THE PLAYBOY DOCTOR'S MARRIAGE PROPOSAL

Fiona Lowe

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The Playboy Doctor's Marriage Proposal

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Enter into the world of high-flying Doctors as they navigate the pressures of modern medicine and find escape, passion, comfort and love – in each other's arms!Her boss, his bride Emily Tippett is a fabulous nurse – all the residents of Warragurra love her. Yet rarely does anyone see the real woman hiding behind the uniform – that is until her gorgeous new boss Linton Gregory arrives. On the face of it, Linton is not what Emily needs. An expert at protecting his own heart, this charming doctor prefers to date and move on…But Linton has seen the beauty that Emily is trying to hide – and she has captured his heart. He's ready to go from playboy doctor to husbandtobe!Join Fiona Lowe for a visit to the small Outback town of Warragurra, where there's always a warm welcome!

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Содержание

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‘I know what a huge step this has been for you.’ Linton tucked a stray curl behind her ear.

The light touch sent ribbons of wonder through Emily, both his actions and words bolstering her fledgling confidence. She realised that, despite her misgivings, telling Linton her story had actually helped her. Trusting him had been the best thing she’d done in four long years.

He was right. She had been hiding. She’d been holding back—holding back from life and keeping her attraction to him a secret. Scared of being a disappointment. But perhaps she didn’t have to hide any more.

She gazed up at him, taking him in, glorying in the look of undisguised desire in his eyes. At that very moment she knew he wanted to kiss her.

And she had no objection at all.

Always an avid reader, **Fiona Lowe** decided to combine her love of romance with her interest in all things medical, so writing Medical™ Romance was an obvious choice! She lives in a seaside town in southern Australia, where she juggles writing, reading, working and raising two gorgeous sons, with the support of her own real-life hero! You can visit Fiona’s website at www.fionalowe.com

Recent titles by the same author:

A WEDDING IN WARRAGURRA A WOMAN TO BELONG TO THE FRENCH DOCTOR’S MIDWIFE BRIDE THE SURGEON’S CHOSEN WIFE HER MIRACLE BABY

Dear Reader

Writing two books set in Warragurra has been so much fun! The people who live in the Australian Outback are hard-working, loyal and resilient, and the Warragurra community shares all these attributes. With its hospital and flying doctors’ base, the town has generated some of my favourite characters.

The first book, A WEDDING IN WARRAGURRA, told Kate and Baden’s story. As I wrote it, Emily just appeared on the page. I quickly sent her off to work with Linton, the playboy doctor from the hospital, and right there and then they demanded I tell their story next. Being an obedient author, that is exactly what I did, and I really enjoyed writing THE PLAYBOY DOCTOR’S MARRIAGE PROPOSAL.

Everyone’s best friend, Emily hides her pain behind baggy clothes and bright hair. Linton is a city doctor who has come to Warragurra for A&E experience. He never plans to settle down—marriage is for everyone else but him.

When Emily comes to work at the hospital life changes for both of them. Do opposites attract? Absolutely. And as much as Linton fights his attraction for a woman he considers to be so *not* his type, he finds himself drawn to her, and to her loving family, until he’s forced to question everything he thought he held dear. Along the way Emily learns to demand her place in the world, and to fight for what she believes in.

I hope you enjoy Emily and Linton’s story, as well as the cameo appearance of Kate and Baden.

Let me know what you think!

Fiona x http://www.fionalowe.com

THE PLAYBOY DOCTOR'S MARRIAGE PROPOSAL

BY
FIONA LOWE

MILLS & BOON
Pure reading pleasure
www.millsandboon.co.uk

To Heather—a young woman with a bright future
who joins me on philosophical ramblings and
enthusiastically provides help with A&E stories
plus advice on all things radiological!
And to Alison for her help with deciphering ECGs

CHAPTER ONE

THE med student gagged.

'Out!' Linton Gregory, emergency care specialist, vigorously thrust his left arm toward the door, his frustration rising. Using his right hand, he staunched the flow of blood pouring from the deep gash on his patient's scalp. 'And take deep breaths,' he added as an afterthought, softening his terse tone. The last thing he needed today on top of everything else was a fainting student.

Where was everyone? 'Karen,' he called out, breaking his own enforced rule of no yelling inA and E. 'Room two, please, now!' He ripped open a gauze pack. 'Johnno, stick your hand here.' He lifted his patient's hand to his head. 'Press hard.'

'Right-o, Doc, I know the drill.' Johnno gave a grimace.

Linton shone his penlight into the man's eyes, checking his pupils for reaction to light. The black discs contracted at the bright beam and enlarged when the light source was moved away. 'They look OK. Did you black out?'

'Don't remember.'

Linton sighed and started a head-injury chart. 'This is the fourth Saturday in two months you've been in here. It's time to think about hanging up your rugby boots.'

Johnno cleared his throat. 'Doc, now you're starting to sound like the wife.'

He shot the man an understanding look as the familiar ripple of relief trickled through him that he wasn't tied down, that he was blessedly single again. And he intended to stay that way. He raised his brows. 'And yet this time I agree with Donna. Your scalp is starting to look like a patchwork quilt.' He lifted the gauze gingerly, examining the ragged skin edges. 'You're going to need more stitches.'

'Linton?' A nurse popped her head around the half-open door.

'Karen.' He smiled his winning smile. 'Stellar nurse that you are, can you please organise a suture pack and ring X-Ray? Johnno's got another deep scalp laceration. Oh, and check up on the student—he left looking pretty green.'

Her brows drew together in consternation. 'I'd love to, Linton, but the ambulance service just radioed and they're bringing in a crushed arm, ETA five minutes. I've set up the resus room and now I'm chasing nursing staff. The roster is short and half the town is out at Bungarra Station for Debbie and Cameron's inaugural dune-buggy race.'

He swallowed the curse that rose to his lips. 'Keep pressing on that gauze, Johnno, and I'll send Donna in to sit with you until someone can stitch your head.' Three weeks ago his department had been like a slick, well-oiled machine. Now his charge nurse was on unexpected adoption leave and her second-in-charge was on her honeymoon with *his* registrar. Marriage was a lousy idea, even when it didn't actually involve him.

He stripped off his gloves. ‘Ring Maternity, they’re quiet, and get a nurse down from there to help us.’

‘But we’re still short—’

‘We’ve got two medical students. Let’s see if they’ve got what it takes.’ He strode into the resus room as the screaming wail of an ambulance siren broke the languid peace of a Warragurra winter’s Saturday afternoon, the volume quickly increasing, bringing their patient ever closer.

Linton flicked on the monitors and took a brief moment to savour the quiet of the room. In about thirty seconds organised chaos would explode when their patient arrived.

Anticipatory acid fizzed in his stomach. Emergency medicine meant total patient unpredictability and he usually thrived on every stimulating moment. But today he didn’t have his reliable team and the random grouping of today’s staff worried him.

Andrew, the senior paramedic, walked quickly into the room, ahead of the stretcher, his mouth a flat, grim line. ‘Hey, Linton. If Jeremy Fallon is at the game, you’d better page him now.’

Linton nodded on hearing the orthopaedic surgeon’s name. ‘We’ve done that already.’ He inclined his head. ‘Anyone we know?’

Andrew nodded as a voice sounded behind him.

‘Can we triage and talk at the same time? His pressure is lousy.’

A flash of colour accompanied the words and suddenly a petite woman with bright pink hair appeared behind the stretcher, her friendly smile for her colleagues struggling with concern for her patient. ‘We need Haemaccel, his BP’s seventy on not much.’

