



*Medical
Romance*[™]

CAROLINE ANDERSON

Just a
.....
Family Doctor
.....



Caroline Anderson
Just a Family Doctor

«HarperCollins»

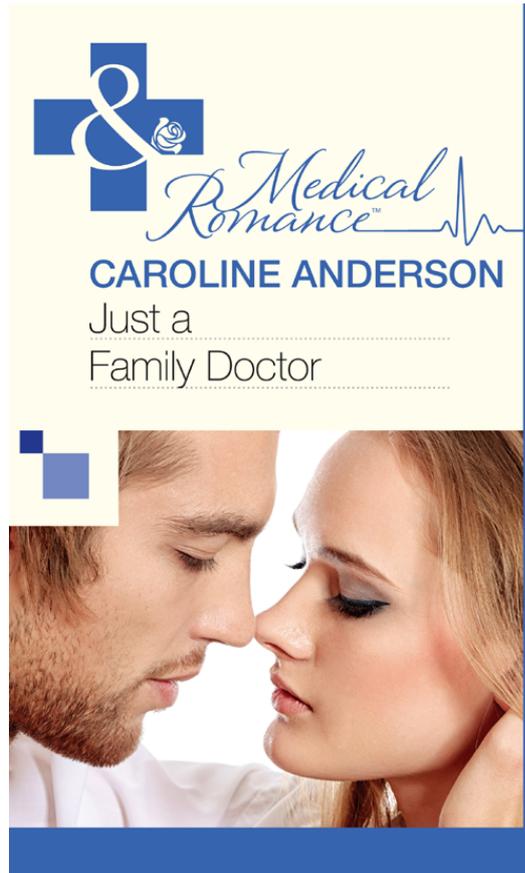
Anderson C.

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THE MAN BEHIND THE DOC When Mark Jarvis arrives at Audley Memorial Hospital as a paediatric Senior House Officer, Nurse Allie Baker's heart skips a beat. Allie's been in love with Mark for years, and now they're finally in the same place emotionally she's going to make the most of being able to declare her love publicly! Allie experiences the best moment of her life when Mark proposes, but it's quickly followed by an earth-shattering bump when she learns that Mark wants to become a GP. Allie watched her parents struggle continually with the pressures of her father's general practice, and she's vowed she'll never have that life. Allie can't ask Mark to give up his vocation, but is she really going to give up the man she loves just because he wants to be a family doctor...? THE AUDLEY—where love is the best medicine of all...

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CHAPTER ONE

ALLIE heard a soft footfall behind her. There you are,' she said. 'I thought you were never coming. Anna, we're going to have to get this rota sorted out—I need the weekend of the—ah!'

Her hands flew up and grasped the fingers covering her eyes—firm, masculine fingers, strong and unyielding and attached to someone with a sexy chuckle and a wicked sense of humour.

'Guess who?' a voice said, and she stopped struggling instantly, all her senses leaping to attention. The voice sounded strangely familiar. It couldn't be—could it?

'Mark?' she said incredulously, and the hands fell away, releasing her.

'Damn. You guessed.'

She leapt up and spun round, and laughter bubbled up inside her. 'It *is* you!' she exclaimed, and found herself wrapped in a huge hug. She indulged herself for a moment, then pushed away, looking up at him with laughing eyes, scanning his face in delight. 'You sneaky rat! And how did you know where I was—did my mother tell you?'

The answering smile was swift and wide, lighting his gorgeous grey eyes and crinkling them at the corners. He looked good enough to eat, but then he always had. 'I'm afraid so,' he confessed.

'So, what are you doing here?' she asked in amazement.

'I've come to say happy birthday,' he said with a grin.

'What—all the way from London?'

He chuckled. 'No. Actually, all the way from Andrew Barrett's clinic. I'm working here—doing a paediatric rotation. I started today.'

'Really? That's amazing, we'll be working together! Oh, Mark, that's wonderful! I haven't seen you for such a long time—'

'Five years.'

'Is it really?' she said in amazement. 'I suppose it must be—I was nearly eighteen, and I'm twenty-three today. Oh, Mark, it's really good to see you again. We ought to catch up—lunch? Oh, damn, no, I can't do lunch, I'm meeting my housemates for a drink. You could come?' she suggested doubtfully.

'I'd rather have you to myself—it's difficult to catch up in a crowd. How about tonight? Are you going out?'

'No—I'm not. Beth and Lucy were both busy tonight—that's why we're having lunch.'

'No hot date?'

'No date at all, hot or otherwise,' she said with a wry chuckle. 'Tonight would be lovely.'

'Where do you live?'

'Just behind the hospital in a little terraced house. Where are you?'

'I've got a room in the hospital—one of those ghastly things like university halls. It could be worse, I suppose. It's got an *en suite* shower room and trees outside the window, but it's pretty grim.'

'You ought to get a flat.'

'I'm hoping to buy a house—I just need time to look. I've got my next job lined up in the same area, so I thought I'd buy now. Why not? The sooner the better, frankly, after last night. Talk about rowdy.'

'You're getting too old,' she teased, and he laughed.

'Tell me about it.' He glanced at his watch and sighed. 'Listen, I have to fly. I just wangled ten minutes and I've already been gone fifteen. How about meeting me at seven at the back entrance by the accommodation block?'

'Sure. I'll look forward to it. Where are we going?'

He shrugged. 'Search me. I only arrived in this town last night. You choose—I'll do as I'm told.'

'OK. See you later.'

‘Sure.’

He wagged his fingers, whipped the door open and strode down the ward, leaving her staring after him with a daft smile on her face.

‘Who was that?’

She looked at Anna, watching Mark’s retreat with undisguised curiosity, and laughed. ‘An old friend. Mark Jarvis—he’s doing a paed’s rotation. He just came to say happy birthday.’

‘It’s your birthday?’

‘Yup—and I get to do Darren’s colostomy pouch, just to celebrate. Want to help?’

Anna laughed. ‘I’ll come and cheerlead. So, tell me how you know that gorgeous hunk, you lucky girl!’

She shrugged. ‘He stayed with us five years ago and spent a couple of weeks with my father while he was doing his clinical-GP work experience.’

‘So you don’t know anything else about him? Like if he’s married or whatever?’

Was Anna really interested in him? Good heavens! What a thought—and a strangely disturbing one, at that ...

‘I don’t know anything about him any more,’ she said, and realised that it was utterly true. She knew nothing, other than that he’d been a charming and delightful house guest, her mother had adored him, her father had thought he was excellent doctor material, and she—well, the less she thought about that, the longer her sanity might remain intact!

‘I’ll have to get my sleuths out,’ Anna mused. ‘Unless you want the first option on him?’

Allie laughed. ‘I don’t think so. I don’t think he’s interested—not like that. He certainly wasn’t then.’

The thought was curiously disappointing.

Mark strode along the corridor towards A&E, whistling softly under his breath and conscious of the smile that lingered round his eyes. Allie Baker, all grown up and even more gorgeous. Whoever would have thought it?

He wondered idly if she was involved with anyone at the moment. Her mother hadn’t been specific, and he hadn’t liked to ask her. Still, she didn’t have a date tonight, so maybe that was hopeful.

He turned the corner, pushed the door out of the way and headed for the work station in the centre of the busy A&E department.

