Medical Romance™

SUE MACKAY

You, Me and a Family

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Returning to Nelson Harbour Hospital, Dr Alexandra Prendergast sees work as a distraction from the loss of the baby she'd always longed for. But working with single dad Mario Forelli, who's bringing up his little girl Sophia, Alex sees a vulnerability beneath his proud façade. Maybe a family for all three of them is closer than they think…

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Dear Reader

I'm often asked where the ideas for my stories come from and I have to say I haven't got a clue. They just arrive in my head. Yes, it's chaos in there sometimes.

So where did Mario and Alexandra come from? In the sunshine by the marina at a restaurant in Nelson, celebrating a friend's birthday earlier this year, I found my story. Sitting at another table was a very big, gorgeous, Italian-looking guy.

And that's how it began. What if this man was a doctor? What if he were bringing up a child alone? Why? What kind of woman would take his heart? It was easy to visualise a tiny but strong woman with him. And how perfect it would be to make her his boss.

We had a great lunch that day, and I didn't spend all my time on the story, preferring to enjoy the celebrations. But during the hour and a half drive home my mind worked overtime. I hope you like the result.

Cheers!

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You, Me and a Family

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To Dad and Mum. No matter what, you were always there for us as we grew from little hellions to adults. I miss you.

CHAPTER ONE

'ALEXANDRA KATHERINE PRENDERGAST, how do you plead? Guilty …?'

The judge paused, drawing out the excruciating moment, forcing her heart to clench with pain.

Just when Alex thought she'd scream with frustration and humiliation, he added in a disbelieving taunt, 'Or not guilty?'

Her mouth was drier than a hot summer's day. Her tongue felt twice its normal size. Tears oozed from the corners of her eyes to track down her sallow cheeks. 'Guilty,' she tried to whisper. *Guilty, guilty, guilty*, cried her brain, agreed her knotted belly.

'Speak up, Alexandra,' the man standing on the opposite side of the operating theatre table growled. His eyes, staring out at her from under his cap, were cold, hard and demanding. Their hue matched the no-nonsense blue of the scrubs they both wore. 'Did this child die in your care or not?'

'I did everything within my power to keep him alive, your honour. The other doctors told me there was nothing I could've done, that I did nothing wrong. I wanted to believe them, but how could I? He was totally reliant on me and I failed him.' The familiar, gut-twisting mantra spilled over her sore, cracked lips. The old pain and despair roiled up her throat. 'I failed Jordan.' The words flailed her brain.

'Jordan died because of you. Have you done everything within your power to prevent the same thing happening again?'

'Yes,' she croaked. 'Every day I try to save other babies.'

'I sentence you to a lifetime of looking after other people's ill children.' Her judge's eyes were icy, his voice a perfect match.

Alex gasped, shoved up from her pillow and clamped her hand over her mouth. Sweat soaked her nightgown, plastering it to her breasts and shoulders, making it pull tight against her skin as she moved in the bed. Moist strands of hair fell into her eyes, stuck to her wet cheeks. 'I will not throw up. I will not.' The words stuck in the back of her throat as she blinked her way back from the nightmare.

The all too familiar nightmare.

Her fingers shook as she reached for the bedside lamp switch and flooded her bedroom with soft yellow light. Tossing the covers aside she put her feet on the floor and pushed up. Despite the heat-pump being on, the winter air was chilly on her feverish skin. But cold was good. It focused her. Brought her completely back from the nightmare and her guilt. Made her concentrate on the here and now, on today and not the past.

Tugging on a thick robe and slipping her feet into fluffy slippers she trudged out to the kitchen and plugged the kettle in to make a drink of herbal tea. Shivering, she stood staring into her pantry, unable to decide what flavour to have. Her eyes welled up as the floodgates opened, and she blindly reached for the nearest packet and plopped a tea bag into a mug.

The oven clock read 3:46. She'd had little more than three hours sleep before the nightmare hit, slamming into her head in full technicolour. Accusing. Debilitating. Painful. Reminding her that her position as head paediatrician at Nelson Hospital was, in her mind, as tenuous as whatever her next patient threw at her. Taunting she was a fraud and that it was only a matter of time before she made a dreadful mistake with someone's child that would expose her as incompetent.

She had to draw deep to find the belief she was a good doctor, a very good one. The ever expanding numbers of sick children coming to see her, not just from the top of the South Island but all over New Zealand, showed that. Unfortunately the nightmare always undermined her fragile belief in herself.

It also reinforced the truth about her not being mother material, how totally incompetent she'd be in that role. Not that she'd be contemplating that ever again.

Click. The kettle switched off. Boiling water splashed onto the counter as she filled her mug. Strawberry vapour rose to her nostrils. Taking the drink she crossed through the lounge to the wide, floor-to-ceiling window showcasing the lights of Rocks Road and the wharves of Nelson Harbour. Rain slashed through the night, falling in sheets to puddle on the surface ten storeys below.

Alex stood, shaking, clutching the hot mug in both hands, and staring down at the tugboats manoeuvring a freight ship through the narrow cut leading from Tasman Bay to the sheltered harbour. Day and night, boats came and went according to the tides. Now, in early June, they'd be loading the last of the kiwifruit destined for the other side of the world. Men looking like midgets worked ropes and machinery. A tough job. An honest job.

'Stop it.' There was nothing easy or dishonest about the work she did with sick children. 'You did not cause Jordan's death. The pathologist proved that, exonerated you.'

Tell that to Jordan's father.

Behind her eyes a steady pounding built in intensity. Alex cautiously sipped the steaming tea, her gaze still fixed on the wet scene below. Why had the nightmares returned tonight? Exhaustion? Or the nagging need to slot back into her role as head of paediatrics at Nelson Hospital as quickly and effortlessly as possible?

The job was more than a job—it was her whole life, a replacement for the family she wouldn't otherwise have. Lots of staff to mentor, harangue, watch over and care about. Oodles of children to care for in the only way she knew how—medically—and to love safely from the sidelines. Involved, yet not involved.

The fruity scent of her tea wafted in the air, sweet and relaxing. 'You shouldn't have taken the four-month sabbatical. It put you under pressure to again prove how good you are.'

But all those American hospitals and their savvy specialists showing how brilliant they were had actually boosted her confidence and made her understand once and for all she was up with the play, had joined the ranks of the best in the business of paediatrics. Everywhere she'd gone she'd been applauded for her paper on premature births. The job offers had been overwhelming. An awesome charge for her fragile ego. Even the nagging need to constantly prove to herself that she was good had taken a hike.

In San Francisco, when her old mentor from specialising days had offered her an incredible position at his new private paediatric clinic, she'd been beside herself with pride.

And that, she thought with grim satisfaction, should earn her stepfather's grudging respect. Except, of course, she'd turned it down.

Draining the mug Alex turned away from the window. Time to try for some more sleep. Jet lag, exhaustion from her hectic time in the States, the inability to relax while away from home. All reasons to explain why she ached with tiredness and her mind ran riot with yearnings for what seemed doomed forever. A family of her own to love and cherish.

