Medical Romance™

CAROLINE ANDERSON

The Secret in His Heart

Caroline Anderson
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Аннотация

He had promised to look after her…now he wants so much more."Promise me you'll take care of her." Simple as that. Except for Dr. James Slater, fulfilling his vow to look after his best friend's wife after he died in Afghanistan has never been simple. Especially now that lovely, vital Connie has asked him to help her have a baby. He can't just father her child and then walk away–he wants and loves her too much for that. Only, how can he even begin to tell her…?

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Praise for Caroline Anderson:

'From one of category romance's most accomplished voices comes a beautifully told, intensely emotional and wonderfully uplifting tale of second chances, new beginnings, hope, triumph

and everlasting love. Caroline Anderson's WEDDING OF THE YEAR is an engrossing, enthralling and highly enjoyable tale that will move you to tears and keep you riveted from the first page until the very last sentence. Moving, heartbreaking and absolutely fantastic, with WEDDING OF THE YEAR Caroline Anderson is at her mesmerising best!'

—*www.cataromance.com* on ST PIRAN'S: WEDDING OF THE YEAR

'Photojournalist Maisie Douglas and businessman Robert Mackenzie have been more or less amicably divorced for almost two decades, but the upcoming marriage of their daughter, Jenni, stirs up old emotions on both sides. Very young when she married him, Maisie—pregnant and disowned by her family—was miserable living in Scotland with Rob's judgmental parents, and left after little more than a year. Maisie hasn't found another partner and neither has Rob. Can they find a way to trust each other again, after all this time? This lovely reunion romance is rich with emotion and humour, and all of the characters are exquisitely rendered.'

—*RT Book Reviews* on MOTHER OF THE BRIDE

Dear Reader,

Writing can be an accidental process. The book that preceded this one, *From Christmas to Eternity*, had a clinical lead called James. That was all I knew about him, until I wrote the words, 'Why not just take the time and enjoy your family? God knows you're lucky enough to have one.' And just like that, James

became a person. A widower with a tragic past and no future other than work. Enter Connie, widow of his best friend, ex-colleague—and an attraction he's spent years denying. But Connie has a problem, and James could help her solve it, if he could defeat his own demons.

Now, you'd think that'd be enough complication, but, no, I gave them a dog. Not just any dog. I was fascinated when I first learned that Penn Farthing, an ex-serviceman, had 'adopted' starving, feral dogs in Helmand and set up a charity to rescue them, so of course when Connie's husband and James' friend Joe was killed in Afghanistan, the dog he'd planned to rescue had to come home—the last thing she could do for him. And where Connie goes, Saffy has to go, too, causing havoc and ultimately bringing Connie and James together.

You can find more about the work of Penn Farthing at www.nowzad.com, and to find out how Saffy helps James and Connie find the love they both deserve, read on …!

Caroline x

About the Author

CAROLINE ANDERSON has the mind of a butterfly. She's been a nurse, a secretary, a teacher, run her own soft furnishing business, and now she's settled on writing. She says, 'I was looking for that elusive something. I finally realised it was variety, and now I have it in abundance. Every book brings new horizons and new friends, and in between books I have learned to be a juggler. My teacher husband John and I have two beautiful and talented daughters, Sarah and Hannah, umpteen pets, and several acres of Suffolk that nature tries to reclaim every time we turn our backs!' Caroline also writes for the Mills & Boon® Cherish™ series.

The Secret in His Heart

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www.millsandboon.co.uk

CHAPTER ONE

SILENCE.

No bleeps, no clipped instructions or clattering instruments, no hasty footsteps. Just a blissful, short-lived hush.

James stretched out his shoulders and felt the tension drain away. The relief was incredible. He savoured it for a moment before breaking the silence.

'Great teamwork, guys. Thank you. You did a good job.'

Someone chuckled. 'Would you accept anything less?'

He grinned. Fair cop, but it worked. Their critically injured patient was stabilised and on her way to Theatre, and for what seemed like the first time that day the red phone was quiet. Time to grab a break.

He glanced up at the clock. Ten to four? No wonder he was feeling light-headed. And his phone was jiggling again in his pocket.

'Right, this time I'm *really* going for lunch,' he said drily. 'Anything less than a MAJAX, you're on your own.'

There was a ripple of laughter as he tore off the thin plastic apron, dropped it in the bin with his gloves and walked out of Resus, leaving the rest of the team to clear up the chaos and restock ready for the next emergency. One of the perks of being clinical lead, he thought wryly as the door dropped shut behind him. God knows there were few enough.

He took the shortcut to the coffee shop, bought a coffee and a soft wholegrain roll stuffed with ham and salad, added a chocolate bar to boost his blood sugar and headed outside, drawing the fresh summer air deep into his lungs.

One of the best things about Yoxburgh Park Hospital was its setting. Behind the elaborate facade of the old Victorian building a modern general hospital had been created, providing the community not only with much needed medical facilities, but also a beautiful recreational area. It was green and quiet and peaceful, and he took his breaks out here whenever he could.

Not nearly often enough.

He found an empty bench under the trees and settled down to eat his lunch, pulling his phone out simultaneously to check for messages. It had jiggled in his pocket more than once in the last hour, but there were no messages, just two missed calls.

From Connie?

He frowned slightly. He hadn't heard from her in ages, and now two missed calls in the space of an hour? He felt his heart rate pick up and he called her back, drumming his fingers impatiently as he waited for the phone to connect.

She answered almost instantly, and to his relief she sounded fine.

'James, hi. Sorry, I didn't mean to disturb you. Are you at work?'

