



The Surgeon's Marriage

Maggie Kingsley

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Medical Romance™

Maggie Kingsley

The Surgeon's Marriage

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Now, he thought

Now's the time, now's the moment, but what could he say? How could he convince her that he loved her, when he was never going to be able to make the kind of flattering speeches that tripped so easily off Mark's tongue?

Show her, his heart suggested. Show her you care, that the love is still there.

"Helen..." He cleared his throat and started again. "Will you come to bed with me?"

Was it his imagination or had her grip on the magazine tightened?

"Helen, please." Heavens, he was begging. "Helen, it's been so long since we made love, and... and I need you." Slowly she lowered the magazine, and to his utter horror he could see tears sparkling in her eyes. Oh, hell, could he never get it right? "Helen, I'm sorry. Oh, love, don't—please don't cry."

Desperately he reached for her, and she met him halfway, clinging to him with almost frantic need.

"Kiss me, Tom," she muttered into his chest. "Don't talk—don't say anything. Just...kiss me."

Dear Reader,

When I finished the first book in the Baby Doctors trilogy, I started thinking about Tom and Helen. They seemed to have the perfect marriage in *Doctor and Son*, but what if Helen doesn't think they have? What if she feels Tom is taking her for granted as so many husbands can unthinkingly do, and that after ten years of marriage the zing isn't there anymore? And to really make her life complicated, what if I arranged for a gorgeous specialist registrar to arrive at the Belfield Infirmary who makes it pretty obvious that he thinks Helen is wonderful?

Would she have an affair? Would she leave her husband? She has to make a choice, but does she make the right one?

If you're as hooked on the Belfield Infirmary as I am, look out for the last book in the Baby Doctors trilogy.

Regards,

Maggie Kingsley

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CHAPTER ONE

HELEN stared at the damp towel hanging over the banister. It was strange how something so ordinary, so innocuous, could set your teeth on edge. Especially when it was nothing new. In fact, every morning for the past ten years Tom had come out of the shower and thrown his towel over that self-same banister.

Then why don't you simply tell him to stop doing it? her mind asked as she lifted the towel and carried it down the stairs to the kitchen. Tell him it's driving you crazy.

'Because if I do,' she told the potted plant on the window-sill, 'Tom will say, "If it bothers you that much, why didn't you mention it before?"'

And she'd be forced to admit that it hadn't bothered her before, but now it did, and Tom would either frown uncomprehendingly or smile in that horribly knowing fashion which meant, Oops, it must be Helen's time of the month again so I'd better tread carefully.

Tears filled her eyes, and she angrily blinked them away. It wasn't her time of the month. She wished it was. At least then she'd have some excuse for the odd feelings of dissatisfaction and irritation which had been plaguing her recently. And she had nothing to be dissatisfied about. She had a good marriage, two healthy, beautiful children, a job she loved—

'Mum, I can't find my white T-shirt, and I need it for gymnastics.'

She glanced round to see her daughter standing in the kitchen doorway. 'If you need it for gymnastics you should have told me yesterday.'

'But I always have gymnastics on Mondays—you know I do. Tuesday's art, Wednesday's—'

'Your green one's washed and ironed.'

'But everyone else will be wearing white. I'll be the odd one out—'

'Mum, have you seen my trainers?'

'I'm talking to Mum,' Emma protested.

'Big deal,' her brother exclaimed. 'Mum, my trainers...'

'They're in your wardrobe, John. Which is where you should have put them when you got home from school on Friday, instead of just dumping them down in the hall,' Helen called after her son as he dashed away.

'Mum, about my white T-shirt. Couldn't you—?'

'Helen, it's half past eight. Are you ready to go?'

'Does it look like I am?' she protested, seeing her husband's head come round the kitchen door. 'Emma, I'm sorry, but you're going to have to wear your green T-shirt, and that's final.'

Emma wandered unhappily away, and Tom's eyebrows rose. 'Problems?'

'Just the usual Monday morning mayhem,' Helen said irritably, taking a scrunchy out of her pocket and twisting her shoulder-length blonde hair back into a ponytail. 'Honestly, there are times when I wonder why we ever had children.'

'Because of one split condom nine years ago?' Tom grinned, and a reluctant smile curved her own lips.

That faulty condom had a lot to answer for. For a start it had put paid to their plans when they'd got married not to have children until they were both Obs and Gynae specialist registrars. Tom had made the grade, but it had never been an option for her, not after the twins had been born.

She'd never regretted it. OK, so perhaps occasionally she thought it would have been nice if both she and Tom could have fulfilled their dreams, but the children were a joy and a delight when they weren't driving her mad, and being an Obs and Gynae SHO was responsibility enough when you had a pair of lively eight-year-olds to look after.

'That's the school bus,' Tom declared as a horn sounded outside. He glanced down at his watch and frowned. 'Helen, I hate to hurry you, but we really do have to go. I'll start the car, shall I?'

The smile on her lips died. He couldn't perhaps have offered to wash the breakfast dishes first, or tidy up the sitting room? No, of course he couldn't. The dishes would still be waiting for her when she got home tonight, and the sitting room would still look as though a bomb had hit it.

Oh, stop it, Helen, she told herself as she shepherded Emma and John out to the school bus, trying hard to ignore Emma's reproachful expression which said all too clearly, Everyone else's mum would have remembered my T-shirt. Tom's a good husband, a loving husband, and you know he would have washed the dishes in a minute if you'd asked him. Yes, but I shouldn't need to ask him, she argued back. He should have known.

'Everything OK, love?' Tom asked, shooting her a puzzled frown as she got into the car beside him, then fastened her seat belt.

'Fine,' she managed to reply, but everything wasn't fine. Not by a long shot.

Tom would probably have said she was simply suffering from a bad case of overwork, and maybe she was. This last month at the Belfield Infirmary had certainly been a nightmare, what with Rachel Dunwoody suddenly taking compassionate leave because of the death of her aunt, then Annie Hart and Gideon Caldwell getting married.

Not that she begrudged the junior doctor and ward consultant their happiness—in fact, she'd been delighted when they'd finally got together—and poor Rachel had obviously been shattered by her aunt's death so it wasn't surprising she'd asked for time off, but all the upheaval had meant so much extra work for her and Tom, and she was feeling it.

'This friend of yours who's standing in for Rachel,' she said as Tom negotiated the busy rush-hour traffic. 'You said he's been working in Australia for the last ten years?'

Tom nodded. 'Mark headed out to Sydney right after he qualified. He worked there for a couple of years, then moved to a senior house officer's post in Canberra, and he's been working as a specialist registrar for the last eighteen months in Melbourne.'

'And he's going to Canada in six weeks,' she said, trying and failing to keep the envy out of her voice. She'd wanted to work abroad, too, when she'd been younger, but then the children had arrived, and the years had flown by, and here she was still living and working in Glasgow. 'I hope he isn't going to find us too boring after all his travelling.'

'Why should he think we're boring?' Tom said in surprise. 'I don't think we're boring and, knowing Mark, he's probably only going to Canada because some irate boyfriend is after him.'

'Some irate boyfriend?' she repeated, bewildered, and her husband grinned.

'Back in med school there wasn't a girl who wasn't potty about him. In fact, he actually had the nerve to poach a couple of my girlfriends, but...' He shook his head ruefully. 'The crazy thing is we still stayed friends. Maybe it's because he could always make me see the funny side of things.'

'Charming as well as handsome,' she observed. 'Sounds like a pretty potent combination.'

'It is. Mind you, I'm talking about the Mark Lorimer I knew a long time ago. Ten years of Australian sun, sea and food could have made him fat, bald and charmless.'

'Is that true concern I hear, Tom Brooke, or a bad case of wishful thinking?' she teased, and her husband's lips quirked.

'What do you think?'