Alexandra sighed through her throbbing headache as she dropped her handbag into the bottom drawer of her desk. Home, sweet home. Nelson Hospital Paediatric Department. The place she spent most of her life. Her stomach flip-flopped like a fish on dry sand. Nerves? Why? She was happy to be back. Wasn't she? Yes, but what if there'd been too many changes on the ward in her absence? Which regular patients had got well and left? Had any of them passed away?

She shivered. What was wrong with her this morning? To be feeling out of sorts was not the best way to start back on the job.

She'd been determined not to think too much about this job while she'd studied with the best of paediatricians in California and Washington, or when she'd presented her paper to countless meetings and conventions. During that time she'd pretended she wasn't worried about staffing levels and the ever increasing numbers of wee patients entering Nelson Hospital. Instead she'd tried to absorb all she could from her mentors and share her own experiences and knowledge. She'd been entertained, courted and tutored. And all she'd wanted to do was return here. Home. Where she felt safe.

She glanced around the familiar room at the paintings she'd bought at the annual summer art show in the Queen's Gardens downtown. They looked tired. Like her. Dusty. Not like her. She smiled reluctantly. It was great to be back—dust, or no dust.

Then reality crashed in on her. Her desk should be littered with stacks of files, notes, memos and all the other detritus that accumulated on a daily basis. Instead there was one small, neat pile in the centre of her desk. The acting HOD from London must've decided to give her a break on her first day back, despite having warned her during their Skype interview he'd be a better doctor than pen-pusher. 'Thanks, John. I owe you.'

Stepping closer she spied a note at the top of the pile and picked it up.

Miss Alexandra Prendergast. Welcome back. I've done the rosters for the next month, signed off the patient reports to date and answered all the mail apart from two letters regarding intern rotations you might like to deal with yourself. I hope you find everything in order.

The scrawled signature read something like Maria Forreel.

Who was Maria Forreel? And why was this woman working in her office? So much for thinking John had done all this. Forreel? What kind of name was that? Was it—? Her smile stretched into a grin. Seriously, was it for real? Alex peered closer. Forell? Forelli, that was it. Forelli. It made no difference. The name meant nothing to her.

Alex tugged the chair out from the desk and sank down on it. She had been excited about coming back and yet today felt like the first day at school—terrifying. Worse, she didn't even know why. 'Probably jet lag.' How many things could she blame on that?

'There you are. How was your trip? Did you do lots of shopping in all those swanky boutiques?' The charge nurse on her ward stood in the doorway with a wide, welcoming smile on her dear face.

'Kay, it's great to see you.' A welcome distraction. 'And yes, I found time to add to my wardrobe. A lot.'

'I'm so-o jealous.' Kay gave the most unjealous grin possible.

Alex reached into the drawer where she'd placed her handbag and pulled out a small package. 'I hope you like these.'

Kay gaped. 'You bought me something? Oh, you big softy. What is it?' The paper tore under her fingers. 'Oh, my gosh. They're beautiful.' She held up the silver earrings, turning them left and right so the light gleamed off the polished metal. 'I love them. Thank you so much. But you shouldn't have.'

Alex laughed. 'Of course I shouldn't. You'll have to work twice as hard now.' Like Kay could do that. She was already the hardest working nurse Alex had ever come across. She added, 'I'm glad you like them. When I saw them I immediately thought of you.' She had little trinkets for the rest of the staff too.

Kay slipped the hooks into her ears. 'Where's a mirror?' She took the one Alex handed her from the drawer. 'Wow, they're perfect.'

Alex rose, smoothed the skirt of her tailored suit and reached for her white coat hanging on the back of the door. 'So how's Darren? The kids?'

'Busy as ever. Why didn't I appreciate my single, peaceful life when I had it?' Kay grinned again.

'You wouldn't swap a thing.' *Whereas I would swap my amazing medical career for exactly what Kay's got.* Alex gulped. Her fingers faltered on the buttons they were doing up. What? *I'd love a Darren and some kids in my life? Okay, not exactly Darren but a loving, caring man who'd understand my eccentricities and forgive me my mistakes in a flash. I would? Since when?* Under her ribs her heart beat a heavy rhythm. Her shoulders drooped momentarily. As if a man like that existed for her. Pressing her fingers to her temples she breathed in slowly. This day was going all weird on her and it was only seven in the morning. Things had better start looking up soon.

'Alex? Are you all right?' Kay was at her elbow, her brow creased with concern.

'I'm fine.' She dropped her hands.

‘Are you sure you should be starting back today? You only got back into the country yesterday, didn’t you?’

Kay’s concern would be her undoing if she let it. ‘I’m fine. Raring to go, in fact.’ Alex hauled her shoulders back into place and plastered a tight smile on her face, then reminded herself where she was. At work, in her comfort zone. She relaxed. A little. ‘I’m a bit tired, nothing else. Rushing from one city to the next took its toll.’

Kay gave an exaggerated eye roll. ‘My heart bleeds for you.’

Alex laughed, finally feeling secure with being back at work. Kay always kept her grounded when the going got rough, and today hadn’t even started. ‘I know I’m early but let’s get the shift under way. What’s been going on in my absence?’

Instantly Kay’s demeanour turned serious. She pointed to an envelope tucked half under the files lying on her desk. ‘There’s a message you need to deal with before anything else. I believe it explains everything.’ She headed for the door. ‘Umm, we’ve had some changes. Big ones.’ Suddenly Kay was in an awful hurry to be gone. ‘Good ones.’

Good changes? What was wrong with how things were before? She ran a well-organised and successful department. There wasn’t any need to alter a thing. Her unease increased as she reached tentatively for the missive. ‘Why? Has something happened?’

Beep, beep. The pager on her desk interrupted. Snatching it up she glanced at the message as she ran out of her office right behind Kay, who was racing for the ward. Then the loudspeaker crackled to life and told them what they needed to know. ‘Cardiac arrest, room four.’

‘Tommy Jenkins.’ Kay shoved the fire door back so hard it hit the wall. ‘It’s so unfair.’

Alex ducked around the door as it swung back, and kept running. ‘Who’s Tommy Jenkins? Fill me in. Quickly.’

‘He and his mother moved to Nelson to be closer to Tommy’s grandparents last month after his father died in a fishing accident. Tommy has cystic fibrosis and was admitted five days ago with a massive chest infection that’s not responding to any treatment.’

‘What an awful time to shift the boy.’

‘Tell me about it.’ Kay scowled. ‘He’s missing his mates, and isn’t happy about getting to know new medical staff.’

Room four was chaos. The boy lay with his head tipped back while a nurse, Rochelle, inflated his lungs with an Ambu bag. Jackson, an intern, crouched astride him, doing compressions on his chest.

‘Hand me the tube,’ a deep male voice Alex had never heard in her life ordered calmly. ‘Now, please.’

‘Here.’ Kay obliged in an instant.

Alex pushed in beside Rochelle, ready to take over. She needed to be in control of this situation. Staring at the stranger, who admittedly seemed to know what he was doing, she demanded, ‘Who, may I ask, are you?’ He certainly wasn’t the man she’d Skyped with about taking her place on the ward. This man she’d never forget. A strong jawline, a mouth that smiled as easily as breathing. Eyes that demanded attention.

‘Mario Forelli.’ He didn’t look up, didn’t falter in suctioning the boy’s mouth. ‘This lad’s arrested.’

