally forgotten Dave waiting for her to help tidy up the aircraft's interior. She spun back to the 'copter looming above her, talking to Jack over her shoulder, trying not to stare at his beloved face. 'I thought you two would've met already since it's his job you're taking over.'

'When I came out here with the director, Dave was away on a job.'

'Then you'll both have lots to discuss.' She called up, 'Dave, come out here for a moment. Please.'

Dave poked his head out. 'So how come you didn't kill this guy for calling you Red?'

Because Jack had always called her that. She hated anyone else using the nickname because it tainted her sweet memories of him, and played havoc with the sexy ones as well. 'He's going to be my boss.'

'Didn't stop you reading the Riot Act when I dared to call you Red.' Dave looked across at Jack, then back at her, a hint of worry in his eyes. 'So you two already know each other.' Was he wondering if this would affect the job situation? If it did then Jack could swap crews.

‘We worked together once.’ In another, totally different life. Ruby gritted her teeth. ‘I was a trainee nurse, Jack was a bossy intern.’

Jack grunted. ‘Me? Bossy? I’d have given you that hat, Red.’

‘Medicine’s a small world.’ The older man smiled down at Jack. ‘Well, hi, there, anyway, welcome aboard. You’re in for some adventures for sure.’

‘There’ll definitely be some interesting days,’ Ruby seconded her partner. Like when the weather was atrocious and any flying became scary. She never admitted to those fears, just tightened her harness and pretended nothing was wrong. Now she officially introduced the two men. ‘Dave, this is Jack Forbes.’ She watched them size each other up in a man kind of way as they reached to shake hands.

They must’ve decided the other was okay because within moments Dave handed down the packs to Ruby and invited Jack on board for a cursory rundown on how things worked.

‘I’ll leave you two to it,’ Ruby said as she slung one pack over her shoulders. ‘When I’ve topped these up, I’ll put a brew on.’ And finally get to eat that pie. It’d be cold and congealed but right now it made her mouth water and her stomach expand with hope.

Jack reached for the second heavy bag. ‘I’ll take this one in for you.’

Ruby grabbed it out of his hand. The bags were heavy but she never, ever let the men carry them for her, even on the days her damaged knee played up. Hauling them was part of her job. ‘I’m fine with it. Dave’s got lots to show you.’

‘I’m not a greenhorn, Red. I’ve done the training, know where everything is kept, how to activate the winch, how to use the radio.’ Exasperation tinged his voice.

‘Still, each ‘copter has a slightly different configuration. You might as well take a look with Dave while it’s quiet.’

Jack shook his head. ‘And I thought I was in charge.’

‘Not until tomorrow.’ Ruby winked at him. ‘And only once you’ve been out for three retrievals.’

Not entirely true but the crews checked out a newbie on the first few trips before accepting him or her completely. Being an A and E specialist with loads of experience wouldn’t save his backside. Working with the limited resources they carried in the helicopter was very different from being in a fully equipped emergency department, not to mention the situations they often found themselves in.

Ruby saw a frown developing on Jack’s forehead. He’d hate her telling him to take a back seat, but he’d better get used to it. The other crew members would be tougher.

His eyes narrowed. ‘Three? First I’ve heard of it.’

‘Don’t tell me that you didn’t keep an eye on any new staff in the emergency department?’

‘Of course I did. It goes with the territory,’ he snapped.

Where had that come from? ‘Relax, we’re a friendly lot. You’ll be a perfect fit in our team.’

Jack blinked, flexed and shook his hands, loosened his shoulders, then pushed a cautious smile across his mouth. ‘You’re presuming I haven’t taken up any edgy hobbies lately.’

‘You betcha.’ One thing she could be sure of, he didn’t do edgy. Except he was now learning to fly. For Jack, that really was putting himself out there, a bit like hanging off a cliff on a dodgy rope. Who was this Jack? She didn’t entirely recognise him and yet he looked the same. More mature, more handsome, sexier than ever but still the same. Yet something was different. That flicker of doubt in his eyes, that sudden annoyance with her, for starters.

Maybe she was looking too hard. More likely he was reacting to seeing her again. Not easy for either of them.

Ruby headed for the hangar before she got tangled up in trying to solve the puzzle. The next four months would give her plenty of time to sort Jack out. Not to mention her own mixed-up feelings towards him.

Jack’s hands gripped his hips as he watched Red lug those bags across the tarmac. She displayed all the nonchalance of a weightlifter. Her slight, short frame was taut, her boots heavy as they trod the

concrete. She'd already got to him. Anger flared quickly, fizzed along his veins. This was supposed to be the start of a whole new life for him, not a revisiting of the old one. He'd broken his heart over her once. That had been bad luck. To let it happen again would be plain careless.

If he had known she was back in town, would he have quit his Head of Department position? Damn right he would have. Ruby had long given up the right to alter his life decisions. And this job was the result of those decisions.

He tossed caution aside, and called, 'Hey, Red, I'm going to give you a hand.'

She turned slowly, balancing carefully, smiling widely, fixedly. 'Got two perfectly good ones of my own, thanks.'

A familiar 'don't fool with me' look had snapped into her big green eyes. Was it because he dared to question her capabilities? Was she more confident these days? Or better at hiding her insecurities?

Jack tried to grin back. He didn't do so well. 'That was my last offer.'

'No worries.'

Was she favouring her left leg? 'Did you jar your leg when you jumped down? You look like you're limping.'

Her smile tightened further, warning lights switched on in those piercing eyes. 'I'm perfectly fit, thank you.'