‘Emily?’ Delighted surprise thundered through Linton, unexpectedly warming a usually cold place under his ribs.

She grinned. ‘I know, I belong in a Flying Doctors’ plane rather than an ambulance, although today I don’t belong in either.’

‘Ben’s lucky Emily was driving into town on her day off.’ Andrew’s voice wavered before he cleared his throat and spoke in his usual professional tones. ‘Ben McCreedy, age twenty-one, right arm crushed by a truck. Analgesia administered in the field, patient conscious but drowsy.’

Linton sucked in his breath as he swung his stethoscope from around his neck and into his ears, checking his patient’s heartbeat. Ben McCreedy was Warragurra’s rugby union hero. He’d just been accepted into the national league and today was to have been his last local game.

The young man lay pallid and still on the stretcher, his legs and torso covered in a blanket. His right arm lay at a weird angle with a large tourniquet strapped high and close to his right shoulder.

‘He’s tachycardic. What’s his estimated blood loss?’ Linton snapped out the words, trying for professional detachment, something he found increasingly difficult the longer he worked in Warragurra.

‘Too much.’ Emily’s almost whispered words held an unjust truth as she assisted Andrew with moving Ben from the stretcher onto the hospital trolley.

Two medical students sidled into the room. ‘Um, Dr Gregory, is this where we should be?’

Linton rolled his eyes. *Give me strength*. ‘Attach the patient to the cardiac monitor and start a fluid balance chart. Where’s Sister Haigh?’

Jason, the student who’d almost fainted, looked nervously around him. ‘She said to tell you that Maternity now has, um, three labouring women.’

‘And?’ Linton’s hands tensed as he tried to keep his voice calm against a rising tide of apprehension.

‘And…’ He stared at his feet for a moment before raising his eyes. ‘And she said I wasn’t to stuff up because she had a croupy baby to deal with before she could get here.’

Linton suppressed the urge to throttle him. How was he supposed to run an emergency with two wet-behind-the-ears students?

He swung his head around to meet a questioning pair of grey eyes with strands of silver shimmering in their depths. Eyes that remained fixed on him while the rest of her body moved, including her hands which deftly readjusted the female student's misapplied cardiac-monitor dots.

He recognised that look. That 'no nonsense, you've got to be kidding me' look. Twice a year he spent a fortnight with the Flying Doctors, strengthening ties between that organisation and the Warragurra Base Hospital. Both times Emily had been his assigned flight nurse.

'Emily.' The young man on the stretcher lifted his head, his voice wobbly and anxious. 'Can you stay?'

Ben's words rocked through Linton. *What a brilliant idea*. Emily was just who he needed in this emergency. He turned on the full wattage of his trade-mark smile—the smile that melted the resolve of even the most hard-nosed women of the world. 'Emily, can you stay? It would help Ben and it would really help me.'

The faintest tinge of pink started to spread across her cheeks and she quickly ducked her head until she was level with her patient. 'I'm right here, Ben. I'm not going anywhere.'

Then she stood up, squared her shoulders and was instantly all business. 'Catheter to measure urine output and then set up for a central line?'

He grinned at her, nodding his agreement as relief rolled through him. For the first time today he had someone who knew what she was doing. He swung into action and organised the medical students. 'Patti, you take a set of base-line obs, Jason you'll be the runner.'

Andrew's pager sounded. 'I have to go.' He gave Ben's leg a squeeze, an unusual display of emotion from the experienced paramedic. 'You're in good hands, mate. Catch you later.'

The drowsy man didn't respond.

Linton rolled the blanket off Ben. 'Emily, any other injuries besides the arm?'

'Amazingly enough, I don't think so. I did a quick in-the-field check and his pelvis and chest seem to be fine.'

'We'll get him X-rayed just to confirm that. Now, let's see what we're dealing with here.' He removed the gauze from Ben's arm. Despite all his experience in trauma medicine, he involuntarily flinched and his gut recoiled. The young man's arm hung by a thread at mid upper arm. His shoulder was completely intact as was his hand but everything in between was a crushed and mangled mess.

'Exactly what happened here?' Linton forced his voice to sound matter-of-fact.

Ben shuddered. 'I was driving to the game down Ferguson Street.' His voice trailed off.

Emily finished his sentence. 'Ben had the window down and his elbow resting on the car door. A truck tried to squeeze between his car and a parked car.' Her luminous eyes shone with compassion.

'You *have* to save my arm, Linton.' The words flowed out as a desperate plea. 'I need two arms to play rugby.'

I can't save your arm. Linton caught Emily's concerned gaze as her pearly white teeth tugged anxiously at her bottom lip. Concern for Ben—she knew it looked impossible.

Concern for Linton—somehow she knew how tough he found it to end a young man's dream with five small words.

'BP sixty-five on forty, respirations twenty-eight and pulse one hundred and thirty.' Patti's voice interrupted, calling out the worrying numbers.

'The blood bank's sending up three units of packed cells and X-Ray is on its way.' Emily spoke and immediately snapped back to the brisk, in-control nurse she was known to be. 'Jason, go and get more ice so we can repack the arm.'

Linton knew Ben's body had been compensating for half an hour, pumping his limited blood supply to his vital organs. Now they were entering a real danger zone. 'What's his urine output like?'

Emily checked the collection bag that she'd attached to the catheter. 'Extremely low.' Her words held no comfort and were code for 'major risk of kidney failure'.

He immediately prioritised. ‘Increase his oxygen. Emily, you take the blood gases and I’ll insert a central line.’ He flicked the Haemaccel onto full bore, the straw-coloured liquid yellow against the clear plastic tubing. ‘Patti, ring the blood bank and tell them to hurry up.’

His pager beeped and he read the message. ‘Jeremy’s arrived in Theatre so as soon as the central line’s in place, we’ll transfer Ben upstairs.’

Emily ripped open a syringe and quickly attached the needle. The sharp, clean odour of the alcohol swab dominated the room as she prepared to insert the needle into Ben’s groin and his femoral artery. ‘Ben, mate, I just have to—’

Suddenly Ben’s eyes rolled back in his head and the monitor started blaring.

‘He’s arrested.’ Emily grabbed the bag and mask and thrust them at Patti. ‘Hold his chin up and start bagging. I’ll do compressions.’ She scrambled up onto the trolley, her small hands compressing the broad chest of a man in his athletic prime. A man whose heart quivered, desperate for blood to pump.

‘I’m in.’ Linton checked the position in the jugular vein with the portable ultrasound then skilfully connected the central line to another bag of plasma expander. ‘Now he’s getting some circulating volume, let’s hope his heart is happier. Stand clear.’

Emily jumped down off the trolley.

The moment her feet hit the floor and her hands went up in the air showing a space between her and the trolley, he pressed the button on the emergency defibrillator. A power surge discharged into Ben’s body, along with a surge of hope. It was tragic enough, Ben losing an arm. He didn’t need to lose his life as well.

Four sets of eyes fixed on the monitor, intently watching the green flat line slowly start to morph into a wobbly rhythm.

‘Adrenaline?’ Emily pulled open the drug drawer of the crash cart.

‘Draw it up in case we need it but he’s in sinus rhythm for the moment. Patti, put the oxygen mask back on. We’re moving him up to Theatre *now*. That tourniquet is doing its job but there’s a bleeder in there that needs to be tied off.’ Linton flicked up the locks on the trolley wheels.