Since it didn’t look like she’d be pushing this man out of the way any time soon and wanting something to do with her hands she reached for the drugs bag. ‘What are you doing here?’ Alex asked, feeling even more perplexed, while at the same time recognising the name on that note in her office. Not Maria, but Mario. Not a woman, but a well-muscled, broad-chested, dark-haired male.

‘Mr Forelli, as in paediatric specialist,’ Kay spoke from across the bed where she read the monitor keeping track of Tommy’s status.

‘Stop the compressions.’ The stranger spoke clearly but quietly as he deftly inserted a tube down the boy’s throat.

‘How long has Tommy been down?’ Alex asked while her brain tossed up distracting questions. Where had Mr Forelli come from? More importantly, what was he doing on her ward? And taking care of all her paperwork? Where was John Campbell? Big changes, Kay had said. Presumably this man was one of them. Alex forced herself to concentrate as she drew up the drugs in preparation to inserting them into Tommy’s intravenous line. Right now this lad depended on her being focused on him, nothing or anyone else.

This Forelli character had no qualms about taking command as he asked Jackson to move aside so he could resume the chest massage. His hands were ludicrously large against the boy’s thin, pale chest. He explained to the room in general, ‘I found Tommy lying half out of bed a few minutes ago.’

‘I’d popped out to get his meds only moments before.’ Guilt laced Rochelle’s voice as she glanced at Forelli, a disturbingly ingratiating look in her calf-like eyes.

‘You mustn’t blame yourself, Rochelle. No one could’ve predicted he’d go into cardiac arrest at that moment.’

Relief poured through the young nurse. ‘Thank you, Mario,’ she murmured.

Blimey. ‘Just as well you were here, Mr Forelli,’ Alex muttered, trying to ignore the flare of anger that there was a new doctor on *her* ward whom she knew nothing about. What was the point of being head of department if no one consulted her about something this important? Even if she hadn’t been here, someone could’ve mentioned it in one of the many emails she’d been sent throughout her trip, supposedly keeping her up to date with staff gossip and scandal. She’d have preferred knowing about Forelli’s arrival than Rochelle’s cousin’s car accident.

Forelli gave a quick flick of his dark head in her direction, a beautiful, winsome smile lightening a seriously good-looking face. ‘You must be the marvellous Miss Prendergast I’ve been hearing so much about.’ There’d been no change in the rhythm of the compressions. Very smooth.

‘I am,’ she retorted. *Think you can charm me? Think again, buster*. So why the flutter in her tummy? Why the sense of something she couldn’t quite fathom slipping past her fingertips? Her reaction had nothing to do with that sexy voice with a hint of an accent that made her melt inside. No, it had to be the fear of them losing Tommy. There was so much she needed to find out about.

After they’d saved the boy. According to the notes Tommy was fourteen years old. Too young to be in this situation. He hadn’t even begun to experience life, and if his heart didn’t start soon he’d never get the chance.

Squashing the distress flaring within her she focused on the monitors and pleaded for Tommy’s weary heart to start pumping, itching to take over the compressions, feeling ridiculously useless as everyone worked well together.

The room went quiet as everyone concentrated on bringing Tommy back to life. More compressions, drugs and oxygen. Finally, Forelli sucked a lungful and commanded, ‘Stop.’ Everyone held their breath and watched the monitor’s screen.

At last a rhythm appeared. A collective sigh of relief and a thankful ‘Yes’ resounded around the small room.

Alex fought to keep her shoulders from slumping. That had been too close. ‘Is Tommy’s mother in the hospital?’ she asked Kay after she’d administered another dose of adrenaline.

‘No. She usually comes in about nine and spends an hour or two with Tommy before going back home to work. She’s still got her old job, working online. A tax lawyer for the government, I think. I’ll phone her to come in early.’

‘Thanks, Kay. I’ll talk to Mrs Jenkins when she gets in. In the meantime I’d like to be brought up to date on everyone else on the ward.’ Her eyes clashed with Forelli’s pewter-coloured gaze. ‘That includes you.’

He shrugged eloquently. ‘No problem.’

'We'll talk after I've spoken to whoever's in charge of Tommy's case.'

Those eyes twinkled at her. 'That would be me. I've been taking care of this young man since he was admitted for the first time a month ago.' Before she knew what was happening Forelli put out his right hand to engulf hers in a warm, firm grip. 'We haven't had a chance to meet properly. Mario Forelli. Your new paediatrician.' He shook her hand, but didn't immediately let her go, holding her hand in an almost caress.

'Excuse me?' She tugged free, trying to ignore the spear of warmth zooming up her arm. 'Do you mind telling me how you fit in here?' Talk about being on the back foot in her own department.

'Certainly. Shall we each grab a coffee and go to your office, maybe after I've talked to Carla Jenkins?'

Her eyes locked on to Mario Forelli. Another charmer. The world seemed full of them. And yet his return gaze showed understanding and commiseration at her situation. Which rattled her further, cranking her stress levels dangerously high. Breathe deep, one, two, three. 'Thank you. I'd appreciate it.'

She headed for the nurses' station. Mr Forelli strode alongside her, towering above her, making her feel even shorter than usual. Strangely, that didn't bother her the way it usually did. Who was this guy? How did he so easily get under her skin? She spun around to get a better look at him and tripped over her own feet. She would've fallen flat on her face if *he* hadn't caught her elbow.

'Careful.'

'Thanks.' Again. Alex glared up at this disturbing man, and stretched onto the toes of her new Italian shoes from Los Angeles. Still way too short for level eye contact. For that she'd need a small ladder. Grr.

'Mario, can I get your signature on this letter?' Averill, Alex's secretary, stood in front of them, a dazzling smile on her face as she peered up at Mario.

'Sure.' He reached for the pad and pen being held out to him.

'Ah, hum. Excuse me.' Alex looked from Averill to Mario.

Her secretary finally dragged her eyes sideways and recognised Alex. 'Hi, Alex, you're back.'

'Yes, I'm back.' Since when did Averill come in so early? The starstruck look on the older woman's face held the answer. Since Mr Forelli had started working here. Alex continued watching the pair of them but had to admit the new doctor wasn't encouraging Averill in any way whatsoever.

Mario handed the pen and memo back, his signature scrawled across the bottom. 'There you go.'

As her secretary scuttled away Alex damped down the sudden fear brought on by her own stupid insecurities and rounded on Mr Forelli to demand some answers. The words dried on her tongue when her eyes clashed with his.

'Averill wasn't going over your head to get me to sign that. It was a letter from me to the board about my tenure.' When she again tried to speak he held his hand up. 'We'll talk as soon as we get our patients sorted. Okay?'

'Oh, fine, thanks.' What was she thanking him for? Flustered she looked away. If she went home and started her day again would it get any better? Another glance in his direction didn't clear anything up. Instead his open face and friendly eyes beguiled her. And his practical approach undermined her concerns, told her she had nothing to worry about.

'One hour.' He waved at her as he headed down the ward. 'Hopefully.'

Did she mention how he stole her breath away?

Kay stopped on her way past and joined her in watching Forelli's progress down the ward. 'Delectable, don't you think?'