'Yeah—doesn't matter, I'm on a break now. How are you, Connie? You've been very quiet recently.' Well, not even that

recently. Apart from the odd email saying nothing significant and a couple of ridiculously brief phone calls, she hadn't really contacted him since she'd got back from Afghanistan after Christmas. It wasn't just her fault. He hadn't contacted her, either, and now he felt a flicker of guilt.

She laughed, the soft musical sound making him ache a little inside. There'd been a time not so long ago when she'd never laughed …

'What, you mean I've left you in peace, Slater?'

'Something like that,' he said mildly. 'So, how are you?'

'Fine. Good. Great, really. Ready to move on.' The silence stretched out for a heartbeat, and then she said, 'Actually, I need to talk to you about that.'

She sounded oddly hesitant, and his radar started beeping.

'Fire away.'

That troubling silence again. 'I don't think it's something we can do over the phone,' she said eventually. 'I'd thought you might be off today as it's Sunday, and I thought maybe we could get together, it's been a while, but obviously not if you're working. Have you got any days off coming up?'

'Tomorrow? I'm off then for a couple of days. I don't get many weekends at the moment—crazy staffing issues—but I can always come over and see you tomorrow evening after you've finished work if it's urgent.'

'No, don't do that, I'll come to you. I'm not working at the moment so I've got plenty of time. And it isn't really urgent, I

just—I wanted to talk to you. Can I pop over in the morning?'

Pop? From a hundred and thirty odd miles away? And why wasn't she working? 'Sure. Why don't you stay over till Tuesday, if you're free? We can catch up.' *And I can find out what the hell's going on that's so 'not urgent' that you have to come tomorrow morning*.

'Are you sure? It would be lovely but I've got the dog, don't forget. Can you cope with that? She's very good now—housetrained and all that, but I can't put her in kennels at such short notice.'

Had she mentioned a dog? Possibly, but it didn't matter. He had a secure garden. She'd be fine. The dog was the least of his worries.

'I'm sure we'll cope,' he said. 'Come. It'll be lovely to see you.'

'Thanks. When do you want me?'

Always …

He crushed the inappropriate thought. 'Whenever you're ready,' he said. 'Give me a call when you're an hour away, so I can be sure I'm at home. I'll see you tomorrow some time.'

'Great. Thanks, James.'

'No worries. Drive carefully.'

Ending the call, he ate the soft, squishy roll, drank his coffee and tasted neither. All he could think about was Connie and her non-urgent topic of conversation. He ripped the wrapper off the chocolate bar and bit into it absently.

What the hell did she want to talk to him about? He had no

idea, but he was beginning to regret his invitation. He must have been crazy. His place was a mess, he had a zillion and one things to do, and catching up with Connie just wasn't on his agenda—especially not like this. The prospect of being alone with her for thirty-six hours was going to test him to the limit. Not that he wasn't looking forward to seeing her. Not at all.

Just—maybe a little too much …

Crushing the cup in his hand, he headed off back to the department, his thoughts and emotions tumbling.

Connie. His old friend, his ex-colleague, and his best friend's wife.

No. His best friend's *widow*. The woman he'd promised to take care of.

'When it happens, James—'

'If it happens—'

'When it happens—promise me you'll take care of her.'

'Of course I will, you daft bastard. It won't happen. It's your last tour. You'll be fine.'

Famous last words.

The ache of loss, still raw after two years, put everything back in perspective and gave him a timely reminder of his duties and responsibilities. It didn't matter what else he'd had planned, whatever his personal feelings for her, his duty to Connie came first and right now she needed him.

But apparently not urgently. Tomorrow would do.

Sheesh.

Savagely tossing the crushed cup into a bin, he strode through the door and headed back to work.

'Well. We're going to see James. What do you think of that, Saffy? Do you think he'll understand?'

Saffy thumped her tail once, head on Connie's foot, eyes alert as she peered up at her. Connie reached down a hand and stroked her gently, and Saffy groaned and rolled over, one leg lifted to reveal the vulnerable underside she was offering for a tickle.

'Hussy,' she crooned, rubbing the scarred tummy, and the dog's tail wagged again. She licked Connie's ankle, the contact of her warm, moist tongue cementing the already close bond between them. Almost as if she understood. No, of course she didn't, Connie told herself. How could she, even though Connie had told her everything there was to tell about it all in excruciating detail.

'Sorry, sweetheart,' she murmured, straightening up and getting to her feet. 'No time for cuddles, I've got too much to do.'

If she was going to see James tomorrow, she needed to pull herself together and get ready. Do some washing so she had something other than jeans and a ratty old T shirt to wear. Pack. Make sure the house was clean and tidy before they left.

Not that it was dirty or untidy, but now the decision was made and she was going to see him, to ask him the most monumental and massive favour, she needed to do something to keep herself busy or she'd go crazy.

She'd rehearsed her speech over and over again, gone through

what she was going to say until she'd worn it out. There was nothing left to do but clean the house, so she cleaned it until it squeaked, and then she fell into bed and slept restlessly until dawn.

God, the place was a tip.

He'd been going to tackle it last night, but as usual he'd been held up by admin and hadn't got home until ten, so he'd left it till this morning. Now, looking round it, he realised that had probably been a massive mistake.

He blitzed the worst of it, made up a bed for her and went back downstairs.

Better. Slightly. If he ever had any regular time off he might stand a chance, but right now that was just a distant dream. He glanced at his watch. Ten to ten. Supermarket now, or later, after she'd arrived? She was an early riser but the journey would take her a good two hours.

Now, he decided, if he was quick, and ten minutes later he was standing there in the aisles and trying to remember what she liked. Was she a vegetarian?