‘Hi, I’m Mark Jarvis, paediatric SHO. I believe you wanted me?’

The nurse looked up and smiled. ‘Oh, hi. Yes, we’ve got a youngster with a classic appendix. Can you admit her and let the surgical team know?’

He gave a wry grin. ‘I can try. I’ve only just joined the department this morning. I’m not much of a paediatrician yet, I’m afraid, and as for the hospital routine—!’

She slid off her stool and returned the grin. ‘Come on, I’ll talk you through it.’

It was simple enough, once he’d learned the way things were done at the Audley Memorial. Not so very different from any of the other hospitals he’d been at recently while he’d worked his way through his house years. Surgery first, mainly, then a host of other short rotations, covering all the various aspects of medicine that would be useful to him when he did his training as a GP registrar in a few months’ time.

Of course it would have been quicker if he’d known straight away what branch he wanted to specialise in, but he’d been all round the houses before he’d finally made up his mind that general practice and not surgery was the job for him, and he supposed it was all useful experience.

However, the fragmented, nomadic lifestyle dictated by the last few years was very unsettling. It would be wonderful, he thought with an inward sigh, to settle down in one place and learn a routine that was going to last him longer than three or six months!

The nurse was right, it was a classic appendix, and he admitted the child to the ward pending her operation, and went back up to find that Allie was nowhere in sight and the redhead in the sister’s

uniform was giving him considering looks. *Those* kind of looks. Oops. He hoped she wasn't going to be a problem, because he and Allie had unfinished business.

Well, he did, at any rate. The same might not be true of Allie, of course. The first thing he had to do was find out if she was seeing someone. Anything was possible, even if she didn't have a date on her birthday—

'Hi, I'm Anna Long, and you're Dr Jarvis. We haven't met. How are you getting on?' the Sister asked him with a direct and challenging smile.

'Fine—another routine to learn, but I expect I'll cope. I'm Mark, by the way.'

Anna smiled again, and he looked around. 'Is the girl from A&E with appendicitis here yet?'

'On her way. Allie's just getting her bed ready with another nurse.' She shot him a sidelong glance. 'I gather you and Allie know each other?'

He nodded, wondering what was behind those innocent eyes. Maybe nothing. 'Yes. I stayed with her parents for a couple of weeks several years ago. I haven't seen her since. Lots of catching up to do.'

Anna nodded, and he wondered if he was flattering himself or if that was something akin to disappointment that flickered in her eyes. Probably his imagination.

The child with appendicitis arrived, and he did all her paperwork and talked to her parents, and the surgical registrar arrived and checked her over and told them she'd be going up to Theatre in a little while.

Mark ordered a top-up of pain relief should it be necessary, and then as he was about to leave her bedside he caught a flash of pale gold hair as Allie bustled past. He excused himself and followed her.

'Allie.'

She jumped and turned round, hand on heart. 'You frightened the life out of me!' she said with a laugh. 'How's our new patient?'

'Fine. Well, she's not fine, but she will be. She's off to Theatre soon. I've done all the paperwork. I have to see a young lad with a colostomy—Darren someone?'

'Forsey. He's in the single room here. Can you manage?'

He laughed softly. 'I expect so. Are you busy?'

She nodded, then glanced at her watch. 'I'm always busy. I have to fly—I've got loads to do. I'll see you at seven if not before.'

'OK.' He watched her go, watched the sway of her hips that even the hopelessly unflattering uniform couldn't render sexless, and felt the tug of an old and familiar desire. Seven o'clock seemed a long time away ...

She must be crazy. If only they'd been able to manage lunch it wouldn't have seemed so much like a date, but she'd promised to meet Lucy and Beth, her housemates, because they were on duty until late tonight and then Lucy had a meeting, and they'd wanted to celebrate her birthday.

Lunch would have been so much better. He just wanted a chat, and now she'd booked a table at a little bistro round the corner, and she was having serious doubts over whether it was too smart or if he'd just meant some pub for a quick drink and a packet of crisps!

Oh, well, she'd go halves. It didn't matter, she had nothing else to spend her money on and it would be nice to go out for dinner for a change. If only she didn't have this little fizzle in the pit of her stomach. She hoped she wasn't going down with something, but she did feel strange.

Excited, almost—

She stabbed her eye with the mascara wand and growled at herself. Excited? He wasn't interested in her—and she wasn't interested in him any longer—was she?

Black tears streamed down her cheek, and she blotted and patched and gave up. It was dark outside, and the light in the bistro was pretty lousy. He wouldn't even notice, and it didn't matter if he did.

She slipped into her coat and shoes, pocketed her house keys and went out into the crisply chilly night. It was just a short walk over to the hospital, and it was well lit, but it still gave her the creeps.

You never knew when a weirdo would be hanging around, and they found out where the nurses lived and put pressure on them for drugs and needles and so on.

It could be dangerous, but that was one of the hazards of living outside the hospital, and she'd had her fill of institutional living. She crossed the road, went through the gate past Security and reached the door just as Mark emerged.

'Perfect timing,' she said brightly, and wondered if her heart was going to crash against her ribs *every* time she clapped eyes on him, or only for the first few days—or weeks—or months!

Darn it. That fizzle was back!

His smile lit the gloomy area behind the building, and warmed her against the chilling wind. 'My car's over here, or are we walking?'

'Oh, we can walk, it's only round the corner and parking's difficult there,' she said. 'I've booked a table at a little bistro—it's very reasonable, and it's quite nice, unless you wanted to go to a pub somewhere?'

'No, not at all. A bistro sounds lovely. I'm starving.'

They strode briskly out along the pavement, huddled up against the bite of the wind. It made conversation difficult, and they hardly talked until they arrived at the restaurant. Then Mark settled back in his chair, hands in his pockets and looking altogether too luscious for her peace of mind, and grinned. 'So—tell me all about yourself. How long have you been qualified? A year? Two?'

'A year, just,' she told him. 'What about you? You must be twenty-seven now—quite the old man!'

He chuckled. 'That's right. It was a long time ago, wasn't it?' His eyes smiled, and she wondered what he was remembering. 'So, what have you been doing with yourself?' he asked, leaning forwards and toying with a breadstick.

'Apart from finishing my A levels, and training as a paediatric nurse? Not a lot.'

'So you're not married.'

She shook her head. 'No—no, I'm not married, or anything like that. Just me, on my own. Well, not really on my own. I've got two housemates, but they're both nurses and work odd hours, so there's usually only one there at the most at any given moment. What about you?' she asked, suddenly conscious of the importance of his answer. 'Are you married?'

He smiled and leant back again, crunching the breadstick thoughtfully. 'No, I'm not married—or anything like that—either. Just me, on my own, like you.'

She felt a sudden and absurd little rush of relief that she didn't care to analyse. 'So how's the career going?' she added, struggling for less rivetingly personal conversation. 'Still headed for general surgery?'

'Well, actually—'

'Good evening, sir, madam. Are you ready to order?'

She looked up at the waiter and smiled. 'I don't know. What's the chefs special tonight? It's normally very good.'

'Tagliatelle carbonara,' he said with pride. 'It's superb! Rich and creamy, the sauce is wonderful, with a fresh, crisp side salad.' He kissed his fingers expressively. 'Trust me, you'll love it, madam.'