'No, I don't.' *He's the most beautiful man I've ever met. Just standing in front of him makes me feel tiny and delicate.*

'You're the only woman on the ward to think so. He's charmed every female within miles.' Kay chuckled. 'He's got the staff falling over one another to help him out.'

Why am I not surprised? Those smiles alone would get him anything he wanted. But not from her. No, she was here to work, not play. Disappointment flared. Playing with Mr Forelli after hours might be fun, exciting even. 'How long's he been working here?'

When her head nurse didn't answer Alex turned around to see Kay quickly disappearing behind the nurses' station, her gaze intent on the file in her hand. Right. Alex followed, wondering how she could wait a whole hour to learn more about Mr Forelli.

Suddenly it dawned on her she was letting everything get out of control. She still hadn't caught up on the patients. Mr Forelli's presence had knocked her sideways. Since when did she let these things faze her? *Come on. You worry too much. There were bound to be some changes made during your absence. Hospitals don't stand still.*

Little more than one hour back on the ward and she was shattered. And she'd thought touring was hard work.

'Welcome home, Alex,' she muttered. Would anyone notice if she walked away, grabbed a flight to anywhere and buried her head in the clouds for another day? Probably not if what she'd seen of Mr Forelli was anything to go by. He was definitely in charge—of her department.

CHAPTER TWO

'SO THAT'S THE wonderful Miss Prendergast.' Mario's hands clenched and unclenched at his sides. Imperious despite being as confused as all be it. Did she honestly think the whole ward had been waiting, going nowhere, achieving nothing, until she returned to the helm?

She hadn't exactly rushed him with her enthusiasm at his presence. What she had done was disturb him deep inside where he hid his emotions. Right now that pool of feelings was swirling, putting him on high alert. If she could do this to him in such a short time she was dangerous to his equilibrium. Very dangerous. He needed to exercise caution. But how when just being near all that loveliness tied up in a mouth-watering package made him feel drunk. She was a neat package that reminded him of what he'd been missing out on for nearly a year, and what he did not have the time for now—a sex life.

His teeth ground hard as he cursed under his breath. He really enjoyed this job, but today it was shaping up to be a pain in the butt. Or a tickle in his hormone department.

Worse, like an ungainly teen, he'd struggled to stop ogling at her exquisite features: high cheekbones, pert nose, flawless skin. Not to mention that gleaming auburn hair locked up in a knot so tight not one strand could escape. 'She's so tiny. Yet her reputation is huge.' A powerhouse on heels.

As he continued to study her it dawned on him that he'd been expecting an Amazon woman to match the stories he'd heard about her—a demanding, punishing doctor who expected unsurpassed devotion towards the patients from each and every member of her staff, who accepted nothing but the finest care and treatment for every child entering this ward, and would do whatever it took to get it. Including, so he'd been told, reading stories to wee tots at all hours of the night and day. So he had that much in common with her. He'd also heard she cared a lot for her staff.

Those amazing green eyes, filled with angry questions, had sizzled at him, bursting with frustration because she didn't know what was going on in her domain. Never mind she'd been away a third of the year. Admittedly he fully understood her feelings. He'd be the same in a similar situation. *Scema*.

He'd expected it. Even in Italy he'd heard of Alexandra Prendergast and her groundbreaking theories on dealing with premature infants. He'd read the paper she'd written and had been keen to meet her, to work with her. Who hadn't?

Why hadn't she taken up a grand position in a large hospital overseas? Mistakes in her past? Something had rattled her in Tommy's room. There'd been a fear lurking in her eyes until the boy's heart restarted. Whatever caused it had tugged at his heartstrings, had made him want to wrap her up in a hug and protect her. As if she'd let him even try. As if he had time for another female, another broken soul, to look out for.

Because right now his focus had to be totally on Sophia. Which left no room in his life for anything, anyone, else. Sophia ruled everything including his heart. Getting his wee daughter's life back on track, making her happy and, hopefully, finally winning spontaneous smiles from her sweet cupid's mouth was paramount. Everything else was on hold for as long as it took and beyond.

He shrugged. Enough conjecturing. His first move would be to explain his presence without going into any personal details. Was it too much to hope she wouldn't notice the six-month gap in his CV? The CV the board's chairman insisted he show Alexandra, even though the job was his. Maybe he could forestall too many questions by talking about the reason for Liz's abrupt departure from the department.

Sighing, Mario finally managed to stop staring and instead called to her. 'Do you want to join me when I talk to Carla Jenkins?'

Her eyes lightened and that tautness in her shoulders relaxed. 'Yes. I should meet her.'

Just then a distressed woman in her thirties burst out of the lift and shot straight towards him, tears streaming down her cheeks. 'Mario, what's happened? Is Tommy all right?' Carla rushed at him. 'Kay told me to come in immediately. What's wrong?'

Mario looked into Carla's imploring eyes and had one of those moments when he hated his job. He understood her fears. Really understood them. He'd be absolutely terrified if Sophia's heart had stopped. 'Tommy's fine now but his heart stopped for a while.' He paused to let his words sink in. When Carla's eyes widened and her bottom lip trembled, he pressed her shoulder gently, and repeated, 'He's all right now.'

'I have to see him.' Fear and despair laced Carla's voice. 'I shouldn't have moved here, but it was so hard dealing with this on my own after everything else.'

'Tommy's no worse off being here. His heart would've stopped if he'd been in Auckland.' Taking Carla's elbow Mario gently led her into a visitors' room. 'The nurses are staying with him and you can see him once I've explained what happened.'

Alexandra followed and shut the door firmly. Then she reiterated his first statement. 'Tommy's heart is beating fine now.'

'Who are you? Why did it stop? Are you sure he's all right?' Carla stopped the torrent of words and swallowed hard. Tears gleamed at the corners of her eyes as she stared at the door as though wishing Tommy would walk through and hug her. Her fingers were tightly interlaced against her stomach, her elbows taut and awkward at her sides. 'Sorry. I freaked when Kay phoned.'

'Take a seat, Carla.' Mario parked his backside on the edge of the small table. 'This is Miss Prendergast. You've heard about her and she'll be part of Tommy's medical team from now on. She's very experienced and Tommy couldn't be in better hands.' Hell, Tommy was getting excellent care in *his* hands.

Glancing around, he found Alexandra's eyebrows lifting ever so slightly as she listened to him, amusement blinking back at him from those emerald eyes. Had he gone overboard with his compliment? With a shrug, he got back to the main reason they were all shut in this airless room. 'Do you recall the conversation you and I had when Tommy was first admitted? About what to expect at this stage of Tommy's disease?'

'Yes, but I hoped you were wrong. No, I prayed you didn't know what you were talking about. They didn't put it so bluntly in Auckland. I'm sorry.' Carla sagged further.

Mario winced. There was nothing to be gained by keeping a patient's family in the dark. But then Carla and her son had been dealing with another tragedy, and anything else might've overwhelmed them at the time.

Alexandra took the empty seat beside the woman and reached for Carla's hands. So here was Miss Prendergast's softer side. 'It's very understandable for you to hope for better. I'd probably do the same thing if I was in your situation.' She shook Carla's hands gently. 'But as doctors we don't have that luxury. We have to be prepared for anything to happen so that we can do our very best for Tommy.'