'I don't doubt you are but I'm allowed to show an interest in my colleagues.' With a fierce flick of his shoulders he filed her limp in the dossier in his mind. For now. Remain aloof with her. Do not get involved. Was there a textbook on how to behave around ex-girlfriends?

'She's a tough one,' Dave said behind him. 'Doesn't like any of the men singling her out to give her a break with some of the heavy stuff.'

Huh? Since when? 'Ruby wasn't always like that.' Jack clambered inside the gleaming red helicopter. 'Guess I don't know her as well as I used to,' he added as he looked around the compact interior. At last the excitement he was supposed to feel for this job began leaking into him.

'People change,' Dave muttered.

Jack winced. Yeah, that was exactly why he was here instead of running the emergency department. 'I'm sure we'll get along just fine.'

Dave said, 'Funny thing but Ruby's tough-girl attitude actually makes all of us try to do more for her than you'd normally expect. On and off base. All the crews are close, and we spend a lot of time together, but with Ruby we seem to go those extra miles, if you know what I mean?'

'I'll keep that in mind.' And keep my distance. Going the extra mile might take him a lot closer to Red than was healthy for his future plans. Or for his body if his overheated reaction when he'd held her minutes ago was anything to go by. How would he put distance between them when they were stuffed inside this cramped area?

'Good.' Dave turned back to the stretcher he was cleaning.

Jack studied the man he'd be relieving. 'You worried I'll have scared her off by the time you come back?' Ruby would go, but not because of him. Moving on was her *modus operandi*. Ironic that soon he would be heading away too.

'We've got an excellent group of very professional people working here now and I'd hate to see the status quo change. If my wife hadn't gone and bought our tickets and booked our tours, I probably wouldn't be going to Europe this year.' Dave's brow creased. 'Which is why Gail did it, of course. Women are very crafty, aren't they?'

'They can be.' But not Red. She was more like a moth continuously flying at the light, getting nowhere. Always a tight coil of tense muscles with a sharp tongue to match. Jack used to wind her up just so they could kiss and make up later. He'd be wise to remember that in the weeks to come and ignore any outbursts. There'd be no making up now. Forget those heady kisses, the hottest sex he'd ever experienced and a lot of plain old fun and laughter. Forget how she could melt into absolute sweetness at the most unexpected moments.

Start with remembering her name was Ruby. Not Red. And that she wasn't his type of woman. He took another glance outside, his eyes tracking the one woman he'd ever cared about. His gut twisted. Red's sassy butt still swayed saucily. Sex in boots. Hot sex in a jumpsuit. 'It's been a while.'

Since he'd seen her. Since he'd held her in his arms and kissed her senseless. Since—Stop. Tormenting himself would only lead to trouble. But she'd felt wonderful when he'd lifted her up against his chest minutes ago. Warm, lithe, exciting.

'Odd that she didn't mention knowing you.' Dave's words crashed into his brain, slamming him back to reality.

Words that stung. Hard and deep. He shouldn't be surprised. When he and Red agreed to split they'd both made it perfectly clear there'd be no going back on their decision. But surely that hadn't meant they couldn't acknowledge one another. 'It was a few years ago. How long has she been working with you?'

'Two months. Came straight from San Francisco.'

'Two months?' Jack all but shouted. If Ruby had kicked him in the guts it couldn't have hurt any worse. Two months and not a word. Talk about putting him in his place. Sensing Dave's eagle eye on him, he bit down on the oath hovering on the tip of his tongue and tried for casually unconcerned. 'I've got a lot of catching up to do with her.' But not on this shift.

'She certainly has great work experience. Her credentials are superb.'

'It's the first time Ruby's actually stuck at anything long enough to qualify.' Amazing. And as far as he knew it was also the first time she'd returned anywhere. Had she finally tracked down her father and dealt with the past? That was the only explanation for her spending long enough in one place to put in the required hours to become a paramedic. Did that mean her angst had disappeared? Did a dog suddenly grow wool on its back?

Jack asked, 'Is Ruby still taking on everyone head first? Like she has to knock them down before they get to her?' He shouldn't be asking Dave, but he was speaking boss to boss here, needing to know about a member of his crew.

Believe that and he'd believe anything.

Dave studied him thoughtfully. Was he having doubts about leaving his job in Jack's hands? 'Can't say as I've noticed. And working in stressful situations on a daily basis I think I would've. Is that the Ruby you used to know?'

Already regretting his question, Jack nodded. He'd hate for Dave to think differently of Ruby because of him. 'She used to have a few issues that distressed her big time but from what you're saying maybe she's sorted them out.'

'Some relationships don't stand the test of time, do they?' Dave was studying him with a glint in his eye suggesting he'd somehow be watching out for Ruby even from afar, making sure his replacement didn't upset her. Nice to know she had such a good friend. The man hadn't finished. 'But others can.'

Shaking his head, Jack muttered, 'Not this one.'

Dave shrugged. 'That's a shame. I get the feeling Ruby's ready to settle down.'