She laughed. 'You've sold it to me. I'll have it, it sounds good.'

'Sir?'

Mark closed the menu. 'Sounds excellent. And a bottle of house red—is red OK for you, Allie?'

She nodded. 'Lovely. Thanks.'

He leant back, toying with another breadstick. 'So, tell me about your parents,' he said. 'Are they still well? I spoke to them briefly the other day, but I'm afraid I've been a bit lax about keeping in touch.'

'They're fine. My father's taking early retirement—the strain of general practice. He's nearly fifty-five, and he's stopping after Christmas. He says they're going to have lots of holidays, but I'm

worried about him. I think he's suffering from stress, or maybe there's something else—perhaps something he won't tell us. I mean, why else would he give up so early?

Mark laughed softly. 'Early? Fifty-five? My father died at fifty-eight. He'd planned early retirement and then changed his mind. If he'd taken it, he might still be alive. Anyway, you said your father looks well.'

'Oh, he is,' she admitted, wondering if she was just worrying unnecessarily, being a fussy daughter like he'd been a fussy parent. Who could tell? 'I'm sorry about your father. It must have been awful—Mum wrote and told me, but I didn't have your address so I didn't get in touch. Was it very sudden?'

'Pretty much. It was his heart—he thought he'd got indigestion. He was a doctor, for God's sake. He should have known better.'

The waiter arrived, whisking the plates onto the table in front of them with a flourish and bidding them to enjoy their meal. It broke the sombre thread of their conversation, and as they ate she told him a little about her job at the hospital and what it was like on the paediatric ward.

'It's a good hospital, I like it here,' she told him, twirling tagliatelle on her fork and licking sauce off her lips.

Mark was doing the same, and her eyes were suddenly riveted to the tip of his tongue as it chased a drop of sauce across that firm, chiselled lower lip. Desire, hot and swift and unfamiliar, hit her in the solar plexus like a blow from a sledgehammer.

'Food's pretty good,' he commented between mouthfuls, and she dragged in a lungful of air and smiled.

'Good. I'm glad you like it.'

Her phone rang, saving her from the impossible task of conversing intelligently when her body was suddenly hell-bent on betraying her. Had he been as stunningly attractive as this before? 'Excuse me,' she muttered, and dived into her bag, coming up with the little mobile handset. 'Hello?'

'Darling, happy birthday,' her mother said. 'Had a good day? I tried you at the house but you're obviously out. Anywhere nice?'

She met Mark's eyes and smiled. 'Actually, yes, I'm sitting in a bistro with Mark Jarvis—you are a sneaky woman,' she told her mother laughingly. 'I'll call you later, we're in the middle of eating.' She slipped the phone back into her handbag and looked at Mark.

'By the way, this was my idea so we're going halves,' she told him.

He snorted. 'I don't think so. I seem to remember it was my idea.'

'I suggested we got together—'

'And I said how about tonight. My idea.'

'But I made the reservation—'

'And displayed excellent taste. Well done. It's still my treat.'

Allie rolled her eyes and laughed. 'Look, fair's fair—'

'You know what? You're too darned independent,' he said with a smile. 'If I want to take you out and spoil you, I will. What's wrong with that?'

She sighed. 'Nothing, so long as you don't get carried away—'

'Sounds fascinating,' he said in that husky, sexy, chocolate voice. 'When shall we start?'

She laughed and slapped his hand as he reached for another breadstick, and he grinned and snapped a bit off and fed it to her. 'Happy birthday, Allie,' he said softly, and she nearly choked on it.

Those eyes ...!

He paid for the meal—of course! They lingered over dessert, a sinful chocolate confection with lashings of cream and something distinctly alcoholic lurking at the bottom of the dish, and then had a brandy and wonderful rich, dark coffee with mints while they talked about the hospital and she told him what she knew about the staff.

‘I have a feeling Anna’s on the prowl,’ he commented, peeling another wafer-thin mint out of its little wrapper and feeding it to her.

Feeling decadent and a little tipsy, she took it with her teeth and met his eyes, and felt a jolt of desire like electricity course through her. Was he interested in Anna? Was he pumping her? Damn—

‘Anna?’ she murmured, and cleared her throat. ‘Urn—possibly. She was asking about you.’

He arched an enquiring brow. ‘And what did you tell her?’

‘Nothing. I said I knew nothing. It’s true. I don’t know you at all.’ More’s the pity.

His smile held a promise that made her feel giddy. ‘We’ll have to do something about that,’ he said lightly. He looked around and caught the waiter’s eye. ‘Could we have our bill please—unless you want anything else?’

She shook her head and grinned. ‘Oh, no, I’ve had more than enough. I couldn’t eat or drink another thing.’

He paid the bill with a credit card, and then he helped her into her coat, his hands settling it on her shoulders with a gentle squeeze. He turned the collar up and snuggled her down into the neck, and then tugged on his own coat and buttoned it before opening the door and ushering her out into the night.

It was crisp and bright, but the wind had dropped and it felt strangely warmer. They strolled this time, arm in arm, unhurried, back through the dimly lit streets behind the hospital. When they were almost there, he hesitated. ‘Where do you live? I’ll walk you home. I can’t have you wandering about at this time of night by yourself.’

‘What about you?’ she said sensibly. ‘You could be mugged or stabbed just as easily.’

He chuckled. ‘Not quite, I don’t think. I must weigh five stone more than you, for a start.’

She snorted. ‘I doubt it. Three, perhaps, but never five.’

‘Semantics. I’m bigger, I’m tougher and I’m probably a darn sight meaner than you are.’

She smiled and gave up. ‘Whatever. It’s down here.’

She led him to her front door, and he paused there, looking down at her in the shadow of the porch. ‘There. Safely home,’ he said.

There was a pause, an infinitesimal hesitation, and anticipation tiptoed over her skin.

‘Thank you so much for a lovely evening,’ she said softly. ‘It’s been wonderful.’

‘Good,’ he said, but still he didn’t move.

Instead he stood there, staring down into her eyes, and when she thought she’d scream from the suspense he smiled slightly. ‘I can’t let you go without a birthday kiss,’ he murmured, and his head lowered, blotting out the yellow glow from the streetlight.

Then his lips touched hers, warm and firm and traced with chocolate, and she nearly smiled. He’d kissed her like this five years ago, and her heart had felt giddy for a week ...

For a moment nothing else happened, but then he moved, just slightly, tilting his head and placing tiny nibbling kisses all across her mouth and chin, and she felt a shiver of something unfamiliar and wonderful race through her veins. He’d never kissed her like this!

A tiny noise erupted from her lips, too small to be a whimper, but he heard it, and with a groan he eased her closer, wrapped his arms firmly round her and plundered her mouth with his.

He tasted of chocolate and coffee, with a trace of brandy, and it was enough to intoxicate her already fuddled brain. Without a care, without a modest thought or a second’s pause, she slipped her arms around his neck, tilted her head and kissed him right back.

It felt wonderful. His tongue was like rough velvet, probing and caressing, seeking out the hidden recesses of her mouth and tormenting them with his touch. Their tongues played tag, chasing and retreating, and when after an age he lifted his head, he was breathing hard and a smile lurked in his eyes.