No, of course she wasn't. He recalled watching her eating a bun crammed with roast pork and apple sauce at the Suffolk Show, the memory still vivid. It must have been the first year he'd been in Yoxburgh, and Joe had been on leave.

And he'd been watching her eat, his body throbbing with need as she'd flicked out her tongue and scooped up a dribble of apple sauce on her chin. He'd dragged his eyes away and found Joe

staring at him, an odd expression on his face.

'Food envy,' he'd explained hastily, and Joe had laughed and bought him another roll from the hog roast stand.

He'd had to force himself to eat it, because he hadn't had food envy at all, just plain old envy. He was jealous of Joe, jealous of his best friend for being so ridiculously happy with his lovely wife. How sick was that? How lonely and empty and barren—Whatever. She wasn't vegetarian, so he picked up a nice piece of fillet steak from the butchery counter, threw some other stuff into the trolley and headed home, wondering for the hundredth time what she wanted to say to him. She'd said she was ready to move on, and now it was in his head a disturbing possibility wouldn't go away.

Was there someone new in her life?

Why not? It was perfectly plausible. She was a beautiful woman, she was alone, she was free to do whatever she liked—but even the thought of her replacing the best friend a man could wish for, the kindest and most courageous man he'd ever known, made him feel sick.

Dismissing the pointless speculation, he drove down Ferry Road towards the little community grouped around the harbour mouth, turned onto the gravel track that led past a little string of houses to his cottage and pulled up on the drive next to a four-wheel drive he'd never seen before, just as his phone pinged.

Damn. He'd meant to be here, but she hadn't rung—or had she, while he'd been vacuuming the house?

Yup. There was a missed call from her, and a voice-mail.

'I've arrived. Couldn't get you on the phone earlier, but I'm here now so I'm walking the dog. Call me when you get home.'

He dialled her number as he carried the bags into the kitchen and dumped them on the worktop, and she answered on the second ring, sounding breathless.

'Hi—did you get my message?'

'Yeah. Sorry I wasn't here, I went food shopping. I'm back now. Where are you?'

'On the sea wall. I'll be two ticks, I can see the cottage from here,' she told him, so he opened the front door and stood on the porch step scanning the path, and there she was, blonde hair flying in the breeze, a huge sandy-coloured dog loping by her side as she ran towards him, her long limbs moving smoothly as she covered the ground with an effortless stride.

God, she was lovely.

Lovelier than ever, and that took some doing. His heart lurched, and he dredged up what he hoped was a civilised smile as he went to meet her.

She looked amazing, fit and well and bursting with energy. Her pale gold hair was gleaming, her blue eyes bright, her cheeks flushed with the sea breeze and the exertion as she ran up, her smile as wide as her arms, and threw herself at him. Her body slammed into his and knocked the breath from him in every way, and he nearly staggered at the impact.

'Hey, Slater!'

‘Hey yourself, Princess,’ he said on a slight laugh as his arms wrapped round her and caught her tight against him. ‘Good to see you.’

‘You, too.’

She hugged him hard, her body warm and firm against his for the brief duration of the embrace, and he hugged her back, ridiculously pleased to see her, because he’d missed her, this woman of Joe’s. Missed her warmth and her humour, missed the laughter she carried with her everywhere she went. Or had, until she’d lost Joe.

Don’t tell me you’re getting married again—please, don’t tell me that …

Swearing silently, he dropped his arms and stepped back, looking down at the great rangy hound standing panting at Connie’s side, tongue lolling as it watched him alertly.

‘So—I take it this is your rescued dog? I’d pictured some little terrier or spaniel.’

Connie winced ruefully. ‘Sorry. Teensy bit bigger. This is Saffy—Safiya. It means best friend. Joe sort of adopted her in Afghanistan on his last tour. He was going to bring her home, but—well, he didn’t make it, so I brought her back.’

Typical Joe, he thought with a lump in his throat. Big tough guy, soft as lights. And he’d just bet she’d been his best friend, in the harsh and desolate desert, thousands of miles from home. A touch of humanity in the inhumanity of war.

He held out his hand for Saffy to sniff. She did more than sniff

it. She licked it. Gently, tentatively, coming closer to press her head against his shoulder as he crouched down to her level and stroked her long, floppy ears. A gentle giant of a dog. No wonder Joe had fallen for her.

He laughed softly, a little taken aback by the trusting gesture, and straightened up again. 'She's a sweetie,' he said, his voice slightly choked, and Connie nodded.

'She is. I had to bring her home.'

Of course she'd had to, because Saffy was her last link to Joe. If Joe had been soft, Connie was softer, but there was a core of steel in there, too. He'd seen plenty of evidence of that in the past few years.

He'd seen her holding herself together when Joe was deployed to Afghanistan for what was meant to be his final tour, and then again, just months later, when he came home for the last time in a flag-draped coffin—

'So, this is the new house, then,' she said, yanking him back to the present as he opened the gate and ushered her and Saffy through it.

He hauled in a breath and put the memories away. 'Hardly new. I've been here over two years. I'd forgotten you hadn't seen it.'

'No, well, things got in the way. I can't believe it's that long,' she said. She looked slightly bemused, as if the time had somehow passed and she'd been suspended in an emotional void. He supposed she might well have been. He had, for years. Still

was in many ways, and it was a lonely place.

Take care of Connie.

Guilt ate at him. He should have been there more for her, should have looked out for her, emailed her more often, rung her. It had been months, and he'd just let it drift by. Too busy, as usual, for the things that really mattered.