'Then you really don't know her.' Ruby didn't do settling down. Ever. Not like him. He'd been happy to stay in this place where he'd lived all his life. Until recently. Now he was so restless he itched. He was on the move, done with being the man everyone relied on to be a permanent fixture for them, of always being around when others found their lives going pear-shaped. It was time for his own adventures, and no one, not even a certain scarlet-haired woman, was going to upset this. *Look out, world, Jack Forbes is coming. Yeah, right.*

Jack forced a smile as he continued to watch her disappearing inside. She was as sexy as ever. His body had recognised her instantly. That slow burn starting in the pit of his belly when he'd seen her in the helicopter. And now it had spread out, down and up, engulfing every cell of his body. He wanted her. As strongly as he always had. *Great to see ya, ruby-red girl.*

Enough. Just seeing Red made him reel. Why he'd lifted her into that hug was beyond him, but nothing could've stopped him when she'd dropped to the ground right in front of him. To feel her body along the length of his, to touch that spiky hair with his chin, had brought longing charging through him. He flicked his finger against his thumb. *Dumb ass.*

So much for keeping everything on a boss to crew member basis. Should he hug every member? For a brief moment with Ruby in his arms he'd felt as though they'd never been apart. As if all that pain hadn't happened, hadn't torn him into shreds.

Jack turned and deliberately began studying the interior of the aircraft that would become a big part of his life for the next few months. 'It's a bit of a squeeze.'

Dave grinned. 'Takes some getting used to.'

'And I'm always at the front,' a man drawled from the other side of the bulkhead. 'Along with Slats. He's ducked into the hangar for a minute.'

Dave grinned. 'Chris, get through here and meet Jack.' To Jack he said, 'This guy is one hell of a pilot. You want him with you when the sky's full of bumps.'

Jack shook hands with the man who didn't look old enough to have left school let alone know how to fly one of these massive helicopters. 'Good to meet you. How many hours have you done on this bird?'

Chris laughed. 'More than you'd ever believe. For the record, I stopped drinking milk thirty years ago.'

The man had to be pulling his leg. The same age as him? Nah, couldn't be. But Chris looked like he meant it. 'Bet you have to produce your ID every time you buy a beer.'

'Damned pain at times,' Dave muttered. 'But that innocent face pulls the girls, make no mistake.'

Jack could believe it. What about Ruby? Was she a fan of the pilot? As in had she been out with him, been to bed with him? A cold knot formed in Jack's belly. There had to be a man in her life. A very attractive, sexy woman always had a man, and Red was both. But it wasn't his place to comment, despite the chill creeping over his skin. Red was a free agent. Like him. The fact that they were going to work together again didn't give him any rights over who she went out with. *So behave, Jacko.*

Jack dragged his hand down his cheek. As her boss, he had to learn about her situation, as he did for all the staff. If anyone's private life was out of sync over anything at all he'd want to know about it. Happy staff meant a happy work environment, which in turn meant everyone pulled together to give an exceptionally good service to the public.

Just remember her name was Ruby, not Red, and he should be able to keep everything in perspective. Haa!

CHAPTER TWO

JULIE, the part-time office lady, stood in the middle of the hangar, staring over at the helicopter. ‘So who’s the hottie?’

Ruby grinned at her. ‘Jack Forbes.’

‘As in Dave’s replacement? No way. He’s got a body to die for. And that face, that grin ...’ Julie spluttered to a halt, her eyes enormous.

Ruby shook her head. ‘Too hot to handle?’

Flapping her hands at her cheeks, Julie replied, ‘Remind me to bring my oven mitts to work tomorrow.’

‘Got two pairs?’ There was no point denying Jack’s good looks. That would only make people question her ability to see.

‘Guess you’ll need them more than me, since you’ll be working alongside him. Wonder what he’s like behind those looks?’

‘Imperturbable,’ she muttered. Gorgeous, funny, trustworthy, lovable Jack.

‘You already know him?’ Julie’s perfectly styled eyebrows rose as she continued to stare in the direction of the helicopter.

‘From the days when I was training to be a nurse.’ She’d spent seven months in Wellington, on her way from Nelson to somewhere else, which, on the death of her mother, had turned out to be Seattle. Her training had spread over four cities, and had to be the most erratic on record.

‘You weren’t an item? You know, had a doctors-and-nurses thing going on?’

They’d certainly had something going on, something very hot. Don’t forget the love. There’d been plenty of that too. But not enough to keep them together. What if she was incapable of loving someone enough to get through all the things that got tossed up along the way?

She shuddered, shoved that idea out of the way and said to Julie, ‘If I didn’t know how happily married you were, I’d be arranging a date for you with Jack.’ If he wasn’t already in a relationship with the stunning, lithe blonde Ruby had seen him with in a café four weeks ago. Blondie had been as close to Jack as sticking plaster, and he hadn’t been objecting. Ruby tripped on an uneven piece of concrete. Her knee jagged. She sucked air through her teeth and swore to be more careful.

Julie chuckled. ‘Looking’s fine. It’s the touching that gets people into trouble.’

Ruby winced. Didn’t she know it? Touching Jack had always led to a lot of up-close involvement, a conflagration, so there’d be absolutely no touching this time round. Huge problems lurked there that she wasn’t ready to face. Jack was her past, no matter how much she suddenly wished otherwise. She’d hurt him once, she wouldn’t do that to him again. Or to herself. She headed the subject to safer ground. ‘How come you’re here on a Sunday?’

Julie told her, ‘I’m taking tomorrow morning off so I can go on a school trip with my girls. There’s a pile of reports that need filing with the health department before Wednesday so here I am.’

‘I’d better get these bags sorted.’ Ruby reached the storeroom, exhaling the breath she’d been holding while studying Jack. The sight of him made her giddy, while being near him, being held in that embrace, had made her feel somehow complete. As only Jack had ever made her feel. Damn him. If she’d stayed in Wellington way back then she’d have saved herself a lot of anguish with her father. *And* she’d still be in a relationship with Jack.