‘I’ve got the ice and the blood.’ Jason rushed back into the room.

‘Take it with you and summon the lift to Theatre. We’re right behind you.’ He turned to Emily to give her instructions, but they died on his lips.

She’d already placed the portable defibrillator on the trolley and positioned herself behind Ben’s head, the emergency mask and bag in her hand. Small furrows of concentration formed a line of mini-Vs on the bridge on her nose as she caught his gaze. ‘Ready?’

It was uncanny how she could pre-empt him. She was on his wavelength every step of the way. ‘Ready.’

As they rounded the corner he heard the lift ping. Jason held the doors open as they pushed the trolley inside. The silver-coloured doors slid closed, sealing them into a type of no-man’s-land.

Heavy silence pervaded the lift. The medical students watched everything in wide-eyed awe. Emily’s gaze stayed welded to the monitor as her fine fingers caressed Ben’s hair in an almost unconscious manner.

A stab of something indefinable caught Linton in the solar plexus. He shifted his weight and breathed in deeply. Emily Tippett, with hair that changed colour weekly, her button nose with its smattering of freckles that some might describe as cute, her baggy clothing, which he assumed hid a nondescript figure, and her diminutive height, was so far removed from his image of an ideal woman that it would be almost laughable to find her attractive. He exhaled the unwelcome feeling.

But she’s a damn good nurse. The doctor in him could only applaud that attribute.

The lift doors slid open. ‘Let’s roll.’ Linton manoeuvred the stretcher out into the corridor. He spoke to the drowsy Ben, not totally sure the young man could hear him. ‘Ben, you’re going into Theatre now, mate, and Jeremy Fallon’s going to do his best for you. You’re in good hands.’

The young man nodded. His expression was hidden behind the oxygen mask but his eyes glowed with fear.

Emily squeezed Ben's left hand and then stepped back from the trolley as the theatre staff took over. A minute later the theatre doors slid shut, locking them on the outside.

'What do you think will happen?' Jason spoke the words no one had been prepared to voice in front of Ben.

'High upper arm amputation.'

They spoke at the same time, Emily's words rolling over his, her voice husky and soft.

An image of a late-night, smoky bar with a curvaceous singer draped in a long, silk dress, its folds clinging to every delicious curve, suddenly branded itself to his brain. He'd never noticed what an incredibly sexy voice she had. It was at odds with the rest of her.

He shook his head, removing the image, and focused squarely on his medical student. Warragurra was a teaching hospital and he had teaching responsibilities. 'The X-ray will determine if the arm can be reattached but due to the violence of the impact it's very unlikely. The humerus, radius and ulna will be pulp rather than bone.'

'So what's next?' For the very first time Jason showed some enthusiasm.

'Cleaning up.' Emily turned and pressed the lift call button.

'Cleaning up?' Jason sounded horrified. 'Don't the nurses do that?'

Linton suppressed a smile and silently counted down from five, anticipating the explosion. Every medical student made the same gaffe, the sensible ones only once.

Emily whirled around so fast she was a blur of pink. 'Actually, it's the nurses who supervise the *medical students* doing the cleaning. How else do you learn what is required in a resus room? How else do you learn where everything is kept so you can find it in an emergency?' She folded her arms. 'And if you're really lucky, if you manage to clean and tidy in a timely manner, you might just be allowed near a patient and graduate from running boy.'

Jason's pale face flushed bright red to the tips of his ears as his mulish expression battled with embarrassment.

Linton started to laugh. A great rolling laugh he couldn't hold in. His eyes watered and his body ached. Emily was fantastic. Just the sort of nurse he'd welcome with open arms on his staff. *Just the sort of nurse you need*.

He ushered everyone into the lift and this time the silence was contemplative rather than anxiety charged. If Emily came to work in A and E, so many of his problems would be solved. He could go back to worrying about medicine rather than staff politics because she'd organise everyone and everything. She'd always done that during his rotations with the Flying Doctors. With the resident he'd arranged arriving soon, and with Emily on board, he might even get some time away from work. His fifty-two-year-old father, who had just jetted out after one of his unexpected visits, had accused him of being boring!

Yes, this plan would free him up so he could retrieve his badly missed social life.

Emily in charge would make life very easy.

He started to hum. For the first time in two tension-filled weeks he felt almost carefree. *She might say no*.

He instantly dismissed the traitorous thought. When it came to getting what he wanted he usually achieved it with a smile and some charm. The doors opened onto the ground floor. 'Right, you two,' he spoke to the medical students. 'You make a start clearing up the resus room.'

Emily started to follow them.

'Em, got a minute?' His hand automatically reached out to detain her, his fingers suddenly feeling hot as they brushed the surprisingly soft skin close to her elbow.

She spun round, breaking the contact, her expression questioning as she glanced at her watch. 'About one minute. Why?'

He leaned against the wall. ‘Still the same Em, always in a hurry.’ He smiled. ‘I just wanted to say thank you.’

She twisted a strand of hair around her finger in an almost embarrassed action before flicking her gaze straight at him with her friendly smile. ‘Hey, no problem. It was a fun way to spend my day off.’ She gave a self-deprecating laugh and shrugged. ‘I could hardly walk away and leave you with Jason and Patti, now, could I?’

He spoke sincerely. ‘I would have been in deep trouble if you had. You headed off a potential nightmare.’

‘Thanks.’ He caught a ripple of tiny movement as her shoulders rolled back slightly and her chin tilted a fraction higher as she absorbed his praise.

He flashed her a wide, cheeky smile. ‘You said you had fun and we make a great team so how about you come and do it again, say, five days a week?’

The constant motion he associated with Emily suddenly stalled. For one brief and disconcerting moment, every part of her stilled.

Then she laughed, her eyes darkening to the colour of polished iron ore. ‘You’re such a tease, Linton. Back in February, you spent two weeks bragging to me about your “fabulous team”. Where are they now?’

He sighed. ‘Love, marriage, babies—the full catastrophe.’ The words were supposed to have come out light and ironic. Instead, bitterness cloaked them.

Emily rolled back and forth on the heels of her tan cowboy boots, her brow creased in thought. ‘So you’re serious?’

He caught the interest reflected in her eyes. He almost had her. ‘Absolutely. I’m offering you a twelve-month position of Unit Manager, aka Charge Nurse of A and E.’

Lacing her fingers, she breathed in deeply, her baggy rugby top catching against her breasts.

His gaze overrode his brain, taking control of its focus and sliding from her face to the stripes that hinted at breasts he’d never noticed before. Quickly realising what he was doing, he zoomed his vision back to her face.

Tilting her head to the side, she gave him a long, penetrating look, her eyes a study of diffuse emotion. ‘It’s an interesting offer.’

Yes! She was tempted to take it on. Life was good. He rubbed his hands together. ‘Fantastic. I’ll get HR to write up the contract and -’

‘I don’t think so, Linton.’

Her firm words sliced through his euphoria. ‘But—’

‘Thanks anyway for the thought.’ She rolled her lips inwards and nodded her head slightly. ‘So, I guess I’ll see you around.’ She turned and walked away.

The retreating sound of her cowboy boots on the linoleum vibrated through him. He wasn’t used to ‘no’. He didn’t like ‘no’ at all.

CHAPTER TWO

THE strong and greasy aroma of shorn wool hung in the air as Emily vigorously swept the ancient floorboards of the shearing shed, the thump and swish of the broom soothing her jangled nerves.

Linton Gregory wanted her to work for him. For a second she hugged the delicious thought close.