There didn't seem to be anything else to say, so he took her into the house, looking at it with the critical eyes of a stranger and finding it wanting. Not the house, but his treatment of it. The house was lovely and deserved better than a quick once-over as and when.

'Sorry, it's a bit of a mess. I haven't done a great deal to it, but the people I bought it from left it in great condition so I just moved in and got on with other things. I've been so busy I haven't even unpacked the books yet.'

She looked around and smiled. 'I can see that. You haven't put any pictures up, either.'

'I've got the sea. I don't need pictures,' he said simply, and she turned and looked out of the window, feeling the calming effect of the breakers rolling slowly in, the quiet suck of the surf on the shingle curiously soothing.

'No, I suppose you don't,' she said. She glanced around again. The living space was all open, the seating area at the front of the house facing the sea, the full-width dining and kitchen area at the back overlooking the marshes and the meandering river beyond. There was an unspoilt beauty about the area, and she

could absolutely see why he'd bought the cottage.

'It's lovely, James. Really gorgeous. I was expecting something tiny from the name.'

'Thrift Cottage? There's a plant called sea thrift—*Armeria maritima*. The garden's full of it. I don't know which came first but I imagine that's the connection. It was certainly nothing to do with the price,' he said drily. 'Coffee?'

She chuckled. 'Love one. I haven't had my caffeine fix yet today.'

'Espresso, cappuccino, latte, Americano?'

She blinked. 'Wow, you must have a fancy coffee machine.'

He grinned. 'Some things have to be taken seriously.'

'So do me a flat white,' she challenged, her eyes sparkling with laughter.

Typical Connie, he thought. Never take the easy route or expect anyone else to. He rolled his eyes, took the milk out of the carrier bag he'd just brought home and started work while she and the dog watched his every move, Connie from the other side of the room, Saffy from her position on the floor just close enough to reach anything he might drop. Hope personified, he thought with a smile.

'You do know I was a *barista* while I was at uni?' he offered over his shoulder, the mischievous grin dimpling his lean cheek again and making her mouth tug in response.

'I didn't, but it doesn't surprise me.'

She watched him as he stuck a cup under the spout of the

coffee machine, his broad shoulders and wide stance reminding her of Joe, and yet not. Joe had been shorter, stockier, his hair a lighter brown, and his eyes had been a muted green, unlike James's, which were a striking, brilliant ice-blue rimmed with navy. She noticed the touch of grey at his temples and frowned slightly. That was new. Or had she just not noticed before?

'So how long did the drive take you?' he asked, turning to look at her with those piercing eyes.

'Just over two hours—about two fifteen? I had a good run but I had to stop to let Saffy out for a minute.'

She stepped over the dog and perched on a high stool beside him, and the light drift of her perfume teased his nostrils. He could feel her eyes on him as he foamed the milk, tapping the jug, swirling the espresso round the warmed cup before he poured the milk into it in a carefully controlled stream, wiggling the jug to create a perfect rosetta of microfoamed milk on top of the crema.

'Here,' he said, sliding the cup towards her with a flourish, pleased to see he hadn't lost his touch despite the audience.

'Latte art? Show-off,' she said, but she looked impressed and he couldn't resist a slightly smug chuckle.

He tore open a packet of freshly baked cookies from the supermarket, the really wicked ones oozing with calories. He wouldn't normally have bought them, but he knew Connie was a sucker for gooey cookies. He slid them towards her as Saffy watched hopefully.

'Here. Don't eat them all.'

‘Whatever gave you that idea?’ she said innocently, her smile teasing, and he felt his heart lurch dangerously.

‘I’ve never yet met a woman who could resist triple choc chip cookies still warm from the oven.’

Her eyes lit up. ‘Are they still warm?’ she said, diving in, and he watched in fascination as she closed her eyes and sank her teeth into one.

He nearly groaned out loud. How could eating a cookie be so sexy?

‘Murgh,’ she said, eyes still closed, and he gave a strained chuckle and trashed his own rosetta as his hand jerked.

‘That good?’ he asked, his voice sounding rusty, and she nodded.

‘Oh, yes,’ she said, a little more intelligibly, and he laughed again, set his own coffee down on the breakfast bar and joined her on the other stool, shifting it away from her a little after he’d taken a cookie from the bag.

Her eyes were open again, and she was pulling another one apart, dissecting it slowly and savouring every bit, and he almost whimpered.

He *did* whimper. Did he? *Really?*

‘Saffy, don’t beg,’ she said through a mouthful of cookie, and he realised it was the dog. He heaved a quiet sigh of relief and grabbed the last cookie, as much as anything so he wouldn’t have to watch her eat it.

And then, just because they had to talk about something and

anyway, the suspense was killing him, he asked, 'So, what did you want to talk to me about?'

Connie felt her heart thump.

This was it, her chance to ask him, and yet now she was here she had no idea—*no* idea—how to do it. Her carefully rehearsed speech had deserted her, and her mind flailed. *Start at the beginning*, she told herself, and took a deep breath.

'Um—did you realise Joe and I were having problems?' she asked tentatively.

'Problems?'

James stared at her, stunned by that. Problems were the last thing he would have associated with them. They'd always seemed really happy together, and Joe, certainly, had loved Connie to bits. Had it not been mutual? No, Joe would have said—wouldn't he? Maybe not.

'What sort of problems?' he asked warily, not at all sure he wanted to know.

'Only one—well, two, if you count the fact that I spent our entire marriage waiting for the doorbell to ring and someone in uniform to tell me he was dead.'

'I'd count that,' he said gruffly. He'd felt it himself, every time Joe had been deployed on active service—and it didn't get much more active than being a bomb disposal officer. But still, he'd never really expected it to happen. Maybe Connie had been more realistic.