That he had no need to envy his friend, she decided. Tom was a good-looking man—better-looking now, in fact, than he'd been when they'd first met. At twenty-four he'd been a lanky six-footer, with a shock of brown hair, and a pair of smiling grey eyes. Ten years on, the hair and eyes were still the same, but he'd filled out, grown more muscular, and it suited him.

I've filled out a bit in the last ten years, too, she thought wryly, but I doubt if anyone would say it suited me.

She was snacking too much, that was the trouble, but she never seemed to have time for a proper meal. If she wasn't racing round Obs and Gynae, she was chasing after John and Emma, making sure they'd done their homework properly and had clean clothes to wear for the next day.

Apart from white T-shirts, she thought guiltily, suddenly remembering Emma's disgruntled face. She'd wash and iron it tonight, after she'd done the weekly shop at the supermarket.

'Helen, are you quite sure you're OK?'

She looked up blankly to see they'd arrived at the Belfield Infirmary and Tom was gazing at her with concern.

'Of course I am,' she replied, bewildered. 'Why shouldn't I be?'

'Because...' To her surprise he suddenly reached out and gently cupped her cheek in his hand. 'I've been speaking to you for the last five minutes, and I swear you haven't heard a word.'

To her acute dismay the tears she'd felt earlier began to resurface, and she gulped them down quickly.

'I'm fine—honestly I am,' she replied with a shaky smile. 'Just... just a little tired.'

He swore under his breath. 'It's all the extra hours you've been working recently, not to mention having to look after John and Emma and me. Look, why don't I do the weekly shop tonight—give you a break?'

For a second she was tempted, then a bubble of laughter came from her. 'Tom, if you do the shopping I know exactly what will happen. You'll come back from the supermarket with enough food to feed an army, plus a whole load of stuff that nobody likes because you noticed it was on special offer.'

His lips curved. 'What if I promise to stick to your list?'

'I'll do the shopping. I'm OK—really I am,' she insisted, seeing his frown reappear. 'Now that Mark Lorimer's starting work today, everything will be fine.'

And it would be, she told herself as she got out of the car and followed Tom into the hospital. With the department fully staffed again she wouldn't be so tired all the time, and stupid, niggling little things wouldn't keep irritating her. She knew they wouldn't.

'OK, cheer me up on a cold April day,' she instructed Annie when she found the junior doctor in the staffroom, getting ready to go off duty. 'Tell me the ward was quiet last night, that not one single emergency came in, then give me permission to go home.'

'You don't want cheering up,' Annie protested. 'You want a miracle.'

'I know, but it was worth a try.' Helen laughed. 'OK, what's the current situation?'

'Mrs Foster burst some of her stitches last night. Apparently she was straining to pass a motion—Yes, I know,' the junior doctor said as Helen groaned. 'Not the brightest thing in the world to do when you've just had a hysterectomy, but there you go. Mrs Dawn accidentally dislodged her catheter at midnight—'

'Oh, no.'

'And—and,' Annie continued, 'just to add to the overall fun and excitement, Mrs Alexander suddenly developed a deep-vein thrombosis in her leg.'

'Is she all right?' Helen asked with concern.

'Gideon's put her on anticoagulants, and we've got her in compression stockings, but it looks like we could be in for big problems when she gives birth.'

It did. Mary Alexander was thirty-six weeks pregnant, and she'd only been sent in by her GP because he thought her blood pressure was a little high. A Caesarean might be the answer, but if the clot moved to her lungs during the operation...

'I'll have a word with her once I've done the ward round,' Helen murmured, and Annie grimaced.

'A word is probably all you'll have time for. Honestly, Helen, I feel like I'm living at the hospital at the moment, and if Gideon hadn't insisted on me employing a home help I don't know how I would have managed with Jamie.'

Helen nodded. She could remember only too well how hard it had been when her own children were smaller, trying to juggle their needs and the demands of her job, and it was doubly difficult

for Annie. Gideon wasn't Jamie's father, and although the little boy obviously liked the consultant, it would take time for him to accept his mother's new husband completely.

'Things will be better now Dr Lorimer's here,' she said encouragingly as she followed Annie out of the staffroom. 'With the department fully staffed again—'

'But he's not here. At least, not unless he's hiding in a cupboard.'

Helen came to a halt. 'What do you mean, he's not here? He phoned Tom from London last night to say he was just about to board the Glasgow plane.'

And to reminisce about old times, she thought, remembering the gales of laughter she'd heard coming from her husband when he'd taken the call.

'Maybe he's got lost between the airport and the Belfield. Maybe he's taken one look at what passes for spring weather in Britain, and headed straight back to sunny Australia. All I know is—' Annie bit off the rest of what she'd been about to say, and groaned. 'Oh, Lord. Why do I know this means trouble?'

Helen turned in the direction of the junior doctor's gaze, and her heart sank, too. Gideon was striding towards them, looking tight-lipped and harassed, and Tom didn't look any happier beside him.

'I'm afraid we've got a problem,' the consultant declared without preamble. 'Dr Lorimer's still in London. Apparently Heathrow Airport's fogbound, and though he's hoping to make it to the Belfield by mid-afternoon, we're not to hold our breaths.'

'And?' Helen asked with foreboding, sensing there was a very definite 'and' hanging in the air, and equally certain she wasn't going to like it.

'We've got a postpartum haemorrhage on our hands. I'm on my way to it now. Tom's going to take my morning clinic, but that means—'

'You want me to take Tom's,' Helen finished for him unhappily.

'Sorry, Helen.'

So was she. She hated taking somebody else's clinic at short notice. It meant seeing people 'blind', with scarcely enough time to read through their notes, but it couldn't be helped. Emergencies were just that. Unexpected events that nobody could predict.

'Look, would it help if I stayed on for a couple of hours?' Annie said, beginning to unbutton her coat. 'Jamie will be at the day-care centre by now—'

'What I want is for you to go home and get some sleep,' Gideon said firmly. 'You've just finished a full night shift.'

'Yes, but if we're short-staffed—'

'Home, Annie. Now.'

'Three weeks married, and already he's bossing me about,' the junior doctor protested, and Helen laughed, only for her laughter to die when Gideon suddenly put his arm around his wife and kissed her.

It wasn't a passionate kiss—the ward corridor was hardly the place for it—but as the couple drew apart a hard lump formed in her throat.

When was the last time Tom had looked at her the way Gideon was looking at Annie? When was the last time she'd looked at Tom with such obvious love in her eyes?

Good grief, woman, you've been married for ten years, not three weeks, a little voice protested at the back of her mind. You can't expect either you and Tom to be still wandering round in that heady, crazy state of euphoria that couples feel when they first fall in love.

No, her heart whispered, but surely I should be able to remember when he last told me he loved me. Surely I should at least be able to remember when we last made love.

Her heart contracted and, unable to bear looking at the couple any longer, she began walking down the corridor, only to discover Tom had come after her.

'I'm sorry,' she said, coming to an awkward halt. 'Did you want to talk to me about your clinic?'

‘What I’m more interested in—more worried about—is you,’ her husband replied. ‘Helen, what is it—what’s wrong?’

He looked anxious and perplexed, but as she stared up at him she also saw that he looked completely exhausted, and a wave of guilt surged through her. He’d been working so hard at the hospital recently—much harder than she had been—and yet here she was, feeling sorry for herself just because they hadn’t made love in ages. And it was as much her fault as his. ‘I’m too tired, Tom’ had become her stock reply to any overture he might have made recently.

‘Nothing’s wrong,’ she said swiftly. ‘I’m just thinking about your poor friend, stuck in London—’

‘But you looked so pale just a minute ago,’ he pressed. ‘Quite white, in fact.’

‘That’ll teach me to forget to put on any make-up.’ She smiled, trying to lighten his mood, but it didn’t work.

‘You don’t hear me when I’m talking to you,’ he continued. ‘You’re tired all the time, and now your colour’s coming and going. Look, perhaps you should let me examine you, give you a thorough check-up.’