No, Linton Gregory wants you to work in his department for a year. Note the difference.

Ever since she had been a little girl she’d come out to the shearing shed when she’d needed to think. Or to hide. With four brothers to contend with, that had been reasonably often. She’d come and lie in the softness of the offcuts of wool, stare up at the rough-hewn beams, count the tiny sparkles of sunlight that shone though the pinprick holes in the corrugated-iron roof and find a sense of peace.

Now she was all grown up and far too big to lie in the hessian wool bags, so she swept and quarrelled with herself. For the last hour she'd been caught in an argument loop.

His offer is pure expediency. Nothing personal.

And deep down she knew that. Which was why when he'd asked her to work in A and E, she'd said no. Working side by side with Linton had been hard enough twice a year for two weeks. Working side by side five days a week for a year would completely do her in. She'd be an emotional basket case by the end of that time.

Her subconscious snorted. *And you're not now?*

She thumped the broom hard against the truth. She'd been a basket case from the first moment she'd laid eyes on Linton one year ago.

And she hated herself for it. She was twenty-five, for heaven's sake. A crush at fifteen was normal. At twenty it was forgivable. At twenty-five it was laughable in a tragic and pitying way.

Especially after everything she'd been through with Nathan. After that debacle, she'd promised herself she would never be that foolish again. She needed to keep her heart safe. But some promises seemed impossible to keep.

'Emily? You in there?' Her eldest brother's voice hailed her from outside.

She sighed. Her family knew her too well. If she'd really wanted to hide out she should have gone somewhere else. 'Yes, Mark, I'm here.'

'Thought you would be. You've got a visitor.'

She turned and leaned the broom up against the corrugated-iron wall and called out, 'OK, I'll come back to the house.'

'No need. We can talk here.'

She swung round, her heart pounding wildly like a runaway horse. Her brain immediately recognised that smooth, deep voice which held as many resonant tones as the colours of polished jarrah. Somehow she managed to halt the gasp of astonishment that rocked through her. He was the last person she'd expected. Linton had never visited her at home. In fact, he'd never visited her, full stop.

He leaned casually against the wall, all six feet two of him. His soft-soled Italian leather shoes had been silent against the worn boards more used to the firm tread of boots. His devastating smile hovered on his lips, tinged with the slightest uncertainty. But every other part of him controlled his space with magnetic charisma, from the tips of his blond-brown hair to the hem of his designer trousers.

Emily glanced down at her torn jeans and her brother's old and faded T-shirt, and groaned inwardly. At the best of times she felt frumpy and gauche, but she was usually in her Flying Doctor's uniform rather than her hide-from-the-world, comfort clothes.

She tugged at her hair and pasted a welcoming country smile on her face. 'Linton! What a surprise. What brings you out to Woollara Station?'

He pushed off the wall, toned muscles tensing and relaxing, propelling him forward toward her in one continuous, smooth movement. His lips curved upward into a full smile. 'I came to talk to *you*.'

His words rolled over her like warm caramel sauce—sweet and hot, fanning the bone-deep heat that had smouldered inside her from the first moment she'd met him. The ever-familiar wave of warmth hit her, spinning her round before dumping her against the shore, battering every one of her good intentions to stay immune to him.

She fought her dangerous attraction like she always did, using one of a cache of weapons in her arsenal. She dragged in a long, deep breath. Experience had taught her that men didn't find her attractive, and no way was she going to subject herself to excruciating embarrassment where Linton was concerned. He had *no* idea she had the world's worst crush on him and he *never* would. To him she was just a nurse and a mate—someone to chat to when no tall, gorgeous supermodel types were around.

That wasn't often.

Tall, willowy women flocked to Linton like moths to a flame. They came from all over the town and the region and the rest of the state. Visitors from Sydney often arrived for a weekend so he was never short of company. He dated a different woman every month.

I came to talk to you. Tamping down her reaction to him, she sternly reminded herself that his natural charm and emphasis on the well-placed words wasn't personal. She climbed up onto the post rail of one of the sheep pens and stared straight at him, her chin slightly tilted. 'So, isn't your phone working?'

He rubbed his jaw, his fingertips dipping as they crossed the cute dimple-like cleft that scored his chin. 'My phone's working fine, why?'

She balanced herself with her hands, gripping the rail. 'It's just you've never been out here before and it's a long drive on the off-chance I'd be here.'

He climbed up next to her. 'I wanted to talk to you in person. You raced off so fast this afternoon we didn't have a chance to discuss things fully.'

His familiar and special scent of sunshine, soap and one hundred per cent healthy man enveloped her. She gripped the rail more firmly so she wouldn't move away.

So she wouldn't move closer.

She surreptitiously shot him a sideways glance from under her fringe, taking in how his hair brushed the tips of his ears. Funny, usually his hairstyle was immaculate. 'I didn't think we had anything more to discuss.'

He slapped his thigh, indignation radiating from him. 'Yes we did! I offered you a job.'

'And I said, no, thank you.' Her fingers gripped the wood so hard they started to go numb.

'But why?' Genuine confusion vibrated through his voice. He sounded like a child who couldn't work out why the other kid wouldn't come out to play. 'It would be great experience for you.'

'I'd miss flying.' She tried to keep her tone light. She couldn't tell him the truth. That working with him every day would be delicious yet soul-destroying torture.

'It's *only* for a year.' Lack of understanding stamped itself all over him.

Only for a year. That was so easy for him to say. But for her it was fifty-two weeks, three hundred and sixty-five days, eight thousand, seven hundred and sixty hours. She stared at her feet. 'I don't want to lose my job with the Flying Doctors.'

'You wouldn't.'

She pivoted back to face him, her balance tested. 'How can you be so sure? I can't just leave for a year and expect to return to the same position.'

'What if you could?' His jade eyes usually so full of flirtatious fun, suddenly became serious.

A ripple of apprehension skated through her. Linton Gregory didn't do 'serious'all that often. 'The chief wouldn't be happy. He's already sent Doug Johnston to Muttawindi and now with Kate and Baden married I imagine maternity leave will loom pretty quickly. So me leaving would send the chief into a hypertensive fit.'

She jumped down off the rail, needing to put some more distance between them. 'Besides, this is all hypothetical because we can't even ask him until he gets back from the annual conference. You need help now. An agency from Adelaide or Sydney could supply you with an experienced nurse tomorrow.'

'Oh, come on. Now you're living in fantasyland.' Grumpiness and fatigue rode on the words. 'The Flying Doctors attract staff because of the history of the organisation, the planes and a sense of adventure.' He sighed and rubbed the back of his neck. 'But Warragurra Base is a little more prosaic.'

She chased a tuft of wool with the point of her boot. 'But it attracted you. You came up from Sydney.'

'I did, but it's part of my career plan. I'm not staying for ever. One more year and I'll be back in the big smoke, sailing on the harbour.'

An irrational jolt of pain shot through her. It was crazy, especially when she knew he didn't really belong in Warragurra.

He jumped down from the rail and walked toward her, his gait relaxed. 'But this conversation's not about me, it's about you. I've spoken to the chief and he sends his regards.'

Her head shot up, taking in the high cheekbones, the smiling lines around his eyes and his cat-that-ate-the-cream grin. Apprehension exploded into full-blown panic. She'd forgotten that Linton thrived on getting his own way.

He leaned one arm against a beam. 'The chief agrees with me that a year in A and E will be a fabulous way to use your health promotion skills and it will hone your emergency skills.'