'And the other problem?'

She looked away, her expression suddenly bleak. 'We couldn't have children.'

He frowned, speechless for a second as it sank in. He set his cup down carefully and closed his eyes. When he opened them she was watching him again, her bottom lip caught between her teeth, waiting for him to say the right thing.

Whatever the hell that was. He let out a long, slow sigh and shook his head.

'Ah, Connie. I'm so sorry. I didn't realise there was anything wrong. I always thought it was by choice, something you'd get round to when he'd finished that last tour.'

… except he never had …

'It was.' She smiled a little unsteadily, and looked away again. 'Actually, he was going to come and see you about it when he got home.'

'Me?' he asked, puzzled by that. 'I don't know anything about infertility. You're a doctor, you probably know as much about it as I do, if not more. You needed to see a specialist.'

'We had. It wasn't for that. We'd had the tests, and he was the one with the problem. Firing blanks, as he put it.' She grimaced a little awkwardly, uncomfortable revealing what Joe had considered a weakness, a failure, something to be ashamed of. 'I wanted him to tell you, but he wouldn't, not for ages. He was psyching himself up to do it when he got home, but it was so hard for him, even though you were so close.'

'We were, but—guys don't talk about that kind of thing,

Connie, especially when they're like Joe.'

'I know. It's stupid, I feel so disloyal telling you because he just wouldn't talk about it. I would have told you ages ago, but he couldn't, and so nor could I because it wasn't my secret to tell.'

He sighed and reached out a hand, laying it over her arm and squeezing gently. 'Don't feel disloyal. I loved him, too, remember. You can tell me anything you need to, and you know it won't go any further.'

She nodded. 'I know. I just wish he'd felt he could tell you.'

'Me, too.' He sighed again and withdrew his hand. 'I'm really sorry, Connie. That must have been so tough to deal with.'

She looked down at her coffee, poking at the foam with the teaspoon, drawing little trails absently through the rosetta, and he noticed her cheeks had coloured a little.

She sucked in a slightly shaky breath. 'He was going to tell you, as soon as he got back. He wanted to ask you …' *Oh, just spit it out, woman! He can only say no!*

She sat up straighter and made herself look him in the eye, her heart pounding. 'He was going to ask you if you'd consider being a sperm donor for us.'

He stared at her blankly, the shock robbing him of his breath for a moment. He hauled it back in and frowned.

'Me?'

They'd wanted him to give them a child?

'Why me?' he asked, his voice sounding strangely distant. *Of all the people in the world, why me?*

She shrugged. ‘Why not? I would have thought it was obvious. He doesn’t have a brother, you were his best friend, he loved and respected you. Plus you’re not exactly ugly or stupid. Who better?’ She paused for a second, fiddled with her spoon, then met his eyes again, her own a little wary. ‘Would you have said yes?’

He shook his head to clear it, still reeling a little from the shock.

‘Hell, I don’t know, Connie. I have no idea.’

‘But—possibly?’

He shrugged. ‘Maybe.’

A baby? Maybe not. Most likely not.

‘Definitely maybe? Like, probably?’

Would he? He tried to think, but he was still trying to come to terms with it and thinking seemed too hard right then.

‘I don’t know. I really don’t know. I might have considered it, I suppose, but it’s irrelevant now, so it’s hard to know how I would have reacted. But you would have been brilliant parents. I’m just so sorry you never had the chance. That really sucks.’

She’d shifted her attention to the cookie crumbs on the breakfast bar, pushing them around with her fingertip, and he saw her swallow. Then she lifted her head and met his eyes. Her whole body seemed to go still, as if every cell was holding its breath. And then she spoke.

‘What if it wasn’t irrelevant now?’

CHAPTER TWO

WAS THIS WHY she'd wanted to see him? To ask him *this?*

He searched her eyes, and they didn't waver.

'What are you saying, Connie?' he asked quietly, but he knew already, could feel the cold reality of it curling around him like freezing fog.

He saw her swallow again. 'I wondered—I don't know how you'll feel about it, and I know Joe's not here now, but—James, I still really want a baby.'

He stared at her, saw the pleading in her eyes, and he felt suddenly drenched with icy sweat. She meant it. She really, really meant it—

He shoved the stool back abruptly and stood up, taking a step away on legs that felt like rubber. 'No. I'm sorry, Connie. I can't do it.'

He walked away, going out onto the veranda and curling his fingers round the rail, his hands gripping it so hard his knuckles were bleached white while the memories poured through him.

Cathy, coming into their bedroom, her eyes bright with joy in her pale face, a little white wand in her hand.

'I might've worked out why I've been feeling rough …'

He heard Connie's footsteps on the boards behind him, could feel her just inches away, feel her warmth, hear the soft sigh of her breath. Her voice, when she spoke, was hesitant.

‘James? I’m sorry. I know it’s a bit weird, coming out of the blue like that, but please don’t just say no without considering it—’

Her voice cracked slightly, and she broke off. Her hand was light on his shoulder, tentative, trembling slightly. It burned him all the way through to his soul.

‘James? Talk to me?’

‘There’s nothing to talk about,’ he said, his voice hollow. ‘Joe’s dead, Connie. He’s gone.’ *They’re all gone …*

Her breath sucked in softly. ‘Do you think I don’t know that? Do you really think that in the last two years I haven’t noticed? But I’m still here, and I’m alive, and I’m trying to move on with my life, to rescue something from the wreckage. And you could help me do that. Give me something to live for. Please. At least think about it.’