Carla lifted her pain-filled eyes to Alexandra's face. 'Thank you.'

Mario watched as Alexandra talked softly, explaining the situation once again, having gone from confused to kind and compassionate in a flash. Amazing how her own priorities had been put aside for a suffering parent. He was impressed. This was the soft caramel specialist he'd heard about.

Alexandra said to Carla, 'What you can keep believing is that we're doing everything possible for Tommy.'

Carla's bottom lip trembled but she blinked hard and held herself very straight. 'I do, but I'm afraid of losing him.'

Mario murmured, '*Sì*. It is very hard for you. But Tommy's fighting hard. He won't give in. I've seen it in his eyes.'

He noted Alexandra listening as carefully as Carla. Sussing him out? Making sure he was up to speed on the job? That rankled. He'd worked in some of the best hospitals in England and Italy. He had an excellent reputation as a surgeon for the little ones. This hospital board had been more than happy to accept his qualifications. Miss Prendergast had to accept him, like it or not. Starting now.

He stood abruptly. The desperate need in Carla's eyes to see her son gave him the perfect excuse to cut this conversation short. Carla probably couldn't take in any more right now anyway. Taking her elbow he said, 'Come. We'll visit your son.'

He accompanied the woman to Tommy's room where he spent time checking the boy over again. Finally he stepped back and left Carla gripping Tommy's hand and talking soothing mother things while watching her precious son as though he was about to vaporise into thin air.

His heart stuttered. Sophia's mother had never been there for her child. Too busy having a good time to want to be tied down by her daughter. How the hell had she not loved sweet, lovable Sophia? What he wouldn't do to tell Lucy exactly what he thought of her.

As a father he connected with Carla's emotions. The two times Sophia had been severely ill he'd taken her hands in his and hung on for dear life, willing his own life source into her, urging her to come back to him. It had drained him completely, taken days to recover from, but he was her father and fathers gave their all to their bambinos. So should all mothers.

'Have you got time to join me on the ward round?' Alexandra spoke quietly from beside him. 'Or do you want to stay with those two a while longer? I don't mind waiting if you do.'

When he turned his head and looked down he met the direct but empathetic gaze of this enigmatic woman. 'They don't need me at the moment. Probably better off having time alone. Let's go over patient notes in Kay's cubbyhole she proudly calls her office. I'll bring you up to speed.'

'Right.'

Right. That's it? Did that mean she was accepting his presence? Did she realise he'd been doing her job while she was away? Not to mention filling in for Liz. 'Right,' he snapped back, suddenly tired of this, wanting to clear the air between them now, not after they'd completed their round. But the interns were waiting, grouped around the nurses' station, reading notes, and pestering the nurses. His teeth ground on a curse. He'd have to wait.

At Kay's door he stood back to allow Alexandra to enter first, and as she passed he drew a lungful of sweet spring air that reminded him of freesias. On a freezing winter's day? What was wrong with him? It was as though his brain had gone to hell in a wheelbarrow, leaving him delusional. It certainly wasn't because he was attracted to this woman. Absolutely not. He liked his women pliable and fun, not to mention tall and blonde. Fun especially didn't seem to fit Alexandra. Maybe he could show her some? Bah! Dumb idea. Perturbed at the direction his thoughts were heading he studied Alexandra from behind.

The shapeless white coat did not enhance her figure, but neither did it detract from her attributes. Her slim neck and cute ears poking from above the crinkled white collar appeared delicate. Nothing like the real Miss Prendergast at all.

'Hi, Mario. How's Sophia this morning?' Kay grinned at him.

'As quiet and good as ever.' Sadness struck as he thought of his daughter and her fear of doing something naughty. At times he almost wished she'd throw a tantrum or refuse to do what he asked of her, instead of her quiet sobs in the night and her need to behave perfectly so no one would growl at her. It wasn't normal to be so good. He'd probably never know everything that had happened to her before he'd come into her life. And for now it was more important to help her overcome the past, not make an issue of it. The only way he knew how to do that was to provide stability and loads of unconditional love, things she'd never experienced in her short and sad life.

'I found some of my boys' books and brought them in for Sophia. I hope they're not too young for her but I was thinking that as she's learning to read they'd be a good place to start.'

'I'm sure Sophia will enjoy them. She loves all sorts of books. Just like her dad.' His chest swelled, while at the same time he squashed a pang of annoyance. It was his place to provide everything Sophia needed. If he just had the time to go shopping.

Alexandra's eyes were flicking back and forth between him and Kay, puzzlement darkening the green to the colour of pine needles. 'Sophia's my daughter,' he informed her. Maybe telling her something personal would soften her attitude towards him. 'She's four years old.'

'She's gorgeous,' added Kay, making his heart swell more.

'Of course she's gorgeous.' *She's mine*.

Alexandra's eyes widened but she only said, 'Let's take a look at the patient files, shall we?'

'Sì.' Antagonising this woman wouldn't help anyone, least of all him. He had no intention of finding another specialist position in another city. Nelson was where he belonged, where Sophia now belonged. They were here to stay—forever.

So buying a ticket to Mars was not an option, even if, at this very moment with Alexandra eyeing him up like something the cat had dragged in, all that isolation seemed like bliss.

As Kay handed Alexandra the first file she said in an aside to him, 'I also brought in a chicken casserole for you to take home tonight. I made far too much for us to get through.'

'You're as transparent as glass.' Mario smiled. 'Thank you, but I really wish you wouldn't. I do cook for Sophia every day.' No need to admit that more often than not he heated up something from the freezer, or that often by the time he did have food ready Sophia had fallen asleep on the sofa in front of the TV.

'Just helping you out.' Kay winked, totally unperturbed by his annoyed tone. 'Don't forget to take the dinner home this time.'

Oops. So she'd noticed that the last meal sat in the staff fridge for days before he remembered it was there. Contrite, he smiled. 'I promise I won't.' Quickly scrawling a word on the palm of his hand he shoved his pen back into his pocket and looked up, straight into the amused look on Alexandra's face.

'You don't write memos on your hand?' he asked.

'No, I don't. I have an excellent memory.'

'Unfortunately.' Kay grinned. 'There are times when we all wish you could forget what you've told us to do.'

Startled, Alexandra looked away from this annoying man to gawp at Kay. 'Am I that much of a taskmaster?'

The nurse rolled her eyes and widened her grin. 'The only thing missing is the whip.'

Kay was teasing. Right? A little? What if the staff did think she went too far with her demands of them? 'I can be difficult at times, yes, but I'm only thinking of my patients. I'm not a tyrant. Am I?' She'd been away too long. This was where she faced the world from, wrapping the ward and its inhabitants around her like a security blanket. Now worry gnawed at her. Because she'd found everyone falling over backwards to please Mr Forelli?

Kay chuckled. 'Your little patients adore you, their parents trust you and we all like working here. There, satisfied?'

Mario cleared his throat. 'The patient files?'

The files. Her head jerked up, turning in the direction of that voice that reminded her of red wine and crackers by the fire. Mario Forelli. To be going off on a self-pity tangent was so unlike her. She was tired, and the dregs of her headache still knocked at her skull, but they weren't good enough reasons for this ridiculous behaviour.