‘You just want an excuse to get my clothes off,’ she said, her brown eyes dancing, ‘and you don’t need one. We’re married, remember?’

‘Helen, be serious.’

‘Life’s too short,’ she insisted. ‘Tom, I’ve been thinking—why don’t we hire a babysitter the next time we both have a weekend off? We could head off somewhere romantic like the Isle of Skye. We haven’t been anywhere alone for ages, and—’

‘Do you think you could be hitting an early menopause?’

Her jaw dropped. ‘Do I what?’

‘I know you’re only thirty-two,’ he continued thoughtfully, ‘but it would certainly explain your mood swings, your abstraction and fatigue—’

‘Tom, I am not starting the menopause,’ she snapped. ‘If I look tired, maybe it’s because I am tired. Tired of cooking and cleaning. Tired of constantly tidying up after you and the kids, and tired of being expected to be a super-efficient SHO into the bargain.’

The words were out of her mouth before she could stop them, and she bit her lip. She hadn’t realised she’d been feeling so put upon and taken for granted lately, but now she’d said it she knew it was true. It might have been better, though, if she’d couched her complaint in less confrontational language. Her husband clearly thought so, judging by the dull flush of colour sweeping across his face.

‘Tom—’

‘Sorry to interrupt you, Doctors,’ the department secretary declared, ‘but it’s twenty past nine, and your clinics were supposed to start at nine.’

‘Our clinics will start when we’re ready to start,’ Tom replied, his voice uncharacteristically brusque. ‘Until then I’d be obliged if you’d allow us some privacy.’

Doris looked crushed. She also looked curious. Very curious.

‘That wasn’t the smartest thing in the world to do,’ Helen protested the minute the woman had gone. ‘Doris is the biggest gossip in the hospital, and just because you’re angry with me—’

‘I don’t think this is the time or the place for a discussion about our private life, do you?’ he said stiffly.

Oh, really? she thought. Well, she wasn’t the one who’d started it with all this stupid talk about the menopause. She wasn’t the one who hadn’t been pulling her weight at home.

‘Fine,’ she said, her voice every bit as taut and cold as his. ‘Then perhaps you could consult your diary and pencil me in for a day when it would be convenient.’

And before he could reply she walked into his consulting room and slammed the door shut.

The menopause. He had the nerve to suggest that her tiredness and irritability might be due to the menopause. That would teach her to marry a gynaecologist. One mention of being tired and fed up, and her husband’s mind had immediately gone into diagnostic mode.

Well, his mind could just come right out of diagnostic mode, she decided, sitting angrily down at his desk. She might not have known how aggrieved she'd been feeling, but now that she did know she could see it was time he pulled his weight at home—way past time.

And way past time for her clinic to start, she realised with a muttered oath as she caught sight of the clock on the wall.

'Forget it, Helen,' she told herself, pulling the stack of files on the desk towards her and hitting the intercom button. 'Think about it later, but right now forget it.'

And she managed to until her last patient turned out to be Jennifer Norton.

'I'm feeling fine, thank you, Doctor,' Jennifer said as she eased herself up onto the examination table. 'In fact, now I've got over the morning sickness, the only thing I want is for my husband to stop fussing over me.'

Lucky you, Helen thought, but she didn't say that.

'You can't really blame him for fussing,' she said instead, wrapping the blood-pressure cuff round Jennifer's arm. 'You gave us all a big fright back in February.'

Jennifer had. At just eight weeks pregnant she'd been rushed into the department with vaginal bleeding, and as her pregnancy was the result of her fourth IVF treatment the signs weren't good. Luckily the bleeding had stopped, but Jennifer still had a long way to go.

'You're fourteen weeks pregnant now, aren't you?' she murmured, watching the blood-pressure gauge.

'Fourteen weeks gone, only another twenty-six to go.' Jennifer laughed a little nervously. 'Is it OK—my blood pressure?'

'It's up a little, but that might just be because you knew you were going to be examined today. Unless you've been doing something really silly, of course, like redecorating the whole house.'

'Chance would be a fine thing. If I so much as look at a duster my husband's down on me like a ton of bricks, saying I'm doing too much, putting the twins at risk.'

'I'd enjoy the pampering while you can,' Helen said with more of an edge than she'd intended. 'Speaking as the mother of twins myself, you're going to need all the energy you've got once they arrive. Twelve bottles a day to sterilise and prepare. Two dirty bottoms to change. Two little bodies that suddenly sprout six arms and legs when you're trying to get them dressed to go out.'

Jennifer smiled. 'But I bet you never regretted having them.'

'On good days, no. On bad days...' Helen rolled her eyes heavenwards, and Jennifer laughed. 'OK, I see from your notes that you've already had your spina bifida scan, so I just need to take a blood sample and then we'll do a quick scan to check on how your babies are doing.'

To Jennifer's clear relief the scan revealed that the twins were the correct size and development for their gestation.

'I hate having these scans,' she admitted as she wiped the conductive gel off her tummy and pulled up her trousers. 'I know they're necessary, but I'm always terrified you're going to tell me something's wrong.'

'It's understandable to worry after all you've been through,' Helen said gently. 'Now, we'd like to see you again in a month's time—'

'Another scan?'

'Fraid so. Hey, look on the bright side,' Helen continued as Jennifer groaned. 'It will give you the chance to see how much your babies have grown, and we'll be able to check on your blood pressure at the same time.' She flicked through Tom's diary. 'How does the second of May sound?'

'Fine by me. Brian and I aren't exactly living a wild social life at the moment. Not that we were ever great party-goers even before I got pregnant,' Jennifer said ruefully. 'My husband's the original stick-in-the-mud, stay-at-home bloke.'

Helen smiled, but when the woman got to her feet she suddenly said on impulse, 'How long have you been married, Jennifer?'

'Fifteen years. Cripes, that's longer than the average sentence for murder, isn't it? Not that I've ever felt like murdering him—at least, not often.'

'Husbands do drive you mad sometimes, don't they?' Helen said with feeling.

'And how.' Jennifer nodded. 'In fact, Brian and I went through a really sticky patch a couple of years ago. I thought he was taking me for granted, he thought our marriage was in a rut.'

Which has got absolutely nothing to do with Jennifer's medical condition, Helen told herself firmly, so you can't possibly ask how she solved the problem, but she did, and Jennifer laughed.

'We talked.'

'That's it?' Helen said in surprise.

'The best answers are often the simplest.'

'Yes, but—'

'Talking clears the air, stops things festering. So does accepting neither of you is perfect. If you don't accept that, then you end up like one of these weird film stars, constantly flitting from relationship to relationship, in love with the idea of being in love.'

Jennifer was right. It was silly to be envious of Gideon and Annie. Stupid to let little things annoy her. She loved Tom, and he loved her, and at least he'd noticed something was wrong, which was more than could be said for a lot of men. OK, so his explanation might have been totally off the wall as far as accuracy was concerned, but at least he'd noticed.

Which meant she was going to have to apologise, she realised as she showed Jennifer out. Not for what she'd said—she wasn't going to take a word of that back—but perhaps she could have phrased it better, picked a better time to raise the subject.

She glanced down at her watch and sighed. Time. It was the one thing she never seemed to have enough of, and she didn't have any spare now. Lunch would be yet another quick sandwich in the staffroom, and then it was on to the ward round.

A ward round that did little to improve her spirits or her temper. She didn't mind spending forty minutes with Mrs Alexander—heaven knew, the woman had just cause to be worried about her unborn baby after having suffered a deep-vein thrombosis—but she was in no mood for Mrs Foster's complaint that her hysterectomy stitches wouldn't have burst if they had been inserted properly.

'Some days it just doesn't pay to get up, does it?' Liz Baker, the sister in charge of the Obs and Gynae ward, observed sympathetically when Helen strode towards her, her cheeks red with barely concealed anger.