Or would she? They’d both had a lot of personal issues to sort out that might’ve strained their relationship to the point it couldn’t survive. Could be they’d both needed to grow up. Ruby blinked. Definitely true of her. Not so sure about Jack. Did he still resent his father for leaning too hard on him for support? How strange that set-up had been. Parents were supposed to look out for their kids, not the other way round. But of course Jack had never gone into any detail about his family so she only had half the story.

Grabbing at airway tubes, she quickly topped up the bags, while musing on the past. Staying put in one place had been an alien concept for her. That she'd even considered stopping here three years ago spoke volumes about her feelings for Jack. But in the end the forces that had driven her relentlessly onward all her life had won out. Not even for the love of her life, Jack, could she have given up something that had eaten at her as far back as she could recall.

Julie stood in the doorway. 'You planning on smashing those vials or what?'

Ruby looked at the replacement drugs she'd just rammed into their slots. 'Guess not.'

'Mr Gorgeous has got to you already, hasn't he?'

Unfortunately, yes. 'I'll get over it. You wanted me for something?'

'Can you translate Jason's writing for me?' Julie held a report form out to her. 'Sometimes I wonder if medical staff do a 101 course in Scribble.'

'Doctors say it's because they're always frantically busy.' At least that was what Jack used to tell her.

Jack. Jack. Jack. Suddenly everything came back to him. Already there was no avoiding him. It was so unfair. She'd come here first, this was her job, her sanctuary. There were plenty of places out there for an emergency specialist to work. *Why pick this one, Jack?* Despair crunched inside her. It was hard enough getting her life on track and keeping it there, without the added difficulty of having to spend twelve hours a day with a man who knew the old Ruby. And who was going to struggle to believe the new version she'd made herself into—if he'd even take the time to get to know her again. And suddenly she really, really wanted him to.

Julie laughed. 'That's a cop-out. But, then, most people blame texting for their appalling spelling too. Lazy, I reckon.' She turned for her office. 'I've put the kettle on.'

'Ta. I'll tell the guys.' Ruby cringed. A cop-out. Her father had come up with a million reasons for never coming to New Zealand to meet her, all of them cop-outs. If only she'd believed her mother, whom she'd badgered incessantly all her life for more information about the airman she'd imagined to be a hero. But her mother had only ever said Ruby was better off not knowing him.

As a child Ruby had waited for him to turn up bearing gifts and hugs. He would tell her he was home for good and that they'd have a happy life doing all the things her mother couldn't afford to do. Not until she'd packed up her mother's home after her death did Ruby learn her dad was American and had been in the US Air Force. Her parents had met when her father's plane had stopped in Christchurch for a few days on the way to Antarctica.

Finally it hadn't been too difficult to finally track down the man who'd spawned her. Reality had been harsh. The hero of her childhood had turned out to be a total nightmare. Her humiliation at her father's lifestyle equalled her embarrassment at how badly she'd treated her mother over the years. Then had come the acute disappointment at the realisation she'd given up Jack for that man.

The Greaser—she no longer called him her father—was a good-looking man who'd used his abundant charm to marry into a fortune and produce offspring to keep everyone onside, especially his wealthy father-in-law, while he philandered his way through half his town's women.

Outside, Ruby heaved one of the replenished packs up into the helicopter. 'Kettle's boiled.' At last she'd get to eat that sorry-looking pie. Her stomach rolled over in happy anticipation.

Jack took the pack and strapped it into place. 'We're about done in here.'

She bent down for the other bag, grimacing as she lifted the heavy weight up.

'Here, give me that.' Jack reached down and took the load from her, his fingers brushing hers.

Instant heat sizzled up her arms. Clenching her hands at her sides, she spoke too loudly. 'Thanks. It goes—'

'Over there by the stretcher,' Jack finished with a growl, his eyebrows nearly meeting in the middle of his forehead. His gaze appeared stuck on a spot behind her head while shock flicked through his eyes. So he'd felt the same sparks too. The sparks that made everything so much more difficult.

‘Glad you’ve got it sussed.’ It was important. If any equipment got put away in the wrong place, it could delay things in an emergency.

‘It’s not rocket science.’ A glint in his eye warned her he wasn’t happy with her telling him anything about the helicopter.

‘You didn’t used to be so touchy.’ But he had touched her often.

Jack dropped down beside her, and unsure of him, she tensed, waiting for him to bawl her out, ready to meet him head on. Instead he stole the breath from her by saying, ‘So, a paramedic, eh? Did you ever finish your nursing certificate?’

‘Advanced paramedic, actually.’

‘Sorry, advanced paramedic.’ His eyebrows rose. ‘That’s fantastic. I’m glad you qualified. You certainly have the smarts.’

She straightened a little at his compliment. ‘Yes, I did finish the year on the wards required to finalise my nurse’s practising certificate.’ She’d worked extremely hard to get all her qualifications. Not being satisfied with a pass, she’d aimed for the highest grades possible. That had been the first good turning point in her life. Jack could raise his eyebrows all he liked but he wouldn’t dent her pride in her accomplishments. ‘I trained on the ambulances in San Francisco. Then during the last four months there I took a rotation on the rescue helicopters, which stood me in good stead for this job.’ She’d found her niche. Nothing, nobody would make her give it up. Not a bung knee. Definitely not Jack.

‘San Francisco, eh?’ His tone was acid and he stared straight ahead as they walked towards the hangar and the staffrooms.