Kay tapped her shoulder. 'You're doing it again, going all pale on me.'

'Here.' Warm, strong fingers gripped her elbow, directed her to a chair. 'Take a seat. You must still be jet-lagged. It's a long flight from Los Angeles.' That voice was a balm to her stressed mind, tense muscles.

It also undermined her position as boss. But it was too late to argue. She already sat on the proffered chair. How had she got there so quickly, so effortlessly? Mario Forelli. That's how.

'Thank you. I'm fine, really.' But she stayed seated and reached for the first file. 'Tell me about Gemma Lewis.'

'Gemma has spina bifida. Her family moved here nearly a year ago. Her father is a district court judge. When Gemma required surgery to realign her knees they came to see me rather than return to Wellington.' Forelli's confidence came through loud and clear.

Listening to Forelli explain the surgery he'd performed Alex tried to still the niggling sense of standing on the edge of a precipice. Of falling into a deep chasm she might never find her way back from. Who was Mario? Other than a paediatrician. In no time at all and with no knowledge of the man her thought processes had been hijacked in a totally distracting way. Not a good place to be. Especially, since he had a child, there was obviously a wife. Or a partner.

Or was he a widower? A million questions zapped around her skull, cranking up the throbbing behind her eyes. She should've taken a day at home to fully recover from her trip before facing all these changes.

'Anything you want to ask me about Gemma, Miss Prendergast?' Mario's voice cut through her confusion, and focused her on the job.

'I take it that you're a paediatric surgeon, Mr Forelli.'

His mouth tightened, and she waited for an angry retort.

He didn't disappoint. 'I am, yes. Which is why Judge Lewis was comfortable with letting me look after his daughter.'

'I see.' He hadn't really told her anything but this wasn't the right arena to be asking with other staff hanging on to his every word like he was a god.

'The next file is Tommy Jenkins's. You know about him so we'll move on.' He lifted the third file from her fingers. 'Amelia Saunders, ten years old, contracted dengue fever while on holiday in Fiji. Her liver took a pounding but with drugs her LFTs are slowly returning to normal and she's starting to feel a little better. I'm thinking of letting her go home by the end of the week.' The file slapped down on top of Tommy's and another one was tugged from her light grip. 'Andrew Frost. Fractured femur after falling off a horse.' On and on went Mr Forelli. Completely in control. He answered all her questions without hesitation or referring to the patient notes. He knew his stuff. Very impressive.

Finally he said, 'Let's go and see these patients.'

'Of course.' Why was he in such a hurry? Did he want to get the upcoming conversation in her office done and dusted as much as she did? She pushed out of her chair. 'If you'd like to accompany me, Mr Forelli.' And she led the way out the door as Kay's phone rang.

'I'll be right with you,' Kay called after them.

Mario squashed down his annoyance with her. 'Can't you start by calling me Mario?' He gave her a charming grin that defied her to disagree. 'Everyone else does.'

'I think you'll find I'm not everyone else,' she retorted, her proud eyes little warmer than a glacier.

'How true.' He huffed an annoyed breath. 'You're head of paediatrics with a reputation that's the envy of all your peers.' He stopped and leaned oh-so-nonchalantly against the closed doors of the lift access, easing another wide smile across his mouth as he assessed her. Again. What was wrong with him today? Taking all this time to suss out a woman? A woman who clearly didn't want him here. Sure, he was tired after a sleepless night with Sophia but that was nothing new.

Then his mouth got further carried away with, 'You dress superbly.' Any woman would kill for that perfectly fitted navy blue suit and soft draping white blouse.

'Thank you.' Alexandra's tone was still sharp but her eyes were warming. Just.

He started walking. 'How long have you been working in Nelson?' *Where do you live? Who do you live with?*

‘Three years.’

‘And before that?’ *Have you got bambinos running around somewhere? Though if you do, then why aren’t you at home with them?* And why did he want to know these things? This was his boss. Her private life was of no interest to him whatsoever. *Just being friendly. And testing the temperature*.

‘In San Francisco, specialising.’ Alexandra tilted her head so she could glare up at him more thoroughly. ‘I’m the one who should be asking questions. Such as, exactly how long have you been working here, Mr Forelli?’

So, not Mario, then. Not yet anyway. But give him time, he’d get there. ‘Almost four months.’

Her eyebrows did that imperious rising motion, disappearing under her fringe as the implication of that sunk in. ‘Four months?’

‘Yes. I started a week after you left for your sabbatical.’

CHAPTER THREE

MARIO STOPPED AT the first door and ushered Alexandra ahead of him. Again freesias teased his nostrils as she passed. A sweet, beautiful fragrance. Hell, he didn't even like freesias.

Kay joined them, bringing Rochelle and Jackson with her. 'Hey, Lucas, how's your tummy now? All better?'

'It's still sore.' The boy barely lifted his head as he concentrated on the game on his console.

Mario tapped the eight-year-old on the knee. 'What are you playing today?'

Lucas grinned. 'I'm dragon-slaying, and I'm winning.'

'Good for you.' Mario turned to Alexandra and recalled the boy's details for her. 'Lucas presented with sudden severe abdominal pain three days ago. Peritonitis had set in, caused by his ruptured appendix.'

Kay held a thermometer up. 'Open up, Mr Dragon Slayer. Can't have you fighting dragons without making sure you're fit for battle, can we?'

'Mmm-mmm,' Lucas murmured around the thermometer, his fingers never missing a move on the keys.

Alexandra chuckled. 'You're not going to get in the way of his game, Kay.' She leaned around to watch the small screen. 'Hey, watch out, there's a dragon coming out from behind that tree. Yes, that's it.' She clapped her hands. 'Well done. Oops, there's another one.'

Mario gaped. This woman turned into marshmallow whenever she was around kids. As though she knew what kids liked. Did that mean she did have her own family? No one had mentioned one, but then he'd never thought to ask. Why would've he wanted to know? Perhaps he should borrow Lucas's console and play a game during his meeting with her. If he let her slay more dragons she just might begin to thaw with him.

Then Alexandra straightened and stepped across to the next cubicle. 'Hello, Amy. I hear you've been in for over a week this time.'

The twelve-year-old with nephrotic syndrome dropped the book she'd been pretending to read. 'Yeah, it sucks.'

Alexandra picked up the notes from the end of the bed and perused them. 'You've had more infections.'

'The same old thing. I wanted to go home yesterday but Mario said I had to wait a few more days.' She directed a conniving look at him from under her eyelashes.

'Sorry about that. I'm such a mean monster.' He grinned, totally unfazed by Amy's wish to manipulate him.

'But I can go tomorrow, can't I?' Amy asked.

He took the notes from Alexandra and scanned them. 'Keep this up and I can't see why not.'

'Cool. Mum's going to be happy about that. My uncle and aunt are coming to stay and she won't want to be stuck in here with me.' Her tone turned wistful. 'I want to see them too.'

As they finished the ward round Alexandra turned to Kay. 'Dr Forelli and I will be in my office. We're not to be interrupted unless it's an emergency.'

Kay grimaced, glanced at him, then back to Alexandra. 'Of course.' And then she gave their boss a gentle smile. 'Welcome back to the real world.' Kay widened her smile. 'We're glad you're back, by the way.'