'Tell me about it,' Helen began. 'That Mrs Foster—'

'Is a pain in the butt.' Liz nodded. 'I know, and I hate to have to add to your problems but Haematology's just been on the phone. Apparently one of the blood samples you took this morning isn't quite right. Look, why don't you use the phone in the staffroom to call them back?' Liz continued as Helen groaned. 'Get yourself a cup of coffee at the same time.'

A cup of coffee sounded good. Something considerably stronger sounded even better, she decided when she left the ward and began walking towards the staffroom, only to see Tom coming towards her.

She came to an uncertain halt. He did, too.

'I'm sorry.'

They'd spoken in unison, and Tom shook his head. 'You have nothing to apologise for, but I obviously do. I hadn't realised I wasn't pulling my weight at home.'

'No, but you get called out a lot more at night than I do,' she replied, more than willing to meet him halfway. 'And I don't have all your departmental meetings.'

'Yes, but I should have noticed you were doing it all. The trouble is I've been so busy, and...' He shook his head. 'No, that's no excuse. Being busy is no excuse for not pulling my weight, and I'm sorry.'

'Hey, we're not heading for the divorce courts over this or anything,' she said gently as he stared at her, his grey eyes troubled. 'All I'm asking for is a little more help around the house and with the children.'

'You've got it,' he said. 'Whatever you want, you've got.'

She chuckled. 'That's dangerous talk, Tom. What if I ask you for the moon?'

His grey eyes softened. 'If you want the moon I'll get you the moon. If you want...' He paused and his face creased into a broad smile of welcome. 'Mark, you old reprobate, you've finally got here.'

Helen glanced over her shoulder, and blinked.

Wow.

Wow, wow and triple wow.

Tom hadn't been exaggerating when he'd said his friend was handsome. In fact, Tom hadn't been nearly fulsome enough, she thought, automatically tucking in her tummy and standing up straighter, only to feel slightly silly afterwards because this was Tom's friend and she didn't need or want to impress him.

But Mark Lorimer was impressive. Tall, and tanned, with thick black hair, and green eyes. Not a wishy-washy anaemic green, but green like sparkling emeralds, and fringed by quite indecently long black eyelashes.

'Helen, this is Mark,' Tom said unnecessarily after he and his friend had indulged in that mutual backslapping routine which heterosexual males always seemed to feel obliged to perform whenever they met a friend they hadn't seen for years. 'Mark, this is my wife, Helen.'

'It's nice to meet you, Mark,' she said, holding out her hand. 'Tom's talked such a lot about you.'

Which wasn't exactly true. In fact, her husband hadn't mentioned him at all until Rachel Dunwoody had taken compassionate leave, but it hardly seemed polite to say so.

'You've come as a bit of a surprise to me, too.' He grinned, clearly reading her mind. 'Tom never said he was married, but now that I've met you...' his green eyes swept over her '...all I can say is I hope he knows what a very lucky man he is.'

It was flattery, of course. Tom had always said she had the loveliest smile he'd ever seen, and the biggest brown eyes, but she knew her limitations. She wasn't beautiful—not even particularly pretty—and she laughed and shook her head.

'I bet you say that to all the girls.'

'Actually, no, I don't.'

He was still staring at her, still holding her hand, and to her acute embarrassment she realised she was blushing.

Oh, for heaven's sake, pull yourself together, she told herself severely, quickly withdrawing her hand. You're a thirty-two-year-old mother of two, and just because an absolutely jaw-droppingly gorgeous man is smiling at you shouldn't mean that you should start behaving like a dumbstruck teenager.

'The fog's all gone from Heathrow Airport, then?' she said. Oh, jeez, Helen. He'd hardly be standing here if it wasn't, would he? 'I mean—I meant—you must be really tired after all your travelling.'

'Not at all,' he replied. 'But, then, I've always been able to sleep anywhere.'

He certainly didn't look as though he'd just spent goodness knows how many hours on a plane, and then been marooned in an airport. He looked pristine, and immaculate, and she just knew she must look as though she'd been dragged through a hedge backwards, her hair coming loose from her scrunchy, her sweater the first thing that had come to hand that morning.

Not that it mattered, of course. She was a doctor, here to work, but...

'I'm afraid you'll have to excuse me,' she said, beginning to back up the corridor. 'I have blood results to chase up—'

'Hey, you're not abandoning me already, are you?' he protested, and Tom smiled.

‘Of course she’s not. In fact, I’ll make sure Helen takes care of you, shows you the ropes.’

It made sense. Tom was hardly likely to expect Annie to do the honours when she was only a junior doctor, but Helen couldn’t help but wish her husband hadn’t suggested it.

She wished it even more when she got to the end of the corridor and glanced back. Mark and Tom were deep in conversation, but Mark must have sensed her gaze on him because he suddenly looked up and smiled. A warm, wide smile that sent a disturbing shiver of awareness racing down her spine.

A disturbing shiver that she didn’t want to feel.

CHAPTER TWO

GIDEON drummed his fingers absently on top of his desk, then frowned. 'How long has Mrs Alexander been with us now?'

Tom glanced down at his notes. 'A week.'

'OK. As the venogram didn't show any sign of the clot moving, we'll keep her on the heparin until a week on Thursday, then induce her. I know it's risky,' he continued as Tom looked uncertain, 'but to perform a Caesarean on a woman who's had a deep-vein thrombosis...' He shook his head. 'Too much could go wrong.'

'Which brings us to Mrs Foster,' Tom observed. 'She's still complaining about her burst stitches.'

'Mrs Foster should think herself damn lucky she's not in Intensive Care,' Gideon retorted. 'What the hell was she thinking of, straining to pass a motion after major surgery?'

'I know, but she's driving Helen crazy, saying her burst stitches were due to negligence, sloppy surgery...'

'I'll have a word with her.' The corners of the consultant's lips quirked. 'Better yet, why don't I get Mark to have a word with her? He's supposed to have quite a way with the ladies, isn't he?'

Apart from with Helen, Tom thought with a slight frown. Obs and Gynae might have been inundated with nurses suddenly discovering an urgent need to visit the ward since Mark's arrival a week ago, but Helen had remained strangely reticent whenever he'd asked how she was getting on with him.

'He is a good doctor, isn't he?' Gideon continued, clearly misinterpreting the frown. 'I mean, I'm not employing him simply to sweet-talk difficult patients...'

'He's one of the best,' Tom reassured him. 'He might be the most terrible flirt, but what he doesn't know about Obs and Gynae could be written on a postage stamp.'

Gideon looked relieved. 'In that case, I wish we could employ him permanently instead of for just six weeks. Oh, I know he wouldn't accept a longer contract with us even if we could offer it,' he continued when Tom made to interrupt. 'Nobody in their right mind would swap a job in Canada for one at the Belfield, but—'

'We need him.' Tom nodded. 'Even if Rachel was back we'd still need him. I take it Admin still won't agree to us advertising for another member of staff?'

'Admin says what it always says. Until the hospital gets more funding we're to manage as best we can. It's the old story. Live long enough, old horse, and eventually you might get hay.'

Tom laughed. 'I've never thought of myself as an old horse, but now you come to mention it...'

'Yup, beasts of burden, that's us. And speaking of being overworked... ' Gideon picked up one of the files on his desk, then put it down again. 'I don't want you to think I'm being nosy, or interfering where I'm not wanted, but Annie was saying...'

'Annie was saying?' Tom repeated blankly as the consultant came to an obviously embarrassed halt.

'Well, you know what women are like, Tom,' Gideon said in a rush, 'and she's probably got it all wrong, but she was saying to me the other day that she thought Helen looked a bit down, a bit depressed.'

Annie had noticed? Annie, who had been at the Belfield for less than four months, had noticed? Tom bit his lip. Dammit, he should have been the first one to see there was a problem, and yet he hadn't. Maybe women were better attuned to picking up on that sort of thing than men, or maybe he was just insensitive. It wasn't a comforting thought.

'Helen's fine,' he murmured. 'Just tired, like the rest of us.'