‘Wow,’ he murmured.

She laughed softly and said, ‘Wow, indeed.’

He hugged her, tucking her head under his chin and holding her close, and she could feel the rise and fall of his chest against her cheek.

‘Sorry, that was five years of curiosity coming to the fore,’ he murmured against her hair.

‘What?’ She tipped back her head and searched his face. ‘What do you mean?’

He gave a wry grin. ‘Just that I’ve wondered for the last five years what it would be like to kiss you—really kiss you, not just that little kiss goodbye, but a real, honest-to-goodness proper kiss.’

‘You didn’t notice me!’ she protested.

‘No—I tried to ignore you. There’s a difference. You were my host’s daughter. You were seventeen, totally innocent and much too sweet for what I had in mind.’

‘I had spots and puppy fat,’ she said bluntly.

He chuckled. ‘Rubbish. You were lovely. You were just young, and I was a guest in your parents’ house.’

‘And now?’ she asked without pausing to think of the consequences.

His smile softened. ‘Now I think we’re on the same playing field. We’re both adults, we’re both available—why not just see what happens?’

Excitement tingled along her veins, and her legs threatened to give way. Astonishingly, she was speechless.

He bent his head and kissed her again, just lightly, and then winked. ‘Go on, go inside before I change my mind and forget I’m supposed to be a gentleman.’

She was almost tempted, but a belated sense of propriety prevailed and she slipped her key in the lock, twisted it and opened the door.

‘Goodnight, Mark—and thank you for a lovely evening.’

‘My pleasure. Happy birthday.’

And, blowing her a kiss, he turned on his heel and strode up the path and across the street towards the hospital.

When he was out of sight she closed the door, sagged back against it and sighed luxuriously.

‘That was a tender farewell,’ Lucy said, whipping open the sitting room door just next to her.

She felt colour scorch her cheeks. ‘Are you spying on me?’ she demanded laughingly.

‘No—should I have been? What did I miss?’

‘A real treat,’ Beth said, following Lucy out into the hall. ‘I just watched him walk down the road—wow. Where on earth did he come from?’

Allie gave an embarrassed laugh. ‘I’ve known him for years. He did some work experience with my father five years ago.’

‘He was a well-kept secret,’ Lucy grumbled, trailing into the kitchen.

‘He wasn’t a secret—I haven’t seen him since, until today. He just turned up on the ward.’

‘And romance blossomed! How wonderful!’

‘Beth, you have a vivid imagination.’

‘Is that why you’ve got whisker burn on your top lip?’ she said mildly.

Allie’s hand flew up to investigate, and they laughed at her, the teasing, kindly laughter of good friends. ‘Go for it, kid,’ Lucy said sagely. ‘It’s about time.’

It probably was, she acknowledged as she went up to bed, a steaming mug of tea in hand. She was twenty-three, a professional woman on the threshold of her career, and untouched by human hand. It hadn’t really been deliberate, except that she was naturally fastidious and had heard such awful stories from her friends that she’d never felt inclined to dabble or experiment, and nobody had come along who’d pushed her buttons.

Nobody except Mark, that is, but he’d been out of reach and a hero figure at a most impressionable time. The trouble was, the impression had been lasting, and despite a few relationships with young men during her training, the affection she’d felt for them had never been enough for her to take that next and most intimate step.

The memory of his farewell kiss as he was leaving all those years ago had haunted her, and nothing else had measured up. *Nobody* else. As an adolescent she'd wanted the touch of Mark's hand, the feel of his lips, the warmth of his body. Apparently she still did.

She felt the soft, bruised skin of her lips and remembered the kiss they'd just shared, and a deep yearning ache flared to life within her. She'd been subconsciously waiting for him so long—would it be worth waiting for? Was it possible she'd find the love she needed in her life with Mark, or was it just wishful thinking?

She seen her friends flit from one man to another, unfulfilled and often desperately unhappy, and she didn't want that for herself. When she gave herself, it would be for ever. Did Mark feel the same? They might be on the same playing field now in terms of age, but was it a level playing field in terms of expectations, or was she going to open herself up to heartbreak if she allowed them to see what happened, as he suggested?

'Oh, for heaven's sake!' she grumbled, putting her tea down and pulling off her clothes. 'You went out for a cheap meal to a basic little Italian. You're making much too much of it, building too much on such a slight acquaintance. You don't even know the man.'

But she wanted to, and that was scary. She hadn't felt like this before, not since—well, not since they'd first met and they'd sat for hours talking, night after night. They'd talked about everything—religion, politics, music, medical ethics, the fact that her father wanted her to be a doctor and she wanted to be a nurse.

He'd supported her, talking through it with her, giving her a very sane piece of advice.

'Be true to yourself,' he'd said. 'You have to do that. If you aren't true to yourself, you can't be true to anyone else, because everything else is built on a lie.'

It had given her the courage to talk to her father, to explain that being clever enough to be a doctor didn't mean it was the career she wanted. Her mother had understood, but then her mother had been a nurse. And gradually, over the next few weeks, her father had come to understand—all thanks to Mark.

She owed him so much for that. She'd never thought she'd see him again, but now he was back in her life, and she realised she wanted to know much more about him—his likes and dislikes, his taste in music, his preferences in literature—all the things she hadn't had time to find out before. Suddenly it seemed very important. She had felt happier tonight in his company than she'd felt in five years.

Please God, let him feel the same, she thought as she curled up in bed with her tea. Don't let it be one-sided. Give us a chance. Let it be for real ...

CHAPTER TWO

THE ward was busy the next morning when she arrived for work at seven. She'd thought she wouldn't sleep, but in fact had gone out like a light when her head hit the pillow. That's what happiness does for you, she'd told herself as she scrabbled around getting ready in a hurry. Or, more likely, half a bottle of red wine, a brandy and that sinfully laced chocolate dessert!

She had arrived in the nick of time, and found the night staff getting the children ready for their breakfast. There was always a flurry of visits to the loo and a rush round with bedpans to the immobile patients at that time of the morning, and Allie was as busy as any of them.

Anna was there, taking report from the Night Sister, and the moment it was done she joined Allie in the little single room where she was replacing Darren's colostomy pouch.

The twelve-year-old had come in with a rectal abscess, with fever and severe pain, following chronic constipation and an appalling diet, and after investigation they had decided to operate. The surgeons had cut through his bowel above the abscess and brought the cut end out through the wall of his abdomen in a temporary colostomy, to rest the affected area and allow it to heal, and for the next few weeks at least he would have to tolerate the indignity of a bag stuck on the front of his tummy.

Still, at least it wasn't permanent, Allie thought, carefully peeling the old bag away and sealing it and throwing Anna a smile at the same time.

'Morning.'

'Morning. Hi, Darren, how're you doing?' Anna asked, and chatted for a moment to him, then perched on the end of the bed and watched Allie work. 'A little bird tells me you went out for dinner with Mark last night, you sly old fox,' she murmured.

Allie felt a rush of guilt, then stifled it. I got there first, she told herself—five years ago! 'Not really dinner,' she denied, still not sure exactly what had happened. 'We went to the bistro—it was my birthday. Can you hold your T-shirt up higher for me, Darren? That's lovely. Thanks.'