Beside him she grinned, refusing to be intimidated by his attitude. He might think he still knew her but, boy, oh, boy, he didn’t have a clue. She’d returned to Wellington, this time permanently. This was the first city in a long line of cities that she’d come back to. Might as well get some of the details out of the way, let him have his ‘I told you so’ moment. ‘I started in Seattle, then went to Vancouver. I really loved Canada but couldn’t get a job without a work permit. Back in the States I headed down to Kansas, LA, San Diego and finally San Francisco.’ She wasn’t going to enlighten him about her reasons for all that tripping around. Not yet anyway. Not unless they got past being mates. Which, right now, looked doubtful. *Unfortunately.*

‘When did you find time to fit in your training?’ Strong acid.

‘I lived in San Fran for two years, ample time to qualify. My nursing training put me ahead on the course when I started on the ambulance.’ And she’d focused entirely on her job, no sexy distractions anywhere in sight.

‘Two years in one spot?’ The acid sweetened up a little. ‘Did you ever come back here for a visit?’

‘No. Too busy.’ And, because they’d agreed their break-up was final, there’d been nothing, no one, to come back for.

‘Where are you living now?’

‘I bought a villa on Mount Victoria.’ Glancing sideways, she saw his eyebrows lift, his lips tighten, and she braced herself.

His words dripped sarcasm. ‘Don’t tell me you’re settling down? Not you. Come on, I bet you’ve still got that backpack in the corner of your wardrobe, waiting for the day you’ve had enough of Wellington.’

‘Long gone, fallen apart from overuse.’ Not a great testament to her reliability. But, ‘I’m renovating the house. It’s so out of date and colder than an iceberg now that winter’s here. The electricity and plumbing need completely redoing, not to mention the antiquated kitchen and a bathroom requiring a total refit.’ All of which were already guzzling up cash like a thirsty dog.

‘You haven’t exactly answered my question. How long do you think you’ll be around this time?’ His mouth was still tight, but his eyebrows were back in place. ‘You never showed any interest in owning a house. Too much of a tie, you reckoned, if I recall correctly.’

Which, of course, he did. But that had been aeons ago. And deep down she had wanted a home but fear of not being able to make a success of it had driven her to deny the need. What had she ever known about setting up a permanent home? Continuing to ignore his underlying disbelief, she said, 'The villa's eighty-nine years old, and showing its age. But I love it. There's so much potential.'

'Oh, right. You'll be here until you've done the house up. A quick lick of paint? Some new carpet?' He held the door to the staff kitchen open for her. 'Can't quite picture you as a house renovator.'

'Give me a break. I've never had the opportunity before.' And they both knew that had been her fault.

Behind her Dave piped up. 'Ruby's a dab hand at pulling down walls. You should see her swinging a hammer.'

'That's the best bit,' she agreed, grateful for Dave's support.

Jack peered down at her. 'You do know what you're doing, Ruby? Has a builder looked over your plans? Or are you leaping in feet first and knocking out parts of the house any old how? You could bring the roof down on your head if you take out a load-bearing wall.'

'Tea or coffee?' she asked sweetly, fighting the urge to hit him. Of course she knew what she was doing. 'I have expert help.' Chris had been a builder until he'd decided there had to be more excitement to life and learned to fly helicopters. He'd been more than happy to take a look at the house and tell her what she could and couldn't do to it. He'd also put her in touch with a reliable draughtsman who fully understood her need to keep the house in period while modernising the essentials.

'Coffee, thanks.' Jack dropped onto a chair at the table. Questions still clouded his eyes.

'Dave, Chris?' Outside, the rotors of the second rescue helicopter began slowing down. Ruby got out more mugs for the other crew. 'Where's Slat?'

'Right here.' A short, wiry man sauntered in and handed Dave some paperwork.

Chris sat down and introduced Jack to his offsider before returning to the previous conversation. 'Ruby's got everything under control with the house, Jack. We made sure of that the moment we learned what she was up to. She's one very organised lady. And damned determined when she sets her mind to something.'

'Here you go.' Ruby slid the filled mugs across the table towards the men.

Jack's eyebrows were on the move again. 'Ruby? Organised?' His eyes widened and he turned to her. 'Have you had a total mind make-over since I saw you last?' He certainly didn't have any hang-ups about everyone knowing they used to know each other.

'Sort of.' She shrugged off his criticism. 'I definitely don't rush things like a sprinter out of the starter's block any more.'

Jack told Chris, 'Three years ago, if she'd wanted a wall taken out, she'd have taken it out, regardless of load bearing or any other constraints.'

Chris laughed. 'Sometimes it's hard to slow Ruby down once she gets going with that mallet, but she's very conscious of making the best out of this house. It's going to be well worth all her efforts.'

Jack pressed his lips together. Holding back a retort? Then he headed to the sink, poured the coffee away and began making another one. Without milk.

'Oh, sorry.' She'd made it the way he used to drink it. Silly girl. She should've asked, not presumed, she knew.

'Not a problem.'

Leaning back against the small bench, Ruby folded her arms over her abdomen, holding her mug in one hand. Her pie was heating in the microwave. She put distance between her and Jack, all too aware of the sparks that would fly if they touched. Trying not to watch as he stirred the bottom out of his coffee mug was hard after all those years of wondering about him; yearning for his touch, his kisses, even his understanding. She remembered how those long fingers now holding the teaspoon used to trip lightly over her feverish skin, sensitising her from head to toe.

He glanced over. 'What?'

'Nothing.' Thoughtlessly she laid a hand on his upper arm then snatched it back as his eyebrows rose. Dropping onto a chair, she surreptitiously continued to study him over the rim of her mug. There were a few more crinkles at the corners of his eyes, an occasional grey strand on his head. His tall frame still didn't carry any excess weight, but when he'd held her he'd felt more muscular than before. Had he started working out? In a gym? Not likely. But, then, how was she to know?