Her stomach clenched as her tenuous grip on control disappeared from under her. Anger spluttered to life. 'My emergency skills don't need honing.'

'True, but A and E is a different level. The chief thinks you will bring back more than they will lose by letting you go for a year. When you return, you'll return to a promotion.'

She stamped her foot as frustration swamped her. What was it about men just taking over? Her father and brothers did this to her all the time and she hated it. 'And what if I just don't want to work with you?'

His handsome face broke into deep creases and his chest started to heave as deep, reverberating laughter rocked him.

She summoned every angry, indignant fibre of her being and tried to pierce his self-satisfied aura with a withering look. 'I'm glad your self-esteem is so well fortified.'

He wiped a laughter tear from his eye. 'Oh, now, Emily, be fair. The few times we've worked together we've done exceptionally well. Hey, I even let you boss me around sometimes and I can count on half a hand the people I've allowed to do that.'

They *did* work together well. She hated it that he'd recognised that. It gave her one less argument to cement her case. She tried not to slump against the wall as she bent her leg and pressed the sole of her foot into a groove.

He causally leaned over a rail, his chin resting on his fist. 'And then there's your Master's.'

Her mouth went dry. 'What do you know about my Master's?'

His eyes flickered for the briefest moment. 'Don't you remember? Last year when we had to sit out that dust storm you told me you wanted to do your Master's in emergency nursing, but with Kate being away you'd put it on hold.'

Her blood dropped to her feet. He'd actually listened. Listened and remembered. It was completely unexpected—Nathan had never listened, it had always been all about him. She shrugged. 'It was just a pie-in-the-sky idea.'

He clicked his tongue. 'It shouldn't be.' He gave her a sly look. 'Warragurra Base would be the perfect place for you to work while you undertook your Master's.'

Her brain tried to keep up. Every time she had an argument he neatly countered it with almost effortless ease. But right now he was playing dirty pool. He knew she desperately wanted to do her Master's and that as much as the chief and the Flying Doctors supported the idea in principle, with the way staffing had been lately, it hadn't been possible.

Achieving her Master's would mean career security, senior positions and a higher salary. And she'd need that as, unlike her friends, she wouldn't ever be in the position of sharing income with a loving partner. Study leave hovered over her like the devil tempting her into his lair. Was this an opportunity she could really afford to pass up?

Linton pushed off the rail, walking round to lean his back against the wall so he stood next to her.

His heat slammed into her, dissolving all coherent thought. Emily breathed deeply, forcing air into her constricted lungs, in the hope her brain would soon get the much needed oxygen. *Think*.

She tried to fortify her resolution. Working at Warragurra Base meant working with Linton. Unrequited love from a distance had been tormenting enough. Up close and personal it would be torture. But still her words rushed out unchecked. 'How much study leave?'

White, even teeth flashed at her. 'What about you work a nine-day fortnight? The hospital will pay you for two days a month study leave.'

She narrowed her eyes. If she was selling out she should at least get a good deal. 'And one week to attend the "on campus" study component?'

He arched one brown eyebrow and tapped his top lip with his forefinger. 'As long as you can work it so the roster isn't short.'

She hugged her arms across her tightening chest as she committed herself to a path she'd told herself she'd never take. 'I can do that.'

He crossed his arms, his biceps straining against the soft cotton of his sleeves. 'Then we have a deal.'

Deal. The word boomed in her head over and over like the low bass of heavy metal. *What have you just done?* She silenced the words. Her decision was a career move. Linton would eventually leave town and she would get over her crush. Life would go on and she would have extra qualifications. 'A deal? I guess we do.' Somehow she managed to squeak the words out.

He grinned and leaned sideways, nudging her with his shoulder. 'See, that wasn't so hard, was it?'

She looked up into a pair of emerald eyes full of satisfaction. And why not? He'd just solved his staffing problem. All was good in *his* world.

But she'd just taken out a loan on her soul for a chance to study. Unless she was careful, the repayments on the loan would be pieces of her heart.

Emily stared at herself in the mirror in the Warragurra Base Hospital locker room, adjusting to seeing herself in green. Gone were the navy trousers and blue shirt of the Flying Doctors uniform. In their place green scrubs hung baggily revealing nothing of the shape that lay underneath. Hiding the big breasts and the short waist.

You are so ugly. High school had been a nightmare.

University hadn't been much better. *Cover yourself up, you don't want to put people off their dinner*. Nathan's derisive words boomed in her head. The memory of his curled lip and scornful look wormed its way back into her thoughts despite her best intentions to never let him back into her life in any shape or form.

He'd been the one to put the final nails into any delusions she might have had about herself. She now knew for certain that her body wasn't worthy of being on show, so she hid it, avoiding further pain and protecting herself from the glances of men—scrutinising glances that immediately turned to pitying ones.

She tied the string of the shapeless, baggy green pants. It was better this way. Men no longer saw her as a woman and didn't seek her out, which was exactly what she wanted. Her heart, which had loved Nathan and been so badly trampled on, was now well protected.

She turned away from the mirror and spritzed on some perfume, one of the few feminine luxuries she allowed herself. As the only female growing up on a sheep and cattle station, surrounded by men, being a girl hadn't always been easy.

When she was working on the station she generally became 'one of the boys' and fitted in that way. She could shoot a mean game of pool, muster on horseback for a full day without getting saddle-sore and was known for her skill in coaxing difficult engines into life. Her father, brothers and the employees at Woollara had long forgotten she was a woman.

If she was everyone's mate at Woollara, she was all nurse at work. 'Professional, organised and reliable' were the words that always turned up on her performance reviews. At work she had a different 'uniform' from the cowboy boots and jeans she wore at the station. But it was a uniform, and

it made her blend in with the other medical professionals and told the community she was a nurse. The role absorbed her and she gave herself to it, enjoying every moment.

The only part of her that really said 'Emily' was her perfume, although most people missed that. They thought the thing that defined her was her dyed hair. But her hair was just a ruse. Bright hair hid her pain. Bright caused people to look up rather than down and distracted them so she could avoid their scrutiny of her lack of attributes.

She ran some hair gel through her hair. She'd worn it spiky short for so long that its current length surprised her. It was still above her shoulders but long enough for the curls to come back and taunt her. She tried to tame them into place with the waxy product.

In celebration or commiseration of the new job—at this point she wasn't exactly certain which one it was—she'd dyed her hair purple. The mirror reflected purple hair and green scrubs. Hmm, the women's movement would be proud of her. Then again, others might think she was going to take up tennis at Wimbledon.

She nervously fingered the hem of her top and then tugged down hard before breathing in deeply. She spoke to the mirror. 'Right, Emily. You're the unit manager and working for Linton for better or worse. Linton only sees you as a nurse so you're safe and your heart is safe. You're a professional and all personal feelings get left on this side of the door.

'This is work. Work is your shield against his charm. Focus on the job. You can *do* this.' She pulled her name tag and security tag over her neck and spun round to face the door.

CHAPTER THREE

PUSHING open the door, Emily walked into her new department. Unlike the last time she'd been in A and E—when it had held an air of panic and unravelling control—today it seemed almost serene.

'Emily!' Karen waved at her, pausing with one hand on the curtains of cubicle two, the other hand holding a dish containing a syringe. 'It's so great to have you here. I'll see you at the desk in a few minutes.'

She waved and smiled at the warmth in the other nurse's greeting. She hoped Karen represented the rest of the nursing staff with her friendliness.