Probably more so since he'd been helping out at home, he thought ruefully, but how was he supposed to know that the little round symbol with the cross through it meant, Do not tumble-dry?

'Hell, I should have been in Theatre ten minutes ago,' Gideon exclaimed, quickly getting to his feet only to pause, his eyebrows raised. 'Unless there's something else you want to discuss with me?'

For a moment Tom hesitated, then shook his head. The consultant might be his friend as well as his boss, but some things were private, and revealing that Helen had accused him of not pulling his weight definitely came under the heading of private.

He was running late, too. Rhona Scott was booked in for an outpatient hysterosalpingogram this morning, and though he'd asked Helen to prepare her for him it wasn't fair to keep either of them waiting. Rhona was a natural born worrier, and as for Helen...the last thing he wanted was to give her another opportunity to accuse him of taking advantage of her.

No, that wasn't fair, he thought with a deep sigh as he strode down the corridor towards his consulting room. It had clearly taken a lot to make her say what she had, but why on earth hadn't she said something before? OK, so maybe he'd never been much of a New Age man, but neither was he a mind-reader.

'Problems?' Helen said, seeing his frown when he opened the door of his consulting room to find Rhona Scott already prepared and waiting.

'No more than usual,' he replied irritably, only to groan when he saw Helen stiffen. Why the hell had he said that? He hadn't meant to sound so snippy, but there was nothing he could do about it—not with Mrs Scott staring curiously at him. 'All set for your hysterosalpingogram, Rhona?' he said instead.

'To be honest, no,' she said. 'Call me chicken, but the thought of you putting some dye up into me...' She shuddered. 'Are you absolutely sure I can't have an anaesthetic?'

He shook his head. 'I'm afraid the only way we can get really good X-ray pictures of the insides of your Fallopian tubes, and find out why you're having such difficulty getting pregnant, is to carry out the procedure while you're wide awake. It won't hurt,' he added, seeing her flinch when he picked up the small tube. 'You may feel a momentary discomfort when I insert the dye into your uterus, but I promise that's all you're going to feel.'

Rhona didn't look convinced and out of the corner of his eye he saw Helen reach out and catch hold of her hand.

She'd always been much better at dealing with patients—people—than he was. Maybe it was another female thing, but he'd always found it a lot harder to get the right blend of sympathy and understanding, and he could still get it wrong.

Very badly wrong, he thought, remembering how angry Helen had been when he'd suggested she might be going through an early menopause. Well, OK, so his diagnosis might not have been the right one but, dammit, he'd been worried about her. He still was.

It was all very well for her to keep on saying she was simply tired, and if she had more help at home everything would be fine, but he couldn't rid himself of the nagging feeling that there was more to it than that. Something he was missing, but what the 'something' might be was beyond him.

'Dr Brooke?'

Helen's eyes were on him, clearly wondering why he hadn't started the procedure, and he flushed slightly.

'Just checking the dosage,' he lied, but she didn't buy it. He hadn't really expected her to. After ten years of marriage, she could read him like a book. He'd once thought he could do the same with her, but recently... 'Ready, Rhona?' he said, forcing his mind back to the present with difficulty.

She nodded nervously, and as carefully and gently as he could he began inserting the tube into her cervix through her vagina.

'It'll all be over in a second,' Helen smiled reassuringly down at the woman. 'Once the dye is in your uterus it will show up white on a special screen we have, and after we've taken a few X-rays you can go home.'

'Will I get the results today?'

'I'm afraid not,' Tom replied. 'We have to process and examine them first, you see.' Not to mention being so damn swamped with patients that we just don't have the time, he added mentally. 'But I'll get our secretary to make an appointment for you to come in and see me on Friday, if that's OK?'

Rhona nodded.

'Not much more to go now,' Helen declared. 'Just keep on relaxing. Good, Rhona... Well done... That's it.'

'The dye's in?' the woman exclaimed. 'But I didn't feel anything.'

'I'd have hung up my stethoscope if you had.' Tom smiled. 'OK, all I want you to do now is to lie as still as you can while our technician takes the pictures.'

'I should have got my hair done for the occasion, shouldn't I?' Rhona said with a shaky laugh, and he chuckled and patted her shoulder.

'You look fine.'

Her X-rays, unfortunately, didn't.

'No wonder she hasn't been able to conceive,' Helen observed. 'That swelling where her right Fallopian tube joins her uterus—it means the tube is completely blocked, doesn't it?'

'It looks like it,' Tom replied. 'If the blockage hasn't extended right through the uterine wall I could certainly perform a cornual anastomosis—cutting out the blocked section of the Fallopian tube and rejoining it—but...'

'Our theatre schedule's so full it's anybody's guess as to when Rhona could have the operation,' she finished for him.

Tom nodded, then frowned. 'I'm going to pull strings on this one. It's crazy for her to have to wait when we've got somebody of Mark's calibre on the team.'

'Mark has experience of tubal surgery?' she exclaimed. 'I didn't know that.'

'Oh, there's lots of things you don't know about me.' A deep male voice chuckled, and Tom saw his wife jump as though somebody had lit a firecracker behind her.

'Haven't you ever heard of knocking?' she said. 'Creeping up on people like that. Is there something wrong on the ward?'

'Apart from the fact that you're not there?' Mark grinned. 'Not a thing.'

Tom wryly shook his head as he saw a deep flush of colour cross his wife's cheeks. Same old Mark. Still couldn't resist turning on the charm, flirting with every woman he met. Helen didn't appear to appreciate it, though. In fact, she looked angry, tense, and deftly he steered Mark towards the X-rays.

'OK, earn your salary. Take a look at this.'

Mark stared at the screen. 'Somebody's uterus, right?'

'No, somebody's left foot,' Tom responded. 'Cut the jokes, Mark—tell me what you think.'

'That right Fallopian tube—it could simply be scarred, but...' He shook his head. 'Blocked, I'd say, but the clarity's not very good. What did you take the pictures with—an old box Brownie camera?'

'Mark.'

He grinned. 'OK—OK. Probably blocked, perhaps due to an infection caused by a coil. How old is your patient?'

'Thirty-six. Married for eight years, and been trying for a baby for the last six.'

'And she's only just having an exploratory hysterosalpingogram now?' Mark gasped. 'Jeez, what the hell have you guys been doing for the past five years?'

'Working our way through a very long waiting list,' Helen snapped before Tom could say anything. 'The Belfield doesn't have a separate infertility clinic, so we treat people as and when we can. Rhona only got onto our list last year—'

'But—'

'Look, we do the best we can, OK?' Helen said impatiently, and Mark sighed.

‘Well, all I can say is things are very different in Australia.’

Helen muttered something which sounded suspiciously like, ‘So how come you didn’t stay there?’ and Tom shot her a puzzled glance.

He was the one who usually got angry and frustrated, dealing with the limitations of the service they could offer, but Helen hadn’t sounded simply angry, she’d sounded positively antagonistic.

Awkwardly he cleared his throat. ‘I don’t know what happens in Australia, but under the NHS there’s a nine-month to a year waiting list for non-urgent surgery, and a cornual anastomosis is considered non-urgent. I know,’ he said as Mark’s eyebrows shot up, ‘but that’s how it is.’

‘Then why the hell do you put up with it?’ Mark demanded. ‘Dammit, Tom, you’re a first-rate surgeon. If you went to Oz, or to the States, you could be head of your own department, and not have to put up with this sort of crap.’

‘Perhaps,’ Tom said, ‘but Helen and I like the Belfield. It’s where we met, and we’ve a fondness for the old place.’

‘Which doesn’t mean we’re always going to stay here,’ Helen said swiftly. ‘I mean, who’s to say what’s round the corner for any of us—what changes we might make?’

Mark glanced from her to Tom thoughtfully. ‘So it’s only old Tom who’s reluctant to move, is it? You always did play it too safe, mate.’