He turned his head slightly and stared at her, then looked away again. ‘Hell, Connie, you know how to push a guy’s buttons.’ His voice was raw now, rasping, and he swallowed hard, shaking his head again to clear it, but it didn’t work this time any more than it had the last.

‘I’m sorry. I know it’s a bit sudden and unexpected, but—you said you would have considered it.’

‘No, I said I *might* have considered it, for you and Joe. Not just for you! I can’t do that, Connie! I can’t just hand you a little pot of my genetic material and walk away and leave you on your own. What kind of person would that make me?’

‘Generous? I’d still be the mother, still be the primary carer, whatever. What’s the difference?’

‘The difference? The *difference* is that you’re on your own, and children need two parents. There’s no way I could be responsible for a child coming into the world that I wasn’t involved with on a daily basis—’

‘So—what? You want to be involved? You can be involved—’

‘What? No! Connie, no. Absolutely not. I don’t want to be a father! It’s not anywhere, anyhow, on my agenda.’

Not any more.

‘Joe said you might say that. I mean, if you’d wanted kids you would have got married again, wouldn’t you? But he said you’d always said you wouldn’t, and he thought that might be the very reason you’d agree, because you might see it as the only way you’d ever have a child …’

She trailed off, as if she knew she’d gone too far, and he stared down at his stark white knuckles, his fingers burning with the tension. One by one he made them relax so that he could let go of the rail and walk away. Away from Connie, away from the memories that were breaking through his carefully erected defences and flaying him to shreds.

Cathy’s face, her eyes alight with joy. The first scan, that amazing picture of their baby. And then, just weeks later …

‘No, Connie. I’m sorry, but—no. You don’t know what you’re asking. I can’t. I just can’t …’

The last finger peeled away from the railing and he spun on

his heel and walked off, down the steps, across the garden, out of the gate.

She watched him go, her eyes filling, her last hope of having the child she and Joe had longed for so desperately fading with every step he took, and she put her hand over her mouth to hold in the sob and went back to the kitchen to a scene of utter chaos.

'Oh, Saffy, no!' she wailed as the dog shot past her, a slab of meat dangling from her jaws.

It was the last straw. Sinking down on the floor next to the ravaged shopping bags, Connie pulled up her knees, rested her head on them and sobbed her heart out as all the hopes and dreams she and Joe had cherished crumbled into dust.

It took him a while to realise the dog was at his side.

He was sitting on the sea wall, hugging one knee and staring blindly out over the water. He couldn't see anything but Connie.

Not the boats, not the sea—not even the face of the wife he'd loved and lost. He struggled to pull up the image, but he couldn't, not now, when he wanted to. All he could see was Connie's face, the hope and pleading in her eyes as she'd asked him the impossible, the agonising disappointment when he'd turned her down, and it was tearing him apart.

Finally aware of Saffy's presence, he turned his head and met her eyes. She was sitting beside him, the tip of her tail flickering tentatively, and he lifted his hand and stroked her.

'I can't do it, Saffy,' he said, his voice scraping like the shingle on the beach. 'I want to help her, I promised to look after her, but

I can't do that, I just can't. She doesn't know what she's asking, and I can't tell her. I can't explain. I can't say it out loud.'

Saffy shifted slightly, leaning on him, and he put his arm over her back and rested his hand on her chest, rubbing it gently; after a moment she sank down to the ground with a soft grunt and laid her head on her paws, her weight against him somehow comforting and reassuring.

How many times had Joe sat like this with her, in the heat and dust and horror of Helmand? He stroked her side, and she shifted again, so that his hand fell naturally onto the soft, unguarded belly, offered with such trust.

He ran his fingers over it and stilled, feeling the ridges of scars under his fingertips. It shocked him out of his grief.

'Oh, Saffy, what happened to you, sweetheart?' he murmured. He turned his head to study the scars, and saw feet.

Two feet, long and slim, slightly dusty, clad in sandals, the nails painted fire-engine-red. He hadn't heard her approaching over the sound of the sea, but there she was, and he couldn't help staring at those nails. They seemed so cheerful and jolly, so totally out of kilter with his despair.

He glanced up at her and saw that she'd been crying, her eyes red-rimmed and bloodshot, her cheeks smudged with tears. His throat closed a little, but he said nothing, and after a second she sat down on the other side of the dog, her legs dangling over the wall as she stared out to sea.

'She was injured when he found her,' she said softly, answering

his question. 'They did a controlled explosion of an IED, and Saffy must have got caught in the blast. She had wounds all over her. He should have shot her, really, but he was racked with guilt and felt responsible, and the wounds were only superficial, so he fed her and put antiseptic on them, and bit by bit she got better, and she adored him. I've got photos of them together with his arm round her in the compound. His commanding officer would have flayed the skin off him if he'd known, especially as Joe was the officer in charge of the little outpost, but he couldn't have done anything else. He broke all the rules for her, and nobody ever said a word.'

'And you brought her home for him.'

She tried to smile. 'I had to. I owed it to her, and anyway, he'd already arranged it. There's a charity run by an ex-serviceman to help soldiers bring home the dogs that they've adopted over there, and it was all set up, but when Joe died the arrangements ground to a halt. Then a year later, just before I went out to Afghanistan, someone from the charity contacted me and said the dog was still hanging around the compound and did I still want to go ahead.'

'And of course you did.' He smiled at her, his eyes creasing with a gentle understanding that brought a lump to her throat. She swallowed.