'Emily, you're finally here.' Linton spun round, his freshly starched white coat sitting square across his broad shoulders and his stethoscope draped casually around his neck. Unlike his informal clothes on Saturday, today he wore a blue and white pinstriped business shirt with a silk tie. Everything about him said, 'A doctor in charge of his department'.

Puffs of heat spiralled through her. How could one man look so devastatingly handsome perched casually on the edge of a desk?

'I am, I'm here.' Duh! Of course she was here. What happened to 'lovely to be here' or 'looking forward to working with the team'? So much for wowing him and everyone else with scintillating conversation.

He glanced at her name tag, which snuggled into the indentation under her breasts. 'Survived the admin orientation, I see?'

She laughed, remembering her long and excruciatingly dull morning. 'As long as I remember to fill out every form in triplicate, I should be fine. I sometimes think Admin believes patients should be in triplicate as well.' She glanced up at the patient board. It was pretty empty, only listing two patients in cubicles and no one in the resus room.

'It looks like I've got a nice quiet afternoon to settle in on my first day.'

'Of course. I especially arranged it to welcome you.' His tanned face creased into a sparkling smile, which travelled rapidly up his cheekbones and into his eyes. Twinkling eyes, the same aqua green as the water around the coral cays of the Pacific Ocean.

She wanted to stretch out and float lazily in his gaze, revelling in the emphasis he put on the word 'you'. But that was far too dangerous. *Keep it all business*. She flicked a recalcitrant curl out

of her eye. 'Especially for me? Yeah, right, I'll remind you of that when it's frantic and I still don't know where everything is.'

He gave her a long, pensive look, which finished with one brow rising. 'Ah, Emily, for a moment I forgot you don't let me get away with anything.'

A trail of pain pricked her. Surely she hadn't offended him? But there was no way she could flirt with him. He saw flirting as a game. As it was, she was gripping the last vestiges of her self-esteem when it came to Linton, and that was one game she couldn't play.

Before she could speak he slid off the desk, rising to his feet, his height dwarfing her. 'Now, I think you've met almost everyone except for the night staff. You know Karen and you've met Jason and Patti. Our students are with us for three months, and as you worked out the other Saturday, they're in their first weeks. As well as you starting today, we have a new resident, Daniel, and an agency nurse, Jodie. She's on a six-week contract but if she's any good we're hoping she can stay longer.'

'That's a lot of new staff.' A flutter of panic vibrated in her stomach. 'When do Michael and Cathy get back from their honeymoon?'

He drew in a long breath and sighed. 'Another six weeks.'

She did the mental maths of the number of hours in the day over available staff. 'So the roster's still short?'

He grinned. 'Not as short as it was a week ago.'

'And that's supposed to reassure me?' She heard the rising inflection of her voice.

He gave her a playful thump on the shoulder, similar to the ones she received from her brothers on a regular basis. 'I told you I needed you here.' He turned away and started walking as if he knew she would follow.

Irritation at his highhandedness quelled her mounting panic. She cut off a quip and took three quick steps to catch up as he was already talking as if she was standing next to him.

'If I'm out of the department when a patient comes in, I want to be notified. If it's a straightforward case then you and Daniel can deal with it, but page me if you need me or if you believe Daniel needs me.' He gave her a knowing look.

'New resident-itis?'

His shoulders rose and fell. 'It's early days but I don't want him taking on something he can't handle.' He stopped walking as he reached his office door, his face suddenly clearing of the usual fun and flirty expressions that defined him. 'Emily, we're a team. Don't ever feel you have to cope on your own. I'm only ever a page or a phone call away.'

His sincerity washed through her, trickling under her defences like floodwaters squeezing through cracks in a levee. Her mind threatened to leap from work to studying how his eyelashes almost brushed his cheek when he blinked. *Stop reading more into this than exists. He's your boss and he'd be telling all new staff this.*

She forced her attention back to the job. 'What meetings are expected?'

He ushered her into his office and picked up a stack of folders from his desk. 'We have a weekly meeting to discuss medical and nursing issues but I have an open-door policy so, please, don't wait until Tuesdays at two to discuss something important. Honest and open communication is vital in a department like this.'

Honest and open. As long as it only pertained to work, she was off the hook. She couldn't work at Warragurra Base if he knew how she really felt about him. She was embarrassed enough by it. She didn't want to feel this way. She hated it that after everything she'd been through with Nathan, even though she knew she wasn't ready for another relationship, she couldn't control her body's reaction to Linton.

'Right, I promise I won't let anything fester.' She held out her arms. 'Are they for me?'

He winked. 'Just a bit of light reading. We're in the middle of a policy review.'

‘Policy review?’ A vision of reading long into the night popped into her brain. Not that she slept that well, with Linton always hovering in her dreams. ‘Did you just happen to conveniently forget to tell me that when you were twisting my arm in the woolshed?’

His eyes widened in feigned outrage. ‘Twisting your arm? I don’t coerce my staff, Emily.’ He dumped the folders into her outstretched arms. ‘By the way, have you enrolled for your Master’s?’

‘That would be the arm-twisting Master’s?’ She clutched the folders to her chest.

His mouth twitched smugly. ‘All I did was provide you with an opportunity to do something you’ve wanted to do for a while.’ He lowered himself on the corner of his desk, his eyes full of curiosity, appraising her. ‘So, which subject are you starting off with?’

Surprise hit her so hard she swayed on her feet. She stared back at his face, so unexpectedly full of genuine interest. She hadn’t expected that. ‘I, um, I’m starting off with “Interpersonal Relationships in the Clinical Environment”.’

Otherwise known as how to survive working closely with a boss whose presence turns your mind to mush and your heart into a quivering mess.

He rubbed his chin in thought. ‘That sounds meaty. There’s lots of scope there on so many levels—patient-staff, staff-staff, patient-relative, relative-staff.’

His gaze settled back on her, unnerving her with its solicitude. The fun-loving charmer seemed to have taken a back seat. She’d never known him to take such an interest in her before. Her usual approach of friendly mockery didn’t seem right. She managed to stammer out, ‘I—I thought so.’

‘In a high-octane environment like A and E it can be pretty fraught at times, which is why staff wellbeing is high on my agenda.’ He walked her to the door. ‘Let’s do drinks at the end of the shift.’

She almost dropped the folders as blood rushed to her feet, making her fingers numb. *He’s inviting you out for a drink.*

Not a good idea, Emily.

But common sense had no chance against the endorphin rush. All thoughts of staying detached and professional got swept away by the sheer joy that exploded inside her. Her feet wanted to happy dance and her hands wanted to high-five.

Stay cool and calm. ‘That would—’

‘Emily, Linton, you’re needed,’ Sally, the desk clerk, called them to Reception.

Jodie dashed past, holding two kidney dishes. ‘Gastro in cubicles one, two, three and four.’

Emily picked up the histories and noted the patients all had the same surname. ‘Looks like it’s one family.’ She handed out the histories. ‘Jason, you and Patti share Mr Peterson and Jodie’s in with Mrs Peterson. Get base-line obs and assess for dehydration.’

Linton took the remaining histories. ‘You examine the teenager and then join me with the eight-year-old.’ He shot her a cheeky grin. ‘Your hair colour will convince him you’re a clown and he’ll relax while I’m inserting an IV.’

She rolled her eyes. ‘Ha, ha, very funny. I think I just have my first example for my Master’s of interpersonal relationships with staff and harassment.’ She jokingly tapped his chest with her forefinger. ‘Be nice or I might not help.’