‘Whether I do or whether I don’t is immaterial,’ Tom replied, wondering what on earth had made Helen say what she had, and not liking the reference to himself as ‘old’ either. ‘Mrs Scott is certainly not going to have to wait nine months when we’ve got someone with your experience on the team. I’ll have a word with Gideon, insist we get her in while you’re here to help me.’

‘In that case, I’d better take a closer look at these X-rays,’ Mark said. ‘If we’re going to be operating on this lady, I want as much information as I can get.’

Tom nodded but he couldn’t help but notice that when Mark moved closer to the screen, Helen instantly stepped back.

‘If you don’t need me any longer I have a mass of paperwork to catch up on,’ she said. ‘Not to mention my antenatal clinic in an hour.’

She was already heading for the door, and Tom quickly followed her. ‘Thanks for holding the fort for me, love. I really appreciate it.’

She smiled up at him, but she didn’t even so much as glance in Mark’s direction as she left, and Mark’s eyebrows rose.

‘Whoa, but did it suddenly get distinctly chilly in here, or what?’

‘I’m not surprised,’ Tom observed tightly. ‘Criticising our department and its equipment wasn’t exactly the smartest thing in the world to do.’

‘Just telling it like it is,’ Mark replied. ‘It’s not my fault if Helen is hypersensitive to criticism. In fact...’ He came to a halt as he encountered a look in Tom’s eyes. A look he’d never seen before. A look that held neither warmth nor amusement, and he held up his hands defensively. ‘Hey, no offence meant, mate. Look, I’ll apologise to her, OK?’

‘Do that,’ Tom declared, his grey eyes hard, cold. ‘I don’t like my wife upset, and I won’t have her upset. Not by you, not by anyone.’

Mark stared at him for a second. ‘Tom the protector. Tom the defender. You’ve changed since our med days, haven’t you?’

‘If you mean I’ve grown up—realised what and who is important in my life—then, yes, I’ve changed,’ Tom replied. ‘Helen is more important to me than my job, this hospital and our friendship, and you’d be well advised never to forget that.’

Mark grinned. ‘Whoops, but I’ve suddenly got that chilly feeling again. Look, I’ve said I’ll apologise,’ he continued as Tom’s eyebrows snapped together. ‘I’ll even grovel if I have to. Satisfied now?’

Tom nodded. ‘Mark, listen—’

‘Helen doesn’t seem to like me very much, does she?’

Helen didn’t appear to, but there was no way Tom was going to agree. ‘Helen likes everyone,’ he said evasively.

‘OK, let’s just say I’m not feeling the love,’ Mark observed, and Tom couldn’t help but laugh.

‘The trouble with you, my friend, is that far too many women have been bowled over by your charm over the years, and it’s a blow to your ego when one isn’t.’

‘You reckon?’

‘I reckon,’ Tom confirmed. ‘In fact, I think it’s high time you settled down.’

‘And deny all the lovely women out there the pleasure of my company? No way.’

‘Maybe that kind of attitude is OK when you’re in your twenties,’ Tom said, horribly aware that he suddenly felt very old, ‘but you’re thirty-four—’

‘So I should be looking for a woman to settle down with,’ Mark completed for him in a mock-sonorous tone. ‘Perhaps I would if all the best ones weren’t already taken.’ One corner of his mouth turned up. ‘Women like your Helen. Now, if I’d met her before I went to Oz—’

‘You wouldn’t have stood a chance.’ Tom laughed. ‘It was love at first sight for Helen and me.’

It had been, and the love was still there, he thought as he began labelling the X-rays and putting them into Rhona Scott’s file. Even now she could still make his pulses race simply by smiling at him. Even now he felt a tightness round his heart when he saw her coming out of the shower, her hair all tousled, her skin pink and glowing.

He glanced thoughtfully across at Mark. When they’d been students he’d always envied Mark his good looks and easy charm, but he didn’t envy him now. Flitting from woman to woman, moving on when he got bored or if some other female caught his eye. It was an empty sort of a life, rootless and ultimately unsatisfying.

No, he didn’t envy Mark. He had a wife who loved him, two wonderful children, whereas Mark... Mark had absolutely nothing that he wanted any more.

‘He’s gorgeous, isn’t he?’ Liz Baker said dreamily as she switched on the staffroom kettle. ‘His thick black hair, his tan, those eyes...’

‘Looks aren’t everything,’ Helen interrupted tersely. ‘In fact, give me an honest, ordinary-looking man any day of the week.’

‘Hear! hear!’ Annie agreed.

‘Mark Lorimer,’ Liz continued, as though neither of them had spoken. ‘Even his name sounds romantic, don’t you think? Like something out of a story book.’

‘Grimm’s Fairy Tales, perhaps?’ Helen suggested, and Liz looked momentarily startled, then laughed.

‘Oh, come on, Helen, you’re not telling me you don’t think he’s seriously attractive?’

He was, but that didn’t give him the right to waltz into the Belfield and criticise the way they worked, Helen thought, unwrapping her sandwiches with more vigour than was strictly necessary. Neither did it give him the right to imply that she and Tom were a pair of old stick-in-the-muds with no ambition because they’d never worked anywhere else. They had children, for heaven’s sake—obligations. Something that Mark Lorimer clearly knew nothing about.

‘Madge in Paediatrics thinks he’s handsome,’ Liz continued. ‘So does Phyllis in Radiography—’

‘Madge and Phyllis should stop behaving like a pair of silly moon-struck schoolgirls,’ Helen retorted, then bit her lip when Liz’s mouth fell open.

Oh, Lord, but that had been an incredibly bitchy thing to say. Even Annie clearly thought it was, judging by the way she was staring at her, but she was sick to death of everybody giggling over Mark Lorimer like he was a film star or something.

Yes, he was quite unbelievably good-looking. Yes, he had a voice that could melt butter, and eyes that seemed to gaze down deep inside you, but anyone with half a brain should also have been

able to see that he was also an unprincipled flirt. Good grief, put him in front of any female between the ages of eight and eighty—herself included—and he instantly switched on the charm.

Well, she wasn't some naïve schoolgirl who could be impressed by a few slick words, a few finely tuned compliments, she thought with irritation as the staffroom door opened, and Mark came in, deep in conversation with Tom and Gideon. She was more interested in whether he was any good as a doctor.

'Good news, Helen,' Tom declared, coming over to sit beside her. 'Gideon's agreed to slot Rhona Scott in for surgery as quickly as possible, and we've got two possible dates. One for Monday the week after next, and the other for the end of May.'

'Rhona would come in this afternoon if you asked her,' Helen murmured, taking a bite out of her sandwich and trying very hard to ignore the fact that Mark was flirting quite outrageously with Liz.

'You don't think she might feel both dates are too soon?' Tom said. 'We're talking major surgery here, and she'll be in hospital for at least a week. As she's a school-teacher she might prefer to wait until the long summer holidays.'

'Trust me, she won't.'

'Female intuition?' her husband said curiously.

'Female heart.' She smiled.

'OK, that's good enough for me. I'll suggest the Monday when she comes in for the results of her hysterosalpingogram, and see what she says.'

Helen nodded. Annie was getting ready to go off duty, and she saw Gideon bend his head to catch something his wife had said, then laugh and press her hand briefly to his lips.

She and Tom used to do that, Helen thought wistfully. Steal kisses, hold hands simply for the pleasure of touching one another. In fact, they'd joked that there wasn't a sluice room in the hospital they hadn't used at one time or another for a secret rendezvous.

And I'm doing it again, she thought angrily as the couple left the staffroom. Envyng them, and it's so stupid. The love I feel for Tom is bound to have changed over the years, become less intense, more familiar, more comfortable.

Like a pair of old slippers, her mind whispered, and she shook her head. No, not like an old pair of slippers. She loved Tom, and he loved her. Their love was just...different now.

'I'll see you later, then.'

'You're going?' she exclaimed, seeing her husband get to his feet. 'But you haven't had any lunch.'