'Yeah. Well. Anyway, they were so helpful. The money wasn't the issue because Joe had already paid them, it was the red tape, and they knew just how to cut through it, and she was flown home a month later, just after I left for Afghanistan. She was waiting

for me in the quarantine kennels when I got home at the end of December, and she's been with me ever since, but it hasn't been easy.'

'No, I'm sure it hasn't. Poor Saffy,' he said, his hand gentle on her side, and Connie reached out and put her hand over his, stilling it.

'James, I'm really sorry. I didn't mean to upset you. I just—it was the last piece of the puzzle, really, the last thing we'd planned apart from bringing Saffy home. We'd talked about it for so long, and he was so excited about the idea that maybe at last we could have a baby. He didn't know what you'd say, which way you'd go, but he was hoping he could talk you into it.'

And maybe he could have done, she thought, if James had meant what he'd said about considering it. But now, because Joe was dead, James had flatly refused to help her because she'd be alone and that was different, apparently.

'You know,' she said softly, going on because she couldn't just give up on this at the first hurdle, 'if you'd said yes to him and then he'd been killed in some accident, for instance, I would still have had to bring the baby up alone. What would you have done then, if I'd already had a child?'

'I would have looked after you both,' he said instantly, 'but you haven't had a child, and Joe's gone, and I don't want that responsibility.'

'There is no responsibility.'

He stared at her. 'Of course there is, Connie. I can't just give

you a child and let you walk off into the sunset with it and forget about it. Get real. This is my flesh and blood you're talking about. My child. I could never forget my child.'

Ever …

'But you would have done it for us?'

He shook his head slowly. 'I don't know. Maybe, maybe not, but Joe's not here any more, and a stable, happily married couple who desperately want a baby isn't the same as a grieving widow clinging to the remnants of a dream.'

'But that's not what I'm doing, not what this is about.'

'Are you sure? Have you really analysed your motives, Connie? I don't think so. And what if you meet someone?' he asked her, that nagging fear suddenly rising again unbidden and sickening him. 'What if, a couple of years down the line, another man comes into your life? What then? Would you expect me to sit back and watch a total stranger bringing up my child, with no say in how they do it?'

She shook her head vehemently. 'That won't happen—and anyway, I'm getting older. I'm thirty-six now. Time's ebbing away. I don't know if I'll ever be truly over Joe, and by the time I am, and I've met someone and trust him enough to fall in love, it'll be too late for me and I really, really want this. It's now or never, James.'

It was. He could see that, knew that her fertility was declining with every year that passed, but that wasn't his problem. Nothing about this was his problem. Until she spoke again.

‘I don’t want to put pressure on you, and I respect your decision. I just—I would much rather it was someone Joe had loved and respected, someone I loved and respected, than an anonymous donor.’

‘Anonymous donor?’ he said, his voice sounding rough and gritty to his ears.

‘Well, what else? If it can’t be you, I don’t know who else it would be. There’s nobody else I could ask, but if I go for a donor how do I know what they’re like? How do I know if they’ve got a sense of humour, or any brains or integrity—I might as well go and pull someone in a nightclub and have a random—’

‘Connie, for God’s sake!’

She gave a wry, twisted little smile.

‘Don’t worry, James. It’s OK. I’m not *that* crazy. I won’t do anything stupid.’

‘Good,’ he said tautly. ‘And for the record, I don’t like emotional blackmail.’

‘It wasn’t!’ she protested, her eyes filling with tears.

‘Really, James, it wasn’t, I wouldn’t do that to you. I wasn’t serious. I’m really not that nuts.’

He wasn’t sure. Not nuts, maybe, but—desperate?

‘When it happens—promise me you’ll take care of her.’

‘Of course I will, you daft bastard. It won’t happen. It’s your last tour. You’ll be fine.’

But he hadn’t been fine, and now Connie was here, making hideous jokes about doing something utterly repugnant, and he

felt the weight of responsibility crush him.

'Promise me you won't do anything stupid,' he said gruffly.

'I won't.'

'Nothing. Don't do anything. Not yet.'

She tilted her head and searched his eyes, her brows pleating together thoughtfully. 'Not yet?'

Not ever, because I can't bear the thought of you giving your body to a total stranger in some random, drunken encounter, and because if anybody's going to give you a baby, it's me—

The thought shocked him rigid. He jack-knifed to his feet and strode back to the house, his heart pounding, and after a few moments he heard the crunch of gravel behind him on the path.

Saffy was already there at his side, glued to his leg, and as he walked into the kitchen and stared at the wreckage of his shopping bags, she wagged her tail sheepishly, guilt written all over her.

A shadow fell across the room.

'Ah. Sorry. I was coming to tell you—she stole the steak.'

He gave a soft, slightly unsteady laugh and shook his head. 'Oh, Saffy. You are such a bad dog,' he murmured, with so much affection in his voice it brought a lump to her throat. He seemed to be doing that a lot today.

'She was starving when Joe found her. She steals because it's all she knows, the only way she could survive. And it really is her only vice. I'll replace the steak—'

'To hell with the steak,' he said gruffly. 'She's welcome to it.

We'll just have to go to the pub tonight.'

Better that way than sitting alone together in his house trying to have a civilised conversation over dinner and picking their way through this minefield. Perhaps Saffy had inadvertently done them both a favour.

'Well, I could have handled that better, couldn't I, Saff?'

Saffy just wagged her tail lazily and stretched. James had gone shopping again because it turned out it was more than just the steak that needed replacing, so Connie was sitting on a bench in the garden basking in the lovely warm June sunshine and contemplating the mess she'd made of all this.

He'd refused her offer of company, saying the dog had spent long enough in the car, and to be honest she was glad he'd gone without her because it had all become really awkward and uncomfortable, and if it hadn't mattered so much she would have packed up the dog and her luggage and left.