'And did you bring cream cakes in?' Anna prodded, clearly feeling no malice towards Allie for having stolen the brightest prospect on the ward for years. 'No, you didn't. I hope you've brought them today.'

Allie smiled ruefully. 'Sorry. I haven't had time to get to the bakery—anyway, cream cakes are fattening, isn't that right, Darren?'

'Yeah—and I can't have one, so you can't either.'

'No, you can't, but we could always save you one for later—we need any excuse we can get for a cream cake at coffee time!' She propped herself on the edge of the treatment couch and grinned at the patient. 'We all need treats, don't we, Darren?'

Darren nodded. 'I fancy a cream cake. I'm bored with eating nothing decent. Can't you sneak off to the bakery now?'

'No—and anyway, you know you can't have a cream cake,' Allie told him with mock sternness. 'You need to rest your stomach for a few more days, not overload it with junk food, and besides, it's not my birthday any more.'

'We could pretend.'

'No, we couldn't. It's too soon after your operation.'

He poked his tongue out, and Allie chuckled and pressed the new pouch firmly in place. 'We'll pretend when you're better. There. That's you sorted. I'll come and see you in a while—unless you want to go into the playroom and watch telly with the others?'

He shook his head. 'Not yet. Perhaps tomorrow.'

'OK.' She smiled and gave him a quick hug, then pushed the trolley back to the treatment room and cleared up the equipment. 'He hates it,' she murmured to Anna as she worked.

‘I know. It must be hell on a kid to have a colostomy, even if it’s only temporary. Let’s just hope the abscess clears up quickly.’

‘Absolutely—but at least he’s not in so much pain now. He just needs to heal and learn to eat the right foods—and definitely no cream cakes, no matter how bored he is.’

‘Which gets us back to your birthday and the rather gorgeous Mark Jarvis.’

Allie laughed and popped the bag of waste into the bin. ‘It was just a quick meal,’ she lied. ‘Nothing special.’

‘What was nothing special?’

Her heart sank. Of all the times for him to walk in—

‘Nothing.’

‘Excuse me,’ Anna said, and slid out, winking at Allie as she went.

‘What was nothing special?’ Mark said again, and Allie, sighing, turned to face him.

‘Our meal last night. She was being curious—I was just saying that to get her off my back.’

He regarded her thoughtfully. ‘Were you? Or did you mean it?’

She thought of lying, of covering her own emotions to protect herself, and then she looked into his eyes and knew she couldn’t lie. ‘No. I didn’t mean it.’

‘That’s all right, then.’ He smiled, his mouth kicking up at the corners and creasing his eyes.

‘What are you doing?’

She washed her hands and scrubbed them on a paper towel. ‘Just redone Darren Forsey’s colostomy pouch.’

‘Oh, joy. Bet you enjoyed it. I’ve come in to have a look at him, amongst others. How is he?’

‘Fed up. He’s better than he was, but he’s still got to deal with the colostomy for a few weeks and endless suppositories, and I think he’s going to die of embarrassment. Your little girl with appendicitis is bright and lively today, though.’

He chuckled. ‘Bounced back, has she? Kids are amazing.’ His smile faded as he looked at her, and he glanced down at his hands, then back to her, his eyes seeming to see right through her. ‘If dinner really wasn’t nothing special, how about tonight?’

She sorted out all the negatives. ‘Tonight?’ she repeated, her heart jiggling in her chest and a smile fighting its way onto her lips. ‘What about tonight?’

‘I wondered if you fancied a drink. We could grab a bar snack or something, too. There’s a pub I’ve been told about in a village a few miles out, and it’s supposed to have a really nice atmosphere. The food’s supposed to be good, too.’

Should she play it cool and stall him for a week?

No. Subterfuge wasn’t her thing, never had been, never would be. She let the smile escape. ‘Sounds great. What time?’

‘Seven again? I could pick you up, now I know where you live.’

‘Anna will be unbearably curious.’

‘Anna needs a lover,’ he said firmly.

‘Mmm. I think she fancied you for the job.’

His neck went an interesting shade of brick. ‘Tough,’ he murmured. ‘Right, must get on. Where’s Darren? In his room?’

‘Yes—just opposite the nursing station, in the single room. Can you manage?’

‘You keep asking me that. No faith,’ he said drily, and she watched him go, stifling a sigh of sheer enjoyment. It wasn’t just adolescent fantasy, he was good-looking. Very decorative. She eyed the soft, thick hair on his head. It was the colour of a gold nugget, not bright, just warm and interesting and tinged with fair bits where the sun had bleached it. It looked infinitely touchable—

And she was in danger of losing her job and her marbles if she didn’t pull herself together!

She cleared away the last of her bits and pieces, washed her hands again and went out into the ward. There was a baby crying, little Amy Fulcher, who was in under observation after severe abdominal pain with no obvious cause.

Her mother had gone outside for a short walk in the fresh air, and Allie scooped up the eighteen-month-old and cuddled her, walking her up and down and crooning to her until she settled again. Poor little scamp was exhausted, because she'd been crying off and on all night. It seemed likely that the surgeon in charge of her case would decide to operate today to investigate, but the baby seemed reasonably well apart from the pain.

Mark came over to her as she was settling the baby down against her shoulder, and brushed his hand lightly over her head. 'Poor little scrap. They're going to X-ray her again,' he told her. 'Apparently they think she might have bands or adhesions around the intestines.'

'Mmm. She's a bit old for bands to suddenly be a problem at eighteen months, and she hasn't had any previous surgery to give her adhesions, but it could be, I suppose. The symptoms fit. It's obviously not that bad because she's not shocky or vomiting—'

Flying in the face of God, she thought a second later, as Amy retched and covered her uniform in green bile.

'OK, I take that back. Thank you, darling. How lovely. Shh, sweetheart, it's all right now,' Allie said under her breath, soothing the baby automatically. She went quiet, and Allie laid her down in the cot and looked at her shoulder and chest in despair. She'd deal with it later. Just now she had to wipe the baby's mouth and make sure she was all right.

Certainly the crying had stopped. Mark looked over her shoulder.

'Well, it seems to have done the trick—she's more comfortable now,' he said thoughtfully.

'Jolly good. I'm so glad one of us is.'

He chuckled, and patted her other shoulder. 'You smell gorgeous.'

Thank you so much,' she said with a huge false smile. 'I can't tell you what it's like from this side.'

'Did someone chuck on you, Nurse?' one of the boys asked, cruising past on crutches and regarding her uniform with undisguised mirth.

'Just a bit. How's your leg?'

'Excellent. I can go home today, maybe, if the X-ray's all right.'

'Good. That's great.' It was. Healthy young boys with damaged limbs were a nightmare to entertain and keep quiet, but fortunately for the most part they healed at a huge rate of knots and thus weren't such a drastic problem.

'You just want to get rid of me,' he said mournfully, and Allie laughed.

'You guessed, Tim.'

Tim flashed her a grin and set off again. He was getting too darned good on those crutches—

'Can I make a suggestion?'

Allie glanced up at Mark, glowering at his twinkling eyes and twitching mouth.

'Change my clothes, perhaps?'

'You guessed.' He smiled. 'Great minds, eh?'

She sniffed, curled up her nose expressively and headed for the sluice.