She turned away and pushed open the curtain to see a fourteen-year-old boy heaving into a bowl, his ashen face beaded with sweat. ‘David, I’m Emily.’

He fell back against the pillow, exhausted. ‘I feel terrible.’

‘You don’t look too flash.’ She picked up his wrist and her fingers quickly located his pulse, which beat thinly and rapidly under her fingertips. She pushed an observation chart under the metal clip of the folder and recorded his pulse, respirations, blood pressure and temperature. ‘When did the vomiting start?’

‘After lunch.’ He flinched and gripped his stomach, pulling his legs up. ‘Arrgh, it really hurts.’ His quavering voice stripped away the usual teenage façade of bravado.

She hated seeing people in distress. ‘I can give you something to help with the spasms but first I have to insert a drip, which means a needle in your arm.’

‘Oh, man.’

She stroked his arm. ‘It won’t hurt as much as the cramps. Tell me, what did you eat for lunch?’

‘Sausages and chops.’ He grabbed the bowl again, gagging.

‘Take long, slow deep breaths, it really helps.’ Emily quickly primed the IV. ‘When was the meat cooked?’

‘Dad and I barbequed it and then we ate it straight away.’

She wrinkled her nose. ‘I think I can smell the smoke from the fire on your clothes.’

‘Yeah, it was an awesome bonfire. I’d been collecting the wood for a week.’

What was it about men, testosterone and fire? Her brothers loved nothing better than a midwinter bonfire. ‘Was it a special occasion?’

He nodded weakly. ‘Dad’s birthday. Mum even bought coleslaw and potato salad.’

Wrapping the tourniquet around his arm, she kept mental notes of the food. ‘Did you have cake?’

‘Yeah, one of those mud cakes from the supermarket.’

Swabbing the inner aspect of his left arm she kept talking. ‘Sounds like a lovely party.’

‘It was, until we all started vomiting.’ His arm stiffened as the needle slid into his vein.

‘Sorry.’ She whipped the trocar out of the cannula and attached the Hartmann’s solution. ‘Now I can get you something to lessen the nausea.’

David stiffened on the trolley, his eyes suddenly wide and large.

‘What’s wrong?’

He flushed bright pink. ‘I need to go…now.’

‘Right.’ She grabbed a bedpan from under the trolley and helped him into position. ‘Here’s the bell, ring when you’re done.’ She backed out of the cubicle, feeling sorry for the boy who had left his dignity at the door.

‘Emily, how’s your patient?’ Linton stood at the desk, writing up a drug chart.

‘I’ve inserted a Hartmann’s drip. Can I have a Maxalon order, please?’ She slid her chart next to his.

‘No problem.’ His lean fingers gripped his silver pen as his almost illegible scrawl raced across the paper. ‘So does he have diarrhoea, vomiting and stomach cramps?’

‘Yes, all three, poor guy. He’s pretty miserable. It sounds like a birthday party gone wrong.’ She opened a syringe and assembled it, attaching it to the needle. ‘David said his mum bought coleslaw and potato salad. Mayonnaise can harbour *E. coli* so I’m wondering if we should ring the health inspector to check out the deli.’ She snapped open the ampoule of Maxalon.

‘Good idea, and worth a phone call.’ Linton rubbed his creased forehead. ‘But if it was the deli we should have other people in with the same symptoms.’

‘Unless the Petersons left their food out of the fridge and in the sun.’ She confirmed the dose of the injection with Linton.

‘It could be the meat.’ He walked with her back toward the cubicle, his hands deep in his pockets.

‘True, except that a dad and his son were barbequing.’

He arched a brow and stared down at her. ‘Meaning?’

She ignored his supercilious look. ‘Meaning most of the blokes I know tend to char the meat rather than undercooking it.’

‘Now, there’s a sexist statement for you. I’m sure you have to be on the lookout for those in your assignment of interpersonal relationships in the clinical environment.’ He flashed her a challenging grin. ‘I can shoot your gross generalisation down in flames. I happen to be a brilliant barbeque cook and one day I will prove it.’

The dizzy dancing that had been spinning inside her since his invitation to drinks expanded. She couldn't be imagining this. No, the signals were definitely there. He'd asked about her Master's, he'd mentioned drinks, and now a barbeque. There was no doubt about it, he wanted to spend some time with her.

She ducked around the corner and helped her patient off the bedpan before inviting Linton in with the injection. 'David, this is Dr Gergory.'

'Hey, David.' Linton extended his hand, treating the teenager like a young adult.

The patient put his hand out to grasp Linton's and suddenly stopped. He flicked his wrist, shaking his fingers.

'Is there a problem with your hand?' Linton turned David's palm over.

'My fingers feel numb and tingly, like my hands have gone to sleep.'

'Hands? Are both of them feeling like that?' Emily caught Linton's concerned gaze as her own unease increased a notch.

David nodded. 'Yeah, it feels really weird.'

Linton placed David's hand by his side. 'It could be from all the vomiting. We're replacing the electrolytes you've lost and we're slowing down the vomiting with the medication. This should fix the tingling.' He adjusted the drip flow. 'We need to check on the rest of your family but ring the buzzer if you start to feel any more tingling, OK?'

David nodded wearily, not even raising his head from the pillow.

Emily tucked the blanket around him, made sure he could reach his buzzer and then followed Linton. 'I'll organise for bloods to be taken.'

'Good, but let's get everyone together and review the rest of the family first.'

Jason, Patti and Jodie all reported that their patients had similar symptoms after eating the same food.

'So it's an open and shut case of gastro, right?' Jason recorded some notes in his spiral bound notebook.

'Perhaps.' Linton tugged at his hair, his fingers trailing a path, making his blond tips almost stand on end as he walked back to check on the eight-year-old.

'Something's not quite right, is it?' Emily shared his niggling feeling of doubt.

His eyes reflected his apprehension. 'I just get the feeling that if I call it gastro, then that's just too easy. I think I'm missing something.' He ushered her through the curtain ahead of him.

Little Jade Peterson lay quietly sobbing, her chest rising and falling in shuddering grunts.

'Honey, does it hurt somewhere new?' Emily ducked down so she was at eye level with the little girl.

'No, but who's going to look after Towzer?'

Emily exchanged a questioning look with Linton.

He shrugged his shoulders, his expression blank.

'Who's Towzer, Jade?'

'My dog.' She sniffed violently.

Emily stroked the little girl's hair back behind her ear. 'I'm sure your dog will be fine and waiting for you when you go home.'

She shook her head sadly. 'But his tummy hurt too and he was sick.'

Linton bent down next to Emily, his vivid green eyes fixed on Jade's face. 'What did Towzwer eat?

She clutched her hospital teddy bear. 'He loves sausages but he stole a chop too and Dad got cross.'

The meat. The buzzer sounded. 'That's David.' Emily rose and walked quickly back to the cubicle.

Terror shone in the boy's eyes. 'My face feels all funny now. It's like pins and needles and it's really scary.'

'We're working on what's causing these symptoms. I'm going to take some blood and hopefully that will tell us something.' She gave him a reassuring smile and hoped her face didn't show how worried she really was.

Something weird and neurological was going on. She checked his pupils with her penlight. Both were equal and reacting. 'Can you squeeze my hands, David?'

He put his hands out toward her. Fear shot through her, making her gut lurch. His palms, which had been white before, now looked red and blistered, with flaking skin. If he'd burned himself, they would have known on arrival. Linton would have seen it earlier.