On her belt the pager squawked out a message, as it did on Dave's. He said, 'I'll get the details.'

'Damn it, when do I get to eat?' She spun around to empty her coffee into the sink and bumped into Jack. As she snatched the microwave open, she clamped down on the sweet shivers dancing over her skin. 'Lukewarm's better than no pie at all,' she muttered, before sinking her teeth into the gluggy pastry and racing for the helicopter behind Chris and Slats. Would lukewarm Jack be better than no Jack at all? At least she was getting away from him, and he'd have gone by the time they got back.

As Ruby clambered up into the 'copter Dave called out, 'You're picking up a cardiac arrest patient from the interisland ferry.' He came closer, Jack on his heels. 'Ruby, I'm sending Jack in my place. Show him the ropes, will you?'

'Sure,' she spluttered. Didn't anyone around here listen to her? Couldn't they hear her silent pleas? She did not want to be confined inside the 'copter with Jack until she'd had a few days to get her mixed-up emotions under control. Her heart thudded against her ribs. Would that even be possible?

Toughen up and deal with it. Deal with Jack. He was here. That was all there was to it. Her chin jutted out and her spine clicked as she straightened unnaturally tight and upright. She'd do the job, show him the ropes, and then she was due two days' leave.

Out over Cook Strait, Chris hovered the helicopter above the rolling deck of the inter-islander. The sky was clear and cold, the sea running fast with a big swell. Not ideal but it could've been a whole lot worse.

'Send the stretcher after me,' Ruby instructed Jack as she prepared to be lowered to the deck with a pack and the oxygen bottle on her back.

'Right,' Jack snapped.

So he thought he should go first. Tough. It was her job today. At least he hadn't argued and wasted valuable time. That was the Jack she remembered.

The ship lurched upwards as her feet reached for the deck, jarring her whole body and giving her knee some grief. Mindful of the ship's crew, she swore silently and tried hard not to limp as she crossed to her patient, checking the area for any obstacles that might get in the way of the stretcher being lowered. She waved the crowd of onlookers further back.

A woman looked up as Ruby crouched uncomfortably beside her. 'I'm a GP. This is Ron Jefferies, fifty years old. Lucky for him I was close by when he fell. I started CPR within sixty seconds. The ferry crew supplied a defibrillator, which I used at maximum joules. We now have a thready heart rhythm.'

Ruby introduced herself as she unzipped the pack and removed an LMA kit. 'Ron, I'm going to insert a tube in your throat and place a mask over your face to give you oxygen.'

'I'll put an IV in.' Jack was down already and knelt opposite.

'Please.' Ruby was already pushing up Ron's sleeve and passing the bag of saline to the GP now standing behind her. Holding the bag aloft helped the fluid flow more easily until they were ready to winch their patient on board the helicopter. She and Jack worked quickly and efficiently together, unfolding the stretcher and snapping the locks into place at the hinges.

She directed Jack and the GP to grip Ron's legs and upper arm, while opposite them she clutched handfuls of his trousers and shirt, ready to pull. 'On the count of three. One. Two. Three.' And their patient was on the stretcher, being belted securely.

‘We’re ready to transfer.’ Ruby spoke to Slats through her mouthpiece as she checked Jack had attached the winch to the stretcher. Within minutes they were all aboard and Chris had headed the machine for Wellington and the hospital.

Jack checked their patient’s vitals while Ruby wrote up the patient report form.

‘He’s one lucky man,’ she murmured. ‘How often does a GP witness an arrest? Getting the compressions that quickly definitely saved him.’

‘He owes her his life for sure.’ Jack glanced up at her. ‘Did you get her name?’

‘No time for that.’

‘We didn’t learn anything about our man here either, apart from who he is. I wonder if he was travelling with family? Friends?’

She shook her head. ‘According to the steward I spoke to while you were being winched up, he’d put it over the loudspeaker for anyone travelling with Ron Jefferies to come forward, but no one appeared. It will be up to the hospital to track down relatives.’

‘They’ll be able to talk to him when they remove the LMA.’

‘Maybe.’ The man didn’t look very alert. Ruby watched as Jack rechecked all his vitals.

In her headphone Slats said, ‘We’re here, folks. The team’s waiting for your patient.’

Jack glanced up. ‘Thank goodness. Ron needs a cardiologist urgently.’

It didn’t take long to hand Ron over to the hospital emergency staff, and then the pilots were skimming across the harbour to the airport and back to base.

Usually Ruby would gaze out the window during this short flight, looking at all the city landmarks, enjoying the moods of the harbour, unwinding after an operation. But now her eyes were drawn to Jack as he sat, hunched in the bucket seat, reading the clinical-procedures notebook they all carried.

Had he missed her as much as she had him?

Jack glanced across to her, a wry expression in those eyes. ‘Did I pass my first test?’

She held her hand out flat and wiggled it side to side. ‘Maybe.’

Annoyance flickered across his face. ‘I’m being serious, Ruby. You made it abundantly clear you’d be checking me out, so I’ve the right to know what you’re going to tell Dave when we’re back on the ground.’

Whoa. Who was this angry guy? No one she knew. For someone who wanted to be mates he didn’t seem to understand when she was teasing him. ‘I couldn’t fault you. Okay?’ It had been a straightforward job but she refrained from pointing that out.

‘Thank you.’ He studied her for a long moment before returning to reading the notebook in his hand.