'No time. Admin wants a word with Gideon about Mark's work permit so I'm stuck babysitting his students.' He half started towards the door, then turned. 'Which reminds me. Gideon was a bit worried about his afternoon ward round, so I said you'd help Mark to do it.'

Oh, brilliant, Tom, she thought vexedly as he strode away. Like you couldn't perhaps have checked with me first—asked if it was OK? I'm still only halfway through my paperwork because I was helping you this morning, and now you've gone and lost me this afternoon as well.

'He really shouldn't have done that,' Mark murmured, slipping into the seat Tom had vacated. 'Just assumed you'd help me.'

She couldn't agree more, but there was no way she was going to say so.

'He's the specialist registrar, I'm an SHO—it's his job to allocate work,' she said defensively, wishing that Liz would come over and join them, but she was busy on the phone.

'But shouldn't he have checked you with first, rather than simply say you'd do it?'

'Like I said, it's his job,' she repeated, and his mouth turned up at the corners.

'And as he's also your husband you're damned if you're going to bad-mouth him to a semi-stranger.'

It was so exactly what she'd been thinking that Helen couldn't prevent an involuntary chuckle springing to her lips, and his smile widened.

‘That’s better. I was beginning to think I was going to be put in the dog-house for the duration after what I said about Rhona Scott’s treatment this morning.’

She stared down at the remains of her sandwich, then sighed. ‘I know things are far from perfect at the Belfield, but—’

‘You don’t want—or need—some big-mouth newcomer like me telling you so,’ he finished for her.

She couldn’t deny it. Not when his eyes were brimming with laughter, and warmth, and something else which was making her heart race, her breathing jerky and erratic.

He’s flirting with you, she told herself, trying to look away, only to find that she couldn’t. He does it with everyone, and you’re a big girl, you can handle it.

But she couldn’t and that, she realised, was the trouble. She could tell herself—and anybody else who cared to listen—that Mark Lorimer was nothing but a womaniser, and she was more interested in his qualifications than in him, but it wasn’t true. The plain, galling truth was that she was as impressed and stunned by him as every other woman in the Belfield.

Dammit, she’d actually caught herself choosing clothes to wear to work now instead of just grabbing whatever was nearest, and yesterday she’d found herself looking at lipsticks and eye shadows in the chemist. And it was crazy.

She was married. She was happily married, and even if Mark Lorimer was the handsomest, sexiest man in the world, her knees shouldn’t be turning to water and her brain to mush whenever he smiled at her. And they were.

‘Helen?’

Oh, Lord, could he possibly know what she was thinking? There was certainly a decidedly wicked-looking gleam in his eyes, and she stood up fast. ‘I...I’m afraid you’ll have to excuse me. I want...I need to have a word with Liz.’

He didn’t believe her. She could tell by the way he smiled that he didn’t, but she didn’t care. All she wanted was to be as far away from him, and her own unsettling thoughts and feelings, as she could possibly get.

‘The agency can’t supply me with any emergency nursing cover for this afternoon,’ Liz declared, slamming down the staffroom phone. ‘Apparently I haven’t given them enough notice. Not enough notice,’ she repeated furiously. ‘Like how exactly am I supposed to know when people are going to be sick?’

And how could I have predicted I’d start behaving like a loopy schoolgirl because a handsome man keeps smiling at me? Helen thought unhappily.

‘Is there anything I can do to help?’ she asked as Liz made for the door.

The sister shook her head. ‘All I can do is phone around, and see if I can sweet-talk somebody into coming in on their day off.’

Helen wished she had the day off, too, when Liz had gone and she turned to find Mark staring at her thoughtfully.

‘We’d better get going,’ she began. ‘We’re doing Gideon’s ward round, remember, and—’

‘You don’t like me very much, do you?’ he observed.

Whatever else she might have been expecting him to say, it hadn’t been that, and she flushed.

‘I don’t know you well enough to dislike you,’ she said, striving to sound light, dismissive, which wasn’t easy with a pair of intense green eyes fixed on her.

‘That’s what I figured.’ He nodded. ‘In fact, it might surprise you to know that I’m generally considered to be quite likable.’

It didn’t surprise her in the least. Men who were as charming and handsome as Mark Lorimer were generally well liked. In fact, if she was honest—and she had absolutely no intention of being honest—she would have admitted that she could all too easily get to like him herself. A lot.

‘I really do think we should start making tracks,’ she said uncomfortably. ‘The ward’s pretty full so it will take us quite a while.’

‘Tom tells me you have eight-year-old twins—Emma and John?’ he said, clasping his hands behind his head and leaning back in his seat. ‘They must be quite a handful.’

‘They have their moments,’ she replied, wondering what else Tom might have told him, and just where this conversation was going.

‘It must be very difficult for you—holding down a full-time job, running a home, looking after your kids.’

‘Tom does his share,’ she said swiftly. Well, he’d been trying to recently, she told herself, though at the moment his efforts were proving more of a hindrance than a help. ‘It’s not a solo effort.’

‘I can’t imagine Tom as a New Age man.’

He hadn’t make it sound like a compliment. In fact, he’d somehow managed to make Tom sound both boring and dull, and before she could stop herself she said, ‘I don’t know about New Age, but he’s certainly a lot more adult than men who flit from girlfriend to girlfriend, with no roots or purpose in life.’

Mark grinned. ‘I’ve no doubt he is. But I bet he’s not nearly so exciting.’

There was no answer to that—at least none she could immediately think of—and she strode to the staffroom door and opened it. ‘Our ward round, Dr Lorimer?’

‘Didn’t think he was,’ he said, his green eyes dancing.

And you’re too smart by half, Helen thought as she followed him down the corridor. Too smart, too charming, too everything.

Well, maybe he wouldn’t be quite so smart and charming after a couple of hours on the ward, she thought waspishly. Maybe a couple of hours of examinations, blood pressures and sheer exhausting hard work, would dent his charm and overweening confidence.

It didn’t. Not even when Mrs Foster launched into her usual round of complaints the minute he appeared at her bedside.

‘A week is how long I was told I’d be in here,’ she declared, her beady eyes sweeping over him with no appearance of being in the least impressed. ‘One week, and now no one can tell me when I’m going home. If my stitches had been inserted properly—’

‘The trouble is, you tried to go to the toilet too soon after your hysterectomy,’ Mark interrupted, his face a picture of warm solicitude. ‘I can understand why you wanted to—an active, independent person like yourself—’

‘Well, I’ve never been lazy,’ she said, her eyes softening slightly, ‘but—’

‘And I appreciate that you’re anxious to go home, what with having little ones to take care of...’

‘My youngest is twenty-five.’

‘Good grief, you must have been married very young,’ he exclaimed. ‘I wouldn’t have put you a day over forty.’

Mrs Foster pinkened, and simpered. ‘Well, I’ve always tried to take care of myself, but—’

‘And that’s what we want to do for you now,’ he continued with a dazzling smile. ‘Take care of you. I want to take care of you, and surely you’re not going to deny me that opportunity, or the pleasure of your company?’

Helen heard Liz choke behind her, and she only just managed to maintain her own composure by staring determinedly at the wall over Mrs Foster’s bed, but when Mark had moved on down the ward she couldn’t restrain her laughter.

‘That was the most outrageous example of flattery I’ve ever heard,’ she gasped.

‘It worked, though, didn’t it?’ he protested. ‘And you’re not telling me that dreadful woman hasn’t been a thorn in your side for the past week.’

‘No, but—’

‘And it got you to smile at me, instead of shooting daggers, so it was worth it.’

Mark's eyes were deep, and warm, and she shook her head. 'You're completely incorrigible.'

'But likable?' he suggested, and she shook her head again, and laughed.

He was likable. Dangerously likable. In fact, in the space of a week he had somehow managed to make her feel more feminine, more attractive and more desirable than she had done in years, and it had to stop.

She had to start distancing herself from this man. For her own peace of mind and safety she needed to distance herself from him, or...