None of this made sense. 'I'll be right back, David.'

She stepped out of the cubicle, her mind racing, trying desperately to work out what was going on. She rushed back to Jade and almost collided with Linton as he opened the curtain. 'Oh, thank goodness you're here.'

He put his hands out to steady her. 'What's wrong? You're white.' He gently steered her to one side. 'You haven't got gastro too, have you?'

She shook her head. 'I'm fine but David's palms are peeling as if they've come in contact with a corrosive substance. Everyone is getting sicker and sicker in front of our eyes. What do you think this is?'

He clicked his pen up and down, the sound reflecting his agitation before he shoved it back in his pocket. 'I wish I knew. We've got nausea, vomiting, stomach cramps, and the father has blood in his stools.' His forefinger flicked off the tip of each finger on his other hand as he listed each symptom.

'And facial numbness and tingling fingers.' A horrible thought speared her brain. 'It sounds like poison.'

He nodded, his expression grim. 'That is the conclusion I've come to. It matches up that it must have been the meat that was poisoned because the dog was sick as well. I'll call the police. Forget taking blood. Organise for a urine tox screen on everyone and get it to Pathology with an urgent request on it.' He spun round, abruptly calling over his shoulder as he walked away, 'Then organise for the whole family to be in one space. I want to talk to everyone together.'

She gave her staff their orders and ten minutes later, with the tests sent off to the lab, Jason and Patti soon had the trolleys in a square. Each family member lay on their trolley in the foetal position, legs drawn up against the severe stomach cramps, and groaning as each spasm hit.

'I know you're all feeling really ill, but I need you to concentrate on what we're saying.' Emily stood between the trolleys where Christine and Brian Peterson lay. 'Everyone, including the dog, ate the meat and everyone has similar symptoms. David and Brian are the most unwell but I'm guessing that's because they ate the most meat.'

She touched Christine's hand. 'Where did you buy the meat from, Mrs Peterson?'

The sick woman trembled. 'It was one of ours. Brian slaughtered it a month ago.'

'Have you eaten meat from that beast before?' Linton asked, his voice quiet and nonjudgmental.

'Yes, we have, and we've never been sick.' She twisted a hankie in her fingers. 'I defrosted it in the fridge, I did everything the same as normal.'

'The symptoms are leaning very strongly toward poisoning.' Linton's matter-of-fact voice broke the almost surreal news. 'We'll know as soon as the urine tests comes back but in the meantime would there be anyone who might want to hurt you in any way?'

The father of two gasped. 'No, no, no one we know would do such a thing.'

'I don't understand.' Christine gripped the side of the trolley for support, her voice trembling. 'It was supposed to be a special day for Brian. David did such a great job getting the bonfire ready.'

Dad and I barbequed. It was an awesome bonfire, I'd been collecting the wood for a week. Emily's hand shot out, gripping Linton's white, starched sleeve as the thought struck her. 'David, what sort of things were you burning on the fire?'

The teenager replied listlessly. 'Just wood and stuff that I found.'

Linton's eyes flashed his understanding as he immediately picked up on her line of thought. 'Was any of the wood stained green, like the pine they use in the car parks down by the river?'

'Maybe.' He gripped his stomach as another spasm hit.

Emily spoke softly. 'This is really, really important, David. We need you to think. Had any of the wood been treated?'

The boy looked anxiously between Emily and Linton. 'I…I did get some from the building site next door.'

Linton thumped his fist against his forehead. 'Copper-chrome-arsenate. You've barbequed your meat in arsenic vapours. That's what's causing all these symptoms.'

Stunned silence and shocked disbelief scored everyone's faces.

'Arsenic. Hell of a birthday present, son.' Brian grimaced in pain.

'I'm s-s-sorry, Dad.' David's voice quavered as tears filled his eyes. 'Are we going to die?'

'Not now that we know what we're treating.' Linton gave the boy's shoulder a reassuring squeeze.' He turned to Emily. 'We need dimercaprol up to five milligrams per kilogram by intramuscular injection. It acts as a chelator and the arsenic will bind with the drug so it can be removed from the system.'

'I'll ring Pharmacy now.' Emily turned to her staff. 'Jodie, Patti and Jason, attach everyone to a cardiac monitor and monitor urine output. You'll need to weigh each family member so we can work out the dose of dimercaprol. The rest of the nursing care plan is to provide symptomatic care. A cool sponge will help, as well as some refreshing mouthwash.'

Her staff nodded their agreement and everyone attended to their tasks. By the end of the shift the Petersons had been transferred into the high dependency unit for close monitoring. Emily stifled a yawn as she wished the night staff a good shift.

'You can't say we didn't welcome you with a bang. Who would have thought of arsenic poisoning?' Linton leaned back on his chair, his hands clasped behind his head, his broad chest straining at his now rumpled shirt. 'Fabulous call, by the way. What made you associate the bonfire?'

His praise sent streaks of happiness though her. 'At the risk of being called sexist, I have four brothers. When they were younger they'd burn just about anything, and David reminded me of them. Lucky for us, Dad taught us what was toxic and what was safe so we avoided potential tragedies like today.'

'The Petersons are one lucky family.' He rose to his feet and gazed down at her. 'Ready for that drink?'

I've been ready for you to notice me for over a year. 'Sure, I'll just get changed and meet you in the foyer.' She walked to the locker room, somehow managing to control her feet which wanted to spin, twirl and tap their way there.

It had been an incredible first shift. From the moment she'd stepped into the department Linton had seemed different, as if he was interested in her as a person, not just as a nurse. And he'd asked her out for a drink. She hummed to herself as she quickly changed into her jeans and loose-fitting top. She sprayed some perfume onto her neck and wrists, and almost skipped down the corridor.

As she stepped into the foyer she heard Linton's deliciously deep, rumbling voice. 'It was a huge first day for you, Jodie, but you did a fantastic job. Are you up for A and E's traditional welcome drinks?'

'I think I deserve them.' Her girlish laugh tinkled in the quiet foyer. 'I hope every day isn't going to be like today.'

Emily stopped so fast her boots squeaked on the lino floor.

Jason and Patti pushed through the door on the opposite side of the foyer, both dressed in city black. ‘We’re ready.’

Emily’s stomach rolled. She swallowed hard against the rising bile. *Drinks for new staff.*

Her blood pounded in her head, drowning out all coherent thought. How could she have been so stupid? How could she have got it so very wrong?

You always get it wrong with men.

This wasn’t ‘drinks’ as in ‘I finally noticed you and let’s go for drinks’. This was a general invitation for all new staff.

Staff wellbeing is high on my agenda. Linton’s words sounded clearly in her head. Welcome drinks. A ‘getting to know you’ session—team bonding.

She wanted to curl up in a ball and hide. She’d misinterpreted professional team building for personal interest. She’d let her crazy and out-of-control feelings for Linton colour her judgement so much that she’d heard only what she’d wanted to hear. An image of her jabbing his chest with her finger came into her head. She’d even let her guard down and flirted with him.

Linton turned on hearing the squeal of her boots, his smile wide and welcoming. ‘Emily, I thought I recognised the sound of your boots.’

Like a rabbit caught in a spotlight, she had nowhere to run and nowhere to hide. *Be the friendly colleague and hide the pain*. Tossing her head, she forced down every particle of disappointment and embarrassment, and summoned up, from the aching depths of her soul, ‘bright and breezy, Emily, everyone’s best friend’. The public Emily that shielded the real her.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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