'I'm very happy to be back.' Alexandra returned the smile before turning away. That confusion had returned, lacing the glance she flicked him. Did she add 'I think' under her breath?

Alex sank down behind her desk and flicked through that small pile of paperwork she'd noted earlier. At the very bottom was an A4 envelope with 'Mr Mario Forelli, Paediatric Surgeon' typed

across the middle. His credentials? She tapped the envelope corner against the desktop. Should she read it now? With Mario watching her?

Sitting opposite her, one long leg crossed over the other, his intent gaze disconcerted her, as if he saw right through all her carefully erected barriers. Yet at the same time he warmed her from the inside out, reminding her body of its sensuality.

Putting the envelope down Alex reached for the piping hot coffee Averill had just brought them. Then, pulling her shoulders back, she asked, 'What happened to John Campbell? He was meant to be here until the end of this week.'

Mario's mouth twisted left, then right. 'He was a no-show. Apparently he got a better offer in Perth where he stopped over on his way out to New Zealand.'

'The rotten so-and-so.' Anger gripped Alex as she recalled that Skype interview and how convincing Campbell had been. 'He sounded so excited to be coming here. Kept on about how New Zealand had been one of his dream destinations for most of his life and to work here would be wonderful.' He'd played her for a fool. 'Do you think he'd arranged an interview in Perth before leaving London?'

'Who would know? But I suspect so. He's never explained his actions to the board.'

Had she wanted the man to cover for her so badly that she'd overlooked something? It had been hectic back in those weeks leading up to her departure. The department had been undergoing renovations, patient numbers were way up. She'd been afraid she'd have to cancel her trip. Then Campbell made enquiries about a short-term position in Nelson. He had excellent credentials. It had been a no-brainer to take him on. 'Guess I didn't read him as well as I'd thought.'

Mario shrugged. 'Fairly hard to do in one interview, especially when it's done from opposite sides of the world.'

'So how did you come on the scene?' As she asked, more questions were popping up in her mind. Personal questions that had nothing to do with him working here. Nor were they any of her business. But for some inexplicable reason her interest was piqued.

Mario's gaze dropped briefly to the envelope on her desk before he answered. 'I walked into the department to speak to the HOD about the possibility of getting a position in the near future. Liz literally grabbed my arm and dragged me up to see the board chairman who all but locked me up until I signed a contract covering your leave.' He gave a wry laugh. 'He was frantic. I could've come with a kindergarten pass and got the job.'

She rolled her eyes. 'Sure. I'm supposed to believe that?'

Mario grinned with all the confidence of a man who knows his worth, then turned serious. 'About Liz.'

'How's she keeping? Her baby bump must be getting quite big now. Nearly seven months along, isn't she?' Lucky girl. A wee flare of envy twisted through her. The older she got, the harder her decision never to have a family was to accept. Her body clock ticking louder than her common sense? But one reminder of what had happened nine years earlier and the clock quietened.

'She's having problems with her pregnancy.'

'Ouch.' Alex winced. Guilt at her brief moment of envy was pushed aside by concern for Liz. 'That's so unfair after all the trouble it took for her to get pregnant.' Liz and her husband had taken more than a year for her to conceive. 'She must be really worried.'

Mario cleared his throat. 'She's beside herself with worry, which isn't helping. Her blood pressure is far too high, especially for twenty-nine weeks. And she's got mild oedema. Three weeks ago she was ordered to take complete bed rest for the remainder of her term.'

Alex felt her jaw drop. 'Is the baby going to be all right? How's Liz dealing with this? Why wasn't I told about this straightaway? It's not as though Kay and others didn't regularly keep in touch with me.'

‘It was deliberate that you weren’t told. When Liz first started having difficulties she didn’t want you told, believing you’d be on the first plane home. Then when she had to stop working I had a talk with Jackson, Mathew and Linley. We agreed we could manage for three weeks. I’m sorry if you feel left out of the loop but we were backed by all the staff. Everyone said you should finish your time away. It might be hard to accept but your staff thinks the world of you and wanted to do the right thing by you, even if you’d have wished to be here.’

The understanding gleaming out at her from those pewter eyes stopped any retort she may have uttered. ‘It must’ve been hard, one person down.’

‘We coped,’ he said, covering a yawn with one large hand.

‘I can imagine how hard that was.’ Studying him while trying to grapple with Liz’s news she suddenly noticed dark shadows below his eyes, strain lines at the corners of that beautiful mouth. Exhaustion came off him in waves. ‘Looks like you’ve worn yourself out.’

‘Ahh, I can’t blame Liz for that. I have a four-year-old who doesn’t know the meaning of sleeping at night.’ Worry clouded his eyes, darkened the pewter to charcoal. ‘Too many shadows in the night even for me to vanquish.’

Alex felt her heart squeeze for this unknown little girl. To be afraid of anything was awful, and sad, especially for such a young child. ‘Kiddy monsters.’

‘Something like that, yes.’ Uncrossing his legs he sat up straighter. End of that line of talk.

That was okay. She still had plenty of other questions. ‘Where have you been working before turning up on our doorstep? Did you train in New Zealand?’

Around another yawn he told her, ‘I did my medical degree in Christchurch, specialised in London with paediatric surgery being my area of expertise. After that I moved to Florence where I ran the paediatric department in one of their hospitals for four years.’

‘Florence?’ Mario was Italian? ‘That explains the cadence in your voice.’ When his eyes widened heat shimmered in her cheeks. She’d just given herself away. Big-time. So what? The guy had a sexy accent. She wouldn’t have been the first to notice or comment. It didn’t mean she wanted to climb into bed with him. Did it? Shifting in her chair she looked everywhere but at the disturbing Mario, waiting impatiently for the colour to fade from her face.

Thankfully he chose not to pick up on her blunder, instead explaining, ‘I’m a born and bred Kiwi, went to the boys’ college across the road.’ He nodded towards her window. ‘My parents grew tomatoes in the Wood, along with other Italian families in the district.’

‘So why Italy?’ As long as he wanted to talk about himself she was ready to listen.

‘My grandparents came out here from Florence when they were first married. All my life I’ve wanted to know my relatives over there so the job was perfectly placed.’

‘You’ve still got family here?’ Italians had large families, didn’t they? Lots of siblings, cousins, aunts and uncles, to have fun with, to support one another, to share life’s ups and downs. Family. The one thing lacking in her life. The one huge thing. But she didn’t deserve family, especially children. No, even her dogs were fictitious, bounding across the pages of the children’s books she wrote and illustrated. She focused on Mario, away from her own problems.

That appealing grin was back. ‘Sort of. Mamma and Babbo went over to Italy at the beginning of the year and don’t look like coming home any time soon. Two of my sisters are married to Italian nationals, and one sister lives here.’

‘Is your wife Italian?’

The grin slowly disappeared and he studied his hands with intensity, a frown creasing his brow. ‘Sophia’s mother was a Kiwi. Unfortunately she died in a diving accident two years ago.’