'I'll just strip this tabard off and find a clean shirt, then I'll be back to write that lot up. I don't suppose you'd like to report it to the surgical team? Oh, and find someone to sort Amy out?'

'Sure.' Mark grinned, waggled his fingers and went into the office to use the phone, and Allie dealt with the little crisis to her person, washed her hands for the thousandth time that day and pulled on a clean shirt from the stores.

'Hi-ho,' she mumbled, tugging the clean tabard straight and heading back to the ward.

Mark sniffed and smiled. 'Better.'

'All part of the job,' she said with a grin. 'I'll go and check on Amy. I just dropped her, poor little kid. Did you find anyone to sort her out?'

‘Anna’s gone to do it.’

‘Thanks.’ She flashed him a grateful smile and went to see how Amy was now. Anna was still with her, changing her and settling her on a clean draw-sheet.

‘OK?’

Allie smiled. ‘Yes, thanks. I always get in the way.’

‘Don’t we all? Her mother’s on the way back—I rang the coffee shop and asked them to tell her. She’d just nipped in for breakfast. The surgical reg is on his way down—I think they may operate this morning now.’

Allie nodded. ‘I wondered. Still, she’s on nil by mouth already, so there’s no delay.’

Mrs Fulcher arrived back then, and Allie left Anna talking to her and went to see what else she could find. As sure as eggs, there’d be plenty.

It was after four before she got away, not the three o’clock her shift should have ended, but they’d had a flood of post-ops back from General Surgery and Orthopaedics, and she’d had to say goodbye to Tim, and what with one thing and another the time had just slipped by.

She went home and threw her washing together and walked to the laundrette round the corner, read an out-of-date magazine while the clothes sloshed round in the machine and then read another one while the tumble dryer finished the job. She didn’t get home until half past six, and then had to plead with Lucy for the bathroom.

Consequently she was late—which was a nuisance because it meant Lucy got to answer the door and let Mark in, and Allie was like a cat on hot bricks while she finished getting ready, wondering what she was saying.

She needn’t have worried. Lucy, predictably, was talking about herself, and Mark was looking polite. Funny how she could read him already—or did she mean still?

She flashed him a smile. ‘Hi. Sorry I’m late—I had to go to the laundrette and do the dreaded washing.’

‘That’s OK.’ He stood up and smiled at her flatmate. ‘Nice to meet you, Lucy,’ he murmured, and taking Allie’s arm, he ushered her out of the door.

His car was outside—a very normal, ordinary car, nothing too big, just a sensible car for the town. She was surprised. She would have expected him to have a—well, a sexier car, somehow, but what? A Ferrari, for heaven’s sake? A Mercedes?

He was only an SHO.

And that was another thing that was puzzling her. Surely by now he should have been a registrar? Unless he’d taken time out for something else ... She’d have to ask.

He opened the passenger door for her, went round and slid behind the wheel. Suddenly the car seemed much smaller, and astonishingly intimate.

‘All set?’ he asked, throwing her a grin, and she nodded.

‘Where are we going?’

‘Pulham St Peter. It’s just north of here, and the pub’s very good, so I’m told.’

Pulham wasn’t far. She settled back against the actually very comfortable seat and watched him out of the corner of her eye. Within seconds she was totally relaxed. He was a good driver, quiet, competent and not hasty, but he didn’t hang about, either.

She realised she felt safe, and it was a strange feeling. She was normally edgy with other people driving her. She didn’t have long to worry about it, though, because they were pulling up in the pub car park in no time, and he was ushering her into the busy, crowded bar.

It was noisy and full, but by a miracle another couple vacated a table in the corner just as they had got their drinks and they were able to sit down out of the way and study the menu.

‘Shall we eat in here, or in the restaurant?’ he asked her.

Conscious of the price and the fact that tonight she was *definitely* going halves, she said, ‘In here, I think.’

He nodded, scanned the menu again and looked at her. ‘Decided yet?’

‘Scampi and chips—and I’m paying for mine.’

He chuckled. ‘How did I know that?’

He went to the bar armed with her money and placed the order and paid, and then came back and handed her her change. ‘There you are, you stubborn, independent young woman.’

She smiled and pocketed the money. She felt better now. She didn’t want to feel she owed him anything. Not that he would take advantage, but there had been the odd occasion in her past where a man had felt he had a right to her body because she’d accepted a meal from him. It hadn’t taken her long to dissuade her erstwhile suitors, but it had left a nasty taste in the mouth, and she didn’t want to mess up their budding relationship—

‘Penny for them.’

She laughed. ‘Not a chance. What are you having?’

‘Same as you.’

Their eyes clashed, and she looked away, her heart hammering. Oh, Lord. It would be so easy to fall for him. She cast around for a neutral topic of conversation, and remembered her thoughts about his career progression.

‘Tell me about your work,’ she said, sipping her drink. ‘How come you’re still an SHO? I would have thought you’d be a registrar by now.’

He grinned wryly. ‘I would have been, but I changed horses in the middle of the race. Well, actually, I changed races. You know I wanted to do general surgery, like my father?’

She nodded. ‘Yes, I remember. You were keen.’

‘I was—until I started doing it. Then I felt curiously detached from it all. The patients come in with a problem that someone else has detected, you fix it, and they go away. You never see them again, never know how they are unless there’s a problem.’

‘But that’s good. If you don’t see them again, you’ve done your job.’

He shook his head. ‘Maybe—but it’s not the job I want to be doing. I want to find the problem, send them to get it sorted and follow it up afterwards at home.’

‘But that’s general practice,’ she said, a little bemused.

‘Exactly.’

She stared at him in astonishment. ‘But you’re going to be a surgeon.’

He shook his head. ‘No. Not any more. That’s why I’m doing paed, why I’ve done obs and gynae, and A&E, and general medicine, and geriatrics—’

‘You want to be a GP?’ she said slowly, the penny finally dropping.

He smiled. ‘Yes—why not?’

Why not? She thought of the stress her father was under, of his partner who had found the strain all too much and taken the easy way out, leaving his wife and two young children to cope alone without him—

‘Why not?’ she said incredulously. ‘Because it’s an awful life, that’s why not. It’s dreadful. That’s why they can’t recruit GPs for love nor money. It’s stressful, it’s bogged down with paperwork, the hours are horrendous, it’s a thankless task—’

‘No. It’s not a thankless task. It might be all the other things, but it’s not a thankless task, and the hours are much better now. Nearly all GPs are in cooperatives, so their time on call is much better organised and less stressful.’

She snorted. ‘Talk to my father about it.’

‘I have—I did. He agrees.’

‘No, he doesn’t. Well, he might have done five years ago, but he doesn’t now. Why do you think he’s taking early retirement?’

Mark shrugged. ‘To enjoy the rest of his life while he still can?’

She snorted again. ‘Not my father. He’s a workaholic. No, it’s stress, I know it is.’

‘Well, whatever, it’s what I want to do, Allie,’ he said quietly, straightening the edge of his beer mat with a strong, blunt fingertip. ‘I’m not cut out for hospital medicine, I know that now.’

She was stunned. Shocked, confused, utterly baffled by his announcement. He was going to be a surgeon. She’d always known that. It was who he was—wasn’t it?