Don't go that way, her mind warned. You're married, and he's Tom's friend, so don't let your mind go down that road even for a second.

'Helen?'

A smile was playing about his lips, and again she had that uncanny feeling again that he was reading her mind.

Abruptly she turned on her heel. 'We've two more patients left to see. Which do you want first —Mrs Alexander or Mrs White?'

CHAPTER THREE

‘ANYTHING happening yet?’ Helen murmured, hovering at the delivery room door while Liz checked Mary Alexander’s blood pressure, then the foetal monitor.

‘Nothing,’ Tom muttered back. ‘I’m afraid it looks like we’re going to have to go for the Caesarean after all.’

Helen nodded. Tom had ruptured Mary Alexander’s membrane earlier in the morning to release some of the amniotic fluid around the baby. In theory that should have induced her contractions, but when nothing had happened he’d ordered an IV line of oxytocin, and yet still there was no sign of her going into labour.

‘BP up, foetal heartbeat becoming a little unsteady,’ Liz said in an undertone.

‘Shouldn’t something be happening by now, Doctor?’ Mary asked, gazing uncertainly up at Tom. ‘I know I’m no expert, but—’

‘Occasionally we get a baby who’s reluctant to leave the nice warm shelter of his mummy’s tummy.’ He smiled, his face a picture of calm, controlled confidence. ‘It’s nothing to worry about.’

But it’s taking too long, Helen thought, seeing the concern behind her husband’s bright façade. With so much of the amniotic fluid gone the baby was going to be in big trouble soon if they didn’t do something.

Tom met her eyes and he nodded. It was time to alert the theatre staff.

‘Do you want me to page Gideon, tell him what’s happening?’ she asked after she’d phoned the theatre and Tom had explained the situation to Mary and her husband.

‘Please. A Caesarean’s the one thing he was hoping to avoid after her deep-vein thrombosis, but...’ He sighed wryly as one of their porters wheeled a very frightened-looking Mary and her husband out of the delivery room. ‘Want to wish me luck?’

‘You won’t need it,’ she declared, and he smiled.

‘Female intuition?’

‘Professional opinion,’ she replied, and he shook his head and laughed as he hurried after Mary, but she meant it. He might not have Mark’s flamboyance when it came to operating, but he was good—very good.

And Annie looked decidedly harassed when Helen met her coming out of the ward.

‘Tell me that you speak Greek,’ the junior doctor exclaimed. ‘Please—please—tell me you speak Greek.’

‘Why in the world would—?’

‘It’s Mrs Dukakis. She came into A and E this morning complaining of severe stomach pains. They decided she was simply suffering from a bad case of indigestion, but when they tried to discharge her she became hysterical so they sent her up to us.’

‘But—’

‘She’s six months pregnant, and...’ Annie shook her head. ‘Look, come and see for yourself. Or, to be more strictly accurate, come and listen.’

Helen did.

‘Cripes,’ she murmured when Mrs Dukakis finally subsided into silence after a long and virtually incomprehensible account of what she thought was wrong with her.

‘Exactly.’ Annie nodded. ‘Now you see why I was hoping you might speak Greek.’

‘I don’t, and I’m afraid I can’t think of anybody on the staff who does,’ Helen replied, seeing Mrs Dukakis gaze uncomprehendingly from her to Annie.

‘I believe Mark does,’ Liz announced, overhearing them as she passed by with the drugs trolley.

Mark would, Helen thought sourly. Mark probably spoke ten languages, had an IQ of two million and did rocket science in his spare time.

No, that wasn't fair, she told herself, but after spending the better part of the last ten days trying to avoid him, the last thing she wanted was to actively go looking for him.

'Helen?'

Annie was staring at her curiously, and she forced a smile to her lips. 'We'd better get Mark.'

Mrs Dukakis clearly agreed. In fact, her face lit up like a beacon when he spoke to her in her own language, but something was obviously very badly wrong judging by the number of times she burst into tears when he questioned, then examined her.

'What is it—what's wrong?' Helen asked as Mark took her by the elbow and steered her to the bottom of the ward, leaving Annie to comfort the woman.

'At the moment nothing more drastic than a very bad case of indigestion, but... ' He shook his head. 'What do you know about thalassaemia major?'

'That it's a serious, inherited childhood anaemia, most commonly found in people of Mediterranean or Asian descent.' Helen glanced over her shoulder at the sobbing woman. 'Is that why Mrs Dukakis is so upset—is she a thalassaemia carrier?'

'Mrs Dukakis hadn't even heard of the condition until I asked her whether she had any other children,' Mark said grimly. 'She thought she was having a miscarriage.'

'But—'

'Helen, she only came to Glasgow four months ago. Before that she and her husband lived in a poor, very isolated part of Greece with limited medical facilities. All she knows is she's given birth to two other children, and neither of them reached their second birthday. The wasting disease, the people in her village called it.'

What must it be like to lose two children? Helen wondered, staring at Nana Dukakis. To feel them grow inside you, feel them move, then give birth to them, only for them to die so quickly. It didn't bear thinking of.

'It's too late to take a sample from the baby's umbilical cord to find out if it has thalassaemia major, isn't it?' she murmured. 'If she'd known she was a carrier when she first arrived in Glasgow we could have done the test, then offered her a termination, but at six months pregnant...'

'It's too late, but there's still a lot we can do,' Mark declared, his green eyes encouraging. 'First we need to test her and her husband to find out if they're both carriers. If her husband's not, this baby might be all right, and even if it isn't we can start giving it monthly blood transfusions as soon as it's born, and regular injections of Desferal to ensure its liver and kidneys aren't damaged.'

Regular blood transfusions and injections of Desferal. It sounded a wretched life for a little baby, and Mark must have read her thoughts because he smiled. A small, rueful smile.

'It's better than the alternative, Helen, and new treatments are being tried out all the time. We're getting excellent results from bone-marrow transplants, and there's also a lot of work being done with gene therapy.'

He was right, she knew he was, and it was stupid of her to be thinking so negatively. 'What have you told her?'

'The truth. There was no point in skirting round the subject, so I told her I thought her other children had died because they had thalassaemia major, but if we started treating her baby as soon as it was born there was a very good chance it could live to be as old as you or I.'

Helen nodded, then sighed as more immediate concerns suddenly occurred to her. 'You know we can't possibly keep her in—not for indigestion.'

'I'm going to sweet-talk Admissions, ask if she can at least stay for the night. It will give her time to calm down, and me the chance to run some tests.'

'It's going to take some real sweet-talking,' Helen commented. 'We're wall-to-wall patients at the moment.'

He grinned. 'You don't think I'm up to it?'

Oh, he was up to it all right, she thought. In fact, if he treated the women who worked in Admissions to one of his blinding smiles they'd probably agree to Mrs Dukakis staying in one of their private rooms for the duration of her pregnancy.

'Actually, you might not have to talk to Admissions,' Annie said, overhearing the last of their conversation as she joined them. 'Mrs Foster went home this morning—'

'Hallelujah!'

'And Rhona Scott's not due in for her cornual anastomosis until Monday—'

'So unless an emergency comes in we've got a vacant bed for the next few days.' Mark's eyes lit up. 'Liz could OK it for me, couldn't she?'

'Yes, but—'

'Oh, Liz, light of my life, joy of my heart,' he exclaimed, heading off towards the sister before either of them could stop him. 'Could I have a word?'

Annie shook her head as she watched him go. 'He's quite something, isn't he? Handsome, charming and about as reliable as a fifty-pence watch.'

'You reckon?' Helen murmured, seeing Liz frown, then nod, then dissolve into helpless laughter when Mark kissed her soundly on the cheek.

'Don't you?'

There was a very decided edge to the junior doctor's voice, and Helen glanced back at her thoughtfully. She'd never asked—had never thought it was her business to ask—why Annie hadn't married her son's father, but now she thought she knew.

'Annie—'

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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