Gasp. No wonder the little girl had trouble sleeping at night. She’d be missing her mother. Hard to understand at that age why Mummy wasn’t there for her. This also explained the moments of sadness she saw in Mario’s face when he didn’t think anyone was looking. ‘I’m very sorry to hear

that. It must be very hard for you bringing up your daughter on your own.' And working long hours, often six and seven days a week.

Suddenly he looked up and clashed gazes with her, a huge 'don't go there' flashing out at her. 'We're getting off track. With Liz on indefinite leave I've been given a permanent position in your department.' His eyes burned into hers, daring her to argue with the situation.

How could she? She might be miffed that the board hadn't waited to talk the situation over with her but she wasn't stupid. With Liz gone the department was down to two full-time paediatricians and one trainee. Highly qualified paediatricians didn't regularly waltz in the door looking for work. 'I'm glad you came along. As you've already learned we put in some long hours as it is without being short of staff.'

Relief poured into those piercing eyes and he relaxed back in his chair. 'Jackson is shaping up to be a good paediatrician.'

'Yes, he is.'

How did Mario juggle work and a child? She couldn't begin to imagine what that was like for him. Why hadn't he stayed in Italy if that's where his parents were? His sisters too. Families. They never seemed to work out the way anyone expected. Look at hers. A stepfather who resented her for loving her dad; a mother who couldn't care two cents about her. She'd had a lonely, solitary upbringing after Dad died. Sent to boarding school so that Mum and George could swan off all over the world where the inclination took them. When she married and became pregnant she'd really thought that she'd found her own family. Talk about a misconception. Jonty couldn't wait to leave her after everything went horribly wrong. Don't go there. Not now when she was being scrutinised from the other side of her desk. Mario had already proved how good he was at mind-reading.

She reached for the envelope, slid her finger under the flap.

And Mario stood. 'I'll leave you to read that while I go and check up on Tommy again.'

She stared at the closing door. Now what brought about that hurried departure? The CV in her hand? Unfolding the pages she read quickly. Wow, the guy was a megastar of paediatrics. Warmth stole through her. They could make an awesome team if they worked well together.

But this was her domain, the place she felt in control—of herself and of everything around her. Would Mario try to take away her security by insisting on making changes? Only one way to find out—spend as much time on the ward with him. Without smothering him. He didn't need her hanging over his shoulder watching everything he did.

Excitement trickled along her veins. This could turn out to be fun having a colleague as experienced as Mario. They'd be able to bounce ideas off each other, discuss new treatments.

Her smile slowly disappeared. That was fun? It might be the best she'd had in a long time but it wasn't up to scratch in the enjoyment stakes. Real fun would be being held in those strong arms and kissed by that beautiful mouth. Fun would be a walk on the beach out at her cottage in Ruby Bay, hand in hand with Mario, kicking the sand, watching the gulls swooping and soaring, laughing over silly, pointless things.

Yeah, right. She'd better get a full night's sleep tonight. Otherwise sign up for the loony bin. Because something was desperately wrong with her mind, tossing up crazy dreams like holding hands with a man whom until first thing that morning she hadn't known existed.

Mario shivered when icy wind whipped under his jacket and got through to his skin as he crossed the staff car park at the end of the day. June was the pits. Winter was the pits. Though if he had to live through winter Nelson was the best place to be. The forecast for later on in the week hinted at snow. Maybe on Saturday he'd take Sophia and Gina's boys up to Mount Arthur car park so they could build a snowman and throw snowballs.

Sliding in behind the steering wheel of his family wagon Mario slammed the door and leaned his head back on the headrest to stare up at the dark interior. 'What a horrendous day. Thankfully Tommy survived his cardiac arrest, but he's got problems racing towards him, for sure.'

And then there was Miss Alexandra Prendergast. Annoying, intriguing, worrying. Especially worrying. She'd sparked his libido into life big-time. The last complication he needed right now. Not that he'd turn down an evening in bed with a stunning-looking woman—if he had a babysitter on hand. But a quick romp with his boss was not on. Somehow he doubted Alexandra would be into one-night flings. She was deep, thoughtful and not quite into fun. He cracked his knuckles. So suck it up and forget all about getting naked with the woman. Keep everything strictly professional; ignore the wary looks she gave him when she thought he wasn't looking. Forget that you don't have a private life apart from one messed-up daughter. Sophia is your life now, and she's not getting enough of your attention as it is.

The car rocked as another blast of wind slammed against it. Mario looked around the car park, his gaze following a paper cup as it flew through the air to bang into the sports car parked two slots away. Obviously owned by someone who didn't have a brood of kids to run around the place.

Twisting the key in the ignition Mario groaned when the engine raced but didn't start. 'Not again. Not tonight.'

Last week he'd had trouble starting the engine but he'd cleaned the spark plugs and hey, presto, it had gone like a dream since.

He turned the key again, and again. The whining sound of the engine spoke volumes. Slapping the steering wheel he tugged at the catch to release the bonnet and pushed out into the cold. With a torch in one hand he lifted the bonnet and stood studying the wires, the battery and the spark plugs. Everything appeared to be in order. Huh. Like he knew what he was looking for. Topping up the water and oil had been sufficient until now. He pushed and poked everything, shook some wires that meant absolutely nothing to him, went around to try the ignition again. Nothing but that squealing sound.

Definitely time he took the car in for a service. His fingers pushed through his hair. Damn it. Why did cars break down right when you needed them? He had to get home before the nanny did her usual sulky thing. If only he had a few hours to find another, more obliging girl to take care of Sophia when he was at work.

'Problem?' One word and Alexandra made it sound so sweet. Not to mention irritating.

He spun around, stared down into the dark pits of her eyes. It was probably just as well he couldn't see her expression clearly in the half-light of the street lamps. No doubt she'd be laughing fit to bust. 'My car's packed a sad.'

'Bad timing, right?' When she waved her keys in the air the locks on the sports car popped.

Of course that red racy thing would be Alexandra's. It suited her. Small, compact and sexy. He might be abstaining but his hormones had taken a hit today. They still knew a great package when they saw one. Working with her just got a whole lot more difficult.

'Very bad timing. I need to get home quickly.' Hint, hint. Would she offer him a lift? Though being squeezed into that sardine can with her might prove to be the hardest thing he'd done all day. Even ten minutes rubbing shoulders would only make him crankier than he already was. But he'd do anything for Sophia, right? So he'd accept a lift.

But she shocked him. 'What exactly is the problem?'

What? You think you're a mechanic now? Are you teasing me? 'I turn the key and all I get is a noise. The engine's not firing.'

'But it sounds like it wants to?'

He was gaping at her, his mouth half open. Not his best look, for sure, but what the hell was this woman on? She was a paediatrician, not a grease monkey. 'Yes, it keeps up a steady noise but doesn't even hint at catching.' He reached for the bonnet, began to push it down. If Alexandra wasn't forthcoming with an offer of a ride, then he had to get cracking with finding a taxi. Sophia needed to be in bed within the next half-hour.

'Wait. Don't close that yet.' She placed her handbag inside her to-die-for car and came over to peer under the bonnet of his people-mover. Make that children-mover. Taking a hot date, namely

Alexandra, out in it would be a novelty. For her, at least. Reaching in, she pulled a spark plug and blew on it. ‘Looks okay.’

‘I cleaned them a few days ago.’

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