Prickly so-and-so. Jack would have to learn everyone on the base teased each other every opportunity they got. It helped ease the stress levels. Pulling the boss card wouldn’t keep Jack safe at all, but he could learn that from the others. Right now she wanted out of this confined space so she could breath some Jack-less air, could look in any direction and not have her sight filled with a hunky, mouth-watering vision, could move without fear of bumping into him.

As the helicopter settled gently on the ground and the rotors slowed she stood and ran her hands down her thighs, ready for a quick escape.

‘Do we need to take that bag inside to top up or is it all right for me to bring out replacement equipment?’ Jack asked.

Peering down at him, Ruby was disconcerted to find him watching her rubbing her thighs. Tucking her hands behind her back, she answered quickly, ‘It’s fine to bring what’s needed out here as long as it’s done immediately.’ Did he remember smoothing her thighs, running exquisite circles on her skin with his forefinger? Why would he, when she’d only just remembered?

‘Then that’s what I’ll do,’ he snapped back. Unlocking the door, he dropped to the ground and strode towards the hangar.

Ruby lowered herself down, mindful of her now throbbing knee. Sucking in her stomach, she concentrated on walking without limping and trying to force Jack out of her mind.

Except he wouldn't go away. She'd angered him again. Since when had he had such a short fuse? He'd been the one to tell jokes and tease people, and had happily accepted the same in return. Had something happened to him during the time she'd been away? Had someone hurt him? Apart from her? Another woman? Ruby stumbled. He could be married by now—to Blondie. No wedding ring meant nothing. Not all men wore them. He was very desirable and she hadn't been the only nurse to set her sights on him in the A and E department. A smug smile tugged at her mouth. She'd been the one to win him, though. Her smile flicked off. That was then. Now was different. He wouldn't let her close a second time.

The sound of her pager snapped through her thoughts. 'Here we go again.' Reading the details coming through, she turned back to the helicopter and clambered inside.

Jack was right behind her, breathing heavily. He slammed the door shut and dropped onto the seat he'd only moments before vacated. 'What have we got?'

Ruby pushed to the front and read back the details coming through on the electronic screen. "MTV on the Rumataka Road. Female, thirty years, minor injuries but trapped. Stat two. Female, six years, serious facial injuries, possible brain injury. Stat four."

'Do we pick them both up? Or just the child?' Jack asked.

'Just the child at this stage. Being a status four, we can't afford to wait until the mother is freed. The mother will be transferred to Hutt Hospital by road.'

'Will we take the child to Hutt Hospital or back to Wellington?'

'It's not our call, but most likely Wellington, where they've got an excellent neurological department. It's only a few minutes' extra flying time.'

'Every minute can count.' Jack's eyes darkened. 'More than anything else, that mother's going to want to be with her daughter.' He twisted around to stare out the window, his hands clenching and unclenching on his thighs, his mouth a white line in his pale face.

'Jack?' Ruby leaned closer, put a hand over his. What was wrong? It couldn't be the flying, he'd been okay on the last trip, and anyway he was training to be a private pilot.

'I'm fine.' He slid his hand out from under hers, and continued staring outside.

If she hadn't been looking so hard she wouldn't have seen the way his bottom lip quivered ever so slightly. 'Sure.' She had no idea how to get him to open up. Once she'd stupidly thought that if Jack had something to say he'd say it, but now she realised he'd never told her anything that involved his feelings.

Minutes ticked by. Then he coughed. 'I always struggle with seeing kids injured.' His fingers flexed, fisted, flexed.

'I think we all do.' Ruby thought back to when she'd worked alongside Jack in A and E. Had they ever worked together with a seriously sick child? Her mind threw up a memory from her first week in A and E with Dr Forbes.

'Ruby, for God's sake, hurry up with that suction. This kid's going to choke to death.' Jack whipped the tube out of her hand. *'Turn it on. Now.'* He whisked the end of the hard plastic around the little boy's mouth, gentle but firm, sucking up the blood and mucus that filled the cavity. *'Damn it, kid, don't you die on me now.'*

Nurses worked around them, stemming blood loss from the child's legs and head, cutting away clothes and ordering X-rays. Ruby smarted as she tossed the boy's now useless trousers into the rubbish bin. She'd reacted instantly to Jack's command to suction the boy's mouth. What was his problem? 'I was doing just fine,' she snapped at him. 'I can take over now.'

'Press on that leg wound. It's bleeding again.' Jack continued suctioning, his fingers unsteady and his mouth a white line in his pale face. He issued orders to the senior nurse about getting the oxygen mask ready, ignoring Ruby.

Later that night, when they knocked off work, Jack said, 'You've got to learn not to answer back in those situations. Whatever I say goes. Understand?'

She'd nodded. 'Sure.' But she'd been shocked at the way he'd snatched that tube out of her hand.

'Ruby, we can always discuss a case afterwards.' He turned for the door, spun back. 'You did well in there. If I seemed a little abrupt I have my reasons.'

He'd never told her what those reasons were. That had been before they'd got together so she'd put his reticence down to not knowing her very well. Wrong. It was just how he was. Had something dreadful happened to Jack as a trainee? Had he lost a patient in circumstances he blamed himself for?

In her ear Chris's voice was an abrupt interruption. 'ETA one minute. I'll land on the road above the crash site.'

'Right.' Ruby prepared to leave the helicopter the instant it was possible.

As they raced towards the squashed car, their packs banging heavily on their backs, oxygen tank and defib in Jack's hands, Ruby checked him out. She sighed with relief. Whatever had been disturbing him had gone, replaced with a professional, caring expression and the urgent need to help the little girl they were there for.