She sipped her drink again absently, and then the barmaid called out a number and Mark stood up, coming back moments later with two fragrant, steaming baskets of scampi and chips nestled on absorbent paper napkins, two wooden forks and a selection of condiments in another basket.

‘Here—it smells gorgeous.’

It did. Fattening, wicked and absolutely lovely. She let her breath out on a quiet sigh, sprinkled salt liberally over her food with total disregard for her health, and tucked in.

A GP, for heaven’s sake—

‘Allie?’

She looked up, searching his face for any clue that he’d been winding her up, and found none.

‘What?’

‘What’s the matter?’

Was she so easy to read? She shrugged. ‘I just thought—I don’t know. I always knew you were going to be a surgeon.’

He grinned. ‘Well, I’m not. Believe me, I was shocked as well. You’ll get over it. The scampi’s good. Do you want some tartare sauce?’

‘Mmm.’ She tore the corner off the packet and squeezed it out mechanically, then stuck the little wooden fork into a piece of scampi and bit into it. He was right, it was good. She put thoughts of his career out of her mind and concentrated on eating and enjoying his company, but something had gone, like a light being switched off inside her.

It was only later, after he’d taken her home and given her another of those sizzling kisses on the doorstep, that she realised why.

They had no future, because there was no way she could spend her life with anyone who was going into general practice. There was no way she’d marry him if things went that far. She couldn’t bring children into the world knowing their father might not last the course. She’d seen at first hand the havoc it could cause in a woman’s life, and she had no intention of letting it happen to her.

Then she chided herself for being ridiculous.

You’re getting a bit ahead of yourself, Allie Baker. You’ve had two dates—and one of them didn’t even really count. Stop acting like he’s asked you to marry him!

She got ready for bed, climbed under the chilly duvet and snuggled down, and waited fruitlessly for sleep to come.

They had a new admission the next day, a little girl of seven from the cystic fibrosis clinic. Claudia Hall had been diagnosed with CF at birth, and was currently struggling with yet another deep-seated chest infection.

She was coming in for intravenous antibiotics to combat it, and Allie greeted her and her very pregnant mother affectionately. It was the second time she’d been in in the few months Allie had been on the ward, the last time to insert a gastrostomy tube in her stomach so she could have special feeds delivered by pump overnight to boost the amount she was able to eat, because her appetite was dreadful and she wasn’t able to take in enough to sustain herself.

Everybody thought CF was just a chest condition, Allie mused, and yet it affected the intestines just as much, causing havoc with the assimilation of food and secretion of enzymes. In fact if Claudia ate anything with fat in it, she took handfuls of enzyme pills to enable her to digest it properly. Between the enzymes and the tube feeds, Claudia had been gaining weight, but now she’d lost it again with this infection. Allie had hoped they wouldn’t have to see her again so soon, and it was a shame. She’d had more than enough to deal with already in her short life.

‘Where am I this time?’ the little girl asked as she looked round the all too familiar ward.

‘Nice bed by the window—that do you?’ Allie said with a smile.

Claudia nodded. ‘Yes, please. I don’t want to be in the Winnie the Pooh room again.’

Allie laughed. ‘Well, you won’t have to this time because you’re MRSA free, so we won’t have to isolate you. How’s Piglet?’

Claudia pulled up her jumper and showed Allie her gastrostomy tube, nicknamed Piglet because of the Winnie the Pooh room she’d been put in when she’d gone down with the MRSA infection in the gastrostomy site. ‘He’s fine. Still eating all night.’

‘Good. Right, we need to admit you and do all the paperwork, then you can go and find out who’s in the playroom.’

‘Is Katie still here?’ she asked.

Allie shook her head. ‘No, sorry. She went home a few weeks ago. There are a couple of girls of your age, though. I’m sure you’ll get on with them.’

Claudia nodded and scrambled up onto the bed, triggering a coughing fit that ended in her vomiting. Allie was prepared. It was a frequent occurrence with CF children, and she was ready with a paper bowl.

‘She’s really gone downhill the last few days,’ her mother Jayne explained. ‘She’s been coughing more and more—Dr Barrett thought she should come in and get it sorted. She’s got pneumonia this time—I suppose it makes a change from Pseudomonas.’

Allie nodded. ‘Yes, she’s down for gentamycin. That should clobber it. Can’t have you feeling this poorly, can we?’ she said with a smile for Claudia, who was flopped against the backrest looking exhausted.

‘She hasn’t been sleeping all that much,’ Jayne said, and Allie could tell by the bags under her eyes that Jayne hadn’t, either.

‘When’s the new baby due?’ she asked.

‘Three weeks, but I may not make it that long. I’ve got dodgy ligaments in my pelvis and it’s so painful. I have to wear a belt round my hips to support it, and it’s getting really tiresome, not to mention difficult to move around, so they might induce me early.’

As if the poor woman didn’t have enough on her plate. ‘It’ll soon be over,’ Allie said comfortingly, and then turned back to Claudia. ‘All right, poppet? Feeling a bit better?’

She nodded, but it was only politeness. She looked awful, poor kid, and Allie wanted to hug her.

‘Dr Jarvis’ll be here in a minute, I expect, and he’ll check you over and get your IV line in. Then we can get some bug-zapper into you and you should start to feel a bit better.’

Claudia nodded again, and Allie flipped open her file and took out the sheet at the front with all the labels on. They were printed with name, address, next of kin, hospital number and so forth, and were stuck on anything to do with the patient. It saved hours of copying and potential inaccuracy—when they were right.

Allie checked, on the principle that one could never be too sure. ‘Are all your details still the same? Address, phone number and so on?’

Jayne nodded. ‘Yes, nothing’s changed.’

‘Good.’ She stuck Claudia’s labels on the charts, clipped them to the end of the bed and took her temperature and blood pressure. The respirations she’d already done surreptitiously while Jayne had been talking, and they were up, as she’d expected.

‘Fancy a cup of tea?’ she asked Jayne when she’d finished.

‘Oh, I’d love one. Can I make it?’

Allie shook her head. ‘You sit there, I’ll find someone to do it for you. Weak, black, no sugar—is that right?’

‘How did you remember that?’ Jayne asked softly, and looked near to tears. Allie guessed that this pregnancy had been very difficult for her. She had a horrendous obstetric history, by all accounts,

and it was touch and go whether this one would be all right. Still, at least she was almost there. That was a huge improvement.

‘I have a very retentive memory for useless information,’ she told Jayne now, and with a smile, she left them alone and found Pearl, the Jamaican ward orderly. ‘You couldn’t take a cuppa to Jayne Hall, could you? She’s over there. Weak, black, no sugar.’

‘I remember, darlin’, don’t worry. I know Jayne very well. Sometimes I think she lives here. Sure, I’ll take her a cup of tea. I was just goin’ to ask her myself.’

Allie left Jayne in Pearl’s capable hands, and thought not for the first time what a gift to the ward the matronly woman was. She was possessed of infinite kindness and patience, and seemed to be able to keep order with the bored and naughty children absolutely effortlessly. They all adored her, and it was mutual. She would have made a wonderful nurse, but perhaps she was more useful as an orderly, because she never had to do anything unpleasant to the children and that made her easier to trust.

Allie checked on Amy Fulcher who had come back from Theatre yesterday after she’d gone off duty. She was looking better already, much more comfortable, and her mother was slumped in the big vinyl armchair beside her, sleeping.