A policeman lifted the tape protecting the scene from the crowd of onlookers for Ruby and Jack to duck under. 'I think you're wanted at the ambulance.'

Changing direction, they crossed to the paramedics, who were working with a small patient on a stretcher. Ruby's heart ached when she saw the small, blood-soaked child. A quick look at Jack but, apart from a whitening of his face, he was in full control of himself.

They listened carefully to an ambulance officer's report. 'I've given her a second bolus of saline as her BP keeps dropping. GCS is nine. She's got a poor airway and I couldn't intubate.'

A Glasgow coma score of nine. They didn't come worse than that and the patient still be alive.

'Upgrade to stat five.' Jack immediately opened his pack and reached for a small-sized LMA kit. Ruby took the child's head and tipped it back slightly to allow Jack easier access to her throat. Together they quickly had the airway open and oxygen flowing. Jack's expertise was impressive, and Ruby enjoyed working with him. The girl was in excellent hands.

But as Ruby began to relax, the child went into spasms. A seizure was common with her injuries but distressing for everyone observing it. Other than making sure the girl didn't choke, there was nothing Ruby could do but hold the child's bloodied hand in her gloved one until she fell still again.

After a fast but thorough examination they transferred the girl to the helicopter. As Jack began taking her vitals again, she had another seizure. Followed minutes later by another. And another.

'We'll give her a sedative intra-nasally,' he instructed Ruby as the rotors began speeding up.

Ruby held the nasal cannula in place and talked quietly. 'Come on, sweetheart. This will stop those nasty fits.'

'Blood pressure's dropping.' Jack's voice was calm, steady.

'Stay with us, sweetheart.' *Chris, spin those rotors faster, we need a hospital right now.* 'I wonder what your name is. No one back at the accident scene knew. I bet it's something pretty.'

Jack checked the oxygen saturation level, adjusted the flow from the tank. Took blood-pressure readings again, counted the little girl's respiratory rate.

Ruby, uncharacteristically feeling totally helpless, called up Wellington Hospital Emergency Department and gave them the child's medical details and their ETA. They were doing all they could but it was nowhere near enough.

Slats's calm voice sounded in her headset. 'One minute to touchdown.'

A team of paediatric doctors and nurses awaited them, moving towards the helicopter the moment Ruby shoved the door open. The transfer was made with such care that Ruby felt an urge to cry and had to squash it down hard. Everyone knew that this little girl was fighting for her life.

Ruby and Jack stood on the rooftop, watching as the team took charge, their own part in saving the child over. A sense of inadequacy touched Ruby even though she knew she'd done all she could and their patient was better off with the hospital team now. Glancing at Jack, she saw him swallow hard.

'You were awesome with her,' she said.

'Thanks, Red. It's never enough, though, is it?'

'Sometimes it has to be.' Unfortunately. The downside of the job.

Jack looked down into her eyes and for a moment they connected. Really hooked up. Ruby forgot to breathe. Forgot where she was. Forgot about the waiting 'copter. Only Jack mattered. And how good it felt to be with him again. With Jack at her side she could accomplish anything. Even staying in Wellington for ever.

Behind her Chris called out to them, 'Time to hit the sky, you two.'

And Ruby leapt away. Jack wasn't by her side, figuratively or otherwise. And never would be. Racing for the 'copter, she chastised herself for her odd moment of wishful thinking. She wasn't the same person any more, and from what little she'd seen so far, neither was Jack. Getting together again would never work out. They hadn't managed to stay together when they'd been happy and in love. How could they possibly have a workable relationship with all that hurt they'd inflicted on each other?

CHAPTER THREE

AS THE helicopter settled on the hard back at base, Ruby glanced at her watch. Six forty-five. Yee-ha. She could sign off and go home. Grab some take-aways for her dinner on the way. Feed Zane. Put distance between her and Jack. Take time to absorb her initial impressions, think about the differences she'd already noted in him.

Up front Chris clicked off numerous switches as the whine of the rotors slowed. Then he poked his head around the bulkhead. 'Dave's just come through, says to meet him at the Aero House for beers. Something to do with you, Jack. An unofficial welcome aboard sort of thing.'

The Aero House was the local watering hole, frequented mostly by pilots and the girls hoping to nab them. The rescue staff used it regularly for winding down from bad days, for having a quiet drink with people who understood they didn't always want to talk about work, and occasionally for partying.

Jack said, 'Sounds good to me. Ruby?'

Going home where Jack wasn't in her face all the time, where she could breathe without effort, was her preferred option. But this was the team, her family of sorts and, whatever her feelings, Jack was being made a part of it. 'Sure, a cold one is just what I need.'

One beer and then she could leave guilt-free. Hopefully no one had a mind to start a party. Not on a Sunday night.

'Let's top up the packs and get out of here.' Jack dropped to the ground and reached up for the bags Ruby handed down.

She finished cleaning up inside the 'copter and dropped the dirty laundry bag outside for pick-up in the morning.

'Have a busy night.' Ruby waved goodbye to the night crews a little while later and headed out to the well-lit parking lot. As she tossed her bag into the cab of her truck she heard Jack say, 'What are you driving now?'

She grinned. 'Nothing like my old car, is it?' And her grin widened at the stunned look on his face.

'You haven't borrowed it?' He stared at her shining black pride and joy. 'This truck's yours?'

'Right down to the last wheel nut. Isn't it fabulous?' She ran a hand over the bonnet. It still thrilled her to drive this beast. And she so loved the stares she got whenever she pulled into the yard at the building centre and clambered out.

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