It seemed a shame to wake either of them, so Allie left them to it for a little while. Sleep was probably more useful than anything to the baby at the moment, and the mother was exhausted.

She looked across at Claudia’s bed and saw Mark had arrived and was chatting to them. He had one hip hitched up on the edge of the bed, and he was smiling and teasing Claudia into smiling back. He was good with children, she realised, and wondered why he didn’t go into paediatric surgery.

He’d been so keen, so certain of his choice—

She shook her head. She was still stunned by his revelation, and was trying to reconcile herself to the bitter fact that there could be no future for them beyond the immediate one of a few dates—except maybe, because he was the only man she’d ever felt like this about, a brief affair.

Nothing lasting. Nothing permanent. No happy ever after. Just something to remember him by when he moved on.

She swallowed hard and found herself something to do at the other end of the ward, away from him and his laughing eyes and wide, ready smile that made the sun come out.

Her reprieve was short-lived, though, because he asked her to assist him with Claudia’s intravenous line. He was putting in a long line, not as long as a Hickman line that went all the way to the heart, but one that went into the arm in the crook of the elbow and up into the top of the chest.

‘As you know it lasts longer than a needle cannula,’ he explained to Jayne and Claudia, ‘and this treatment’s going to take a couple of weeks. We don’t want to have to keep putting in another line and messing you about, do we, Claudia?’

Claudia shook her head, and they moved her into the treatment room where they undertook the more sterile procedures. Allie was the ‘clean’ nurse, and a younger staff nurse was the ‘dirty’ nurse, the one who handled the outside of the packets and opened them for Allie, who was scrubbed and gowned and ready to assist.

Mark scrubbed as well, and then they settled down with Claudia to insert the line into her little arm. It was splinted straight, and would stay like that until the line came out, which was a bit restricting but one of the penalties for not having to have the line changed constantly.

Her mother was there, of course, supportive as ever, and Allie wondered how Mark would deal with Claudia and her independent attitude. Her mother had brought her up as far as possible with input and control over her illness, and her quiet courage and calm dignity were terrifying.

As for Mark, it was the first time Allie had seen him doing any procedure, and she was impressed. Claudia cried, of course, but only a little, and he was very kind and gentle with her, and it was over in no time. Allie secured the end of the line with tape and made sure the splint that kept her elbow straight was comfortable, and then she was given the first dose of antibiotic through it.

It seemed such a shame to have to put her through it, Allie thought sadly, but it was a small price to pay to combat the germs in her chest which were playing havoc with her breathing and damaging the already fragile structure of her lungs.

‘All right now?’ Mark asked, checking his handiwork and smiling at Claudia.

She nodded, looking wan and exhausted against the white pillows. Allie wanted to cry for her. She wanted to cry for all of them, but she couldn’t, of course, so she smiled and hugged and dished out sensible advice and struggled on.

Just like Jayne, she thought with sympathy, struggling on with her softened pelvic ligaments so that every movement made the two ends of her pubic bones scrape together at the synthesis, the join in the middle at the front. It wasn’t a joint anyone was ever aware of, unless something like this happened.

It must be horribly painful and difficult, Allie thought with another surge of sympathy as she pushed the bed back to its place in the ward. Still, not for much longer. It would soon recover once the pregnancy hormones disappeared from her system.

‘Can I go and see who’s in the playroom?’ Claudia asked her, and Allie nodded.

‘If you want to. Take a paper hat with you, just in case you’re sick. Want me to introduce you to the others?’

She shook her head. ‘S OK,’ she said pragmatically. ‘I’ll do it.’

‘She’s so independent,’ Jayne said in admiration, sinking into the big armchair by the bed. ‘You’d think she’d be clingy, but she’s not. She just gets on with it, no matter how awful. She’s got such guts—’

Jayne broke off, her lips pressed together in a firm line, and Allie wondered what it must be like to have a child with CF and know there was a one-in-four chance that the baby she carried would have inherited the same dreadful and debilitating disease.

She patted her shoulder, giving quiet comfort and support, and then left her to grab a few precious moments alone to rest in the comfy chair. Allie reckoned she’d earned it.

She managed to slip up to the canteen for lunch, by a miracle, and was sitting propped up in an easy chair in the corner nursing a cup of tea when Beth strolled over.

‘He’s gorgeous,’ she said without preamble. ‘I saw him today in Outpatients. I had to cover. He is just luscious.’

Allie didn’t pretend not to understand. ‘I know,’ she said glumly.

Beth dropped into the chair opposite and gave her a curious look. ‘What’s the matter?’ she asked. ‘I’m the one that should have the long face. At least he’s interested in you—he wouldn’t have noticed if I’d got six legs!’

Allie laughed. ‘Beth, you’re silly. He’s going to be a GP,’ she added after a pause.

‘How wonderful. There are far too few of them out there.’

‘I don’t want him to be a GP. It’s so stressful.’

‘Isn’t that rather for him to decide?’ Beth said pointedly. ‘And anyway, what does it matter? He’s here now, he’s giving out all the right messages—you’d have to be mad to ignore it. Well, mad or dead or totally sexless.’

Beth was right—and Allie wasn’t any of those things, at least not where Mark was concerned. Well—mad, maybe, but that was different.

She finished her tepid tea and set the cup down. Happy ever after was probably a figment of the imagination, anyway, but there was no time like the present. Who said every relationship worth having had to end in marriage?

She gave the bemused Beth a dazzling smile. ‘You’re a love. See you later.’

And feeling much brighter than she had all day, she went back to work.

CHAPTER THREE

HE DIDN'T ask her out again until the weekend, and she was beginning to wonder if her imagination had read more into their relationship than was warranted.

If you could call it a relationship.

Maybe she'd presumed too much from their slight acquaintance. Maybe Anna was more appealing to him than he'd let on—although there was no sign of anything blossoming there either, she thought, and told herself that the only reason Mark had shown so much interest in her was because he was lonely in Audley and didn't know anyone else!

So she put it out of her mind, and carried on with her work and tried not to notice when he was around, but it was pointless. Her radar wouldn't switch off, and she was constantly aware of every breath he took when he was on the ward.

Still, her patients were a good distraction, and she tried to concentrate on them.

Little Claudia Hall was doing all right on her antibiotics, despite feeling sick, and her mother and father had taken over her antibiotic therapy and were giving her the injections through the catheter in her arm. It saved the nursing staff a job, and her parents were already so involved with their daughter's care that they were utterly reliable.

In any case they were probably more knowledgeable about her condition than many of the staff on the ward, and like so many parents these days, wanted to know everything and not be kept in the dark. Furthermore they explained everything to Claudia, so that she could be in control of her treatment.

As Jayne said, 'She's Claudia first, and CF second. All this treatment isn't for the CF, it's for Claudia. She has to understand it and condone it and accept it. It's her body, not yours, not mine. She has to make the choices, and if she's given some control, it helps her to deal with it.'

However their philosophy could only help so much. One of the hardest things was also one of the simplest, in comparison to the other things she had to endure. Every third day of her gentamycin therapy, she had to have pre- and post-gentamycin blood tests to make sure that her fragile little system was able to cope with the drug.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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