But then he'd said 'yet'.

Don't do anything yet.

She dropped her head back against the wall of the cabin behind her and closed her eyes and wondered what he'd really meant by 'yet'.

She had no idea.

None that she dared to contemplate, anyway, in case a ray of hope sneaked back in and she had to face having it dashed all over again, but he'd had a strange look about him, and then he'd stalked off.

Run away?

'No! Stop it! Stop thinking about it. He didn't mean anything, it was just a turn of phrase.'

Maybe …

She opened her eyes and looked up at the house, trying to distract herself. It was set up slightly above the level of the garden, possibly because of the threat of flooding before the sea wall had been built, but the result was that even from the ground floor there were lovely views out to sea across the mouth of the estuary and across the marshes behind, and from the bedrooms the views would be even better.

She wondered where she'd be sleeping. He hadn't shown her to her room yet, but it wasn't a big house so she wouldn't be far away from him, and she felt suddenly, ridiculously uneasy about being alone in the house with him for the night.

Crazy. There was nothing to feel uneasy about. He'd stayed with them loads of times, and he'd stayed the night after Joe's funeral, too, refusing to leave her until he was sure she was all right.

And anyway, what was he going to do, jump her bones? Hardly, James just wasn't like that. He'd never so much as looked at her sideways, never mind made her feel uncomfortable like some of Joe's other friends had.

If he had, there was no way she would have broached the sperm donor subject. Way too intimate. It had been hard enough as it was, and maybe that was why she felt uneasy. The whole

subject was necessarily very personal and intimate, and she'd gone wading in there without any warning and shocked his socks off.

It dawned on her belatedly that she hadn't even asked if there was anyone else who might have been a consideration in this, but that was so stupid. He was a fit, healthy and presumably sexual active man who was entitled to have a relationship with anyone he chose. She'd just assumed he wasn't in a relationship, assumed that just because he'd never mentioned anyone, there wasn't anyone.

OK, so he probably wasn't getting married to her, whoever she might be, but that didn't stop him having a lover. Several, if he chose. Did he bring them back here?

She realised she was staring up at the house and wondering which was his bedroom, wondering where in the house he made love to the *femme du jour*, and it stopped her in her tracks.

What was she *doing*, even *thinking* about his private life? Why the hell was she here at all? How had she had the nerve to ask him to do this?

But he'd said 'yet' …

She sighed and stopped staring up at the house. Thinking about James and sex in the same breath was *so* not the way forward, not if she wanted to keep this clinical and uninvolved. And she did. She had to, because it was complicated enough. She looked around her instead, her eye drawn again to the cabin behind her. It was painted in a lovely muted grey-green, set up

slightly on stilts so it was raised above the level of the garden like the house, with steps up to the doors.

She wondered what he used it for. It might be a store room, but it seemed far too good to use as a glory-hole. That would be such a waste.

Home gym? Possibly, although he didn't have the sort of muscles that came from working out. He looked like more of a runner, or maybe a tennis player. Not that she'd studied his body, she thought, frowning at herself. Why would she? But she'd noticed, of course she had.

She dragged herself back to the subject. Hobbies room? She wasn't aware that he had any. James had never mentioned it, and she realised that for all she'd known him for years, she hardly *knew* him. Not really. Not deep down. She'd met him nine years ago, worked with him for a year as his SHO, seen him umpteen times since then while she'd been with Joe, but he didn't give a lot away, at least not to her. Never had.

Maybe that was how she'd felt able to come down here and ask him this? Although if she'd known more about how he ticked she could have engineered her argument to target his weak spot. Or had she inadvertently done that? His reaction had been instant and unmistakeable. He'd recoiled from the idea as if it was unthinkable, but then he'd begun to relent—hadn't he?

She wasn't sure. It would have helped if Joe had paved the way, but he hadn't, and so she'd had to go in cold and blunder about in what was obviously a very sensitive area. Pushing his

buttons, as he'd put it. And he'd said no, so she'd upset him for nothing.

Except he hadn't given her a flat-out no in the end, had he? He'd said don't do anything yet. Whatever *yet* meant.

She sighed. Back to that again.

He didn't really need another trip to the supermarket. They could have managed. He'd just needed space to think, to work out what, if anything, he could do to stop Connie from making the biggest mistake of her life.

Or his.

He swore softly under his breath, swung the car into a parking space and did a quick raid of the bacon and sausage aisle to replace all the breakfast ingredients Saffy had pinched, then he drove back home, lecturing himself every inch of the way on how his responsibility to Connie did *not* mean he had to do this.

He just had to stop her doing something utterly crazy. The very thought of her with a total stranger made him gag, but he wasn't much more thrilled by the idea of her conceiving a child from a nameless donor courtesy of a turkey baster.

Hell, it could be anybody! They could have some inherited disease, some genetic disorder that would be passed on to a child—a predisposition to cancer, heart disease, all manner of things. Rationally, of course, he knew that no reputable clinic would use unscreened donors, and the checks were rigorous. Very rigorous. He *knew* that, but even so …

What would Joe have thought about it? If he'd refused, what

would Joe and Connie have done next? Asked another friend? Gone to a clinic?

It was irrelevant, he told himself again. That was then, this was now, this was Connie on her own, fulfilling a lost dream. God knows what her motives were, but he was pretty sure she hadn't examined them in enough detail or thought through the ramifications. Somehow or other he had to talk her out of it, or at the very least try. He owed it to Joe. He'd promised to take care of her, and he would, because he kept his promises, and he'd keep this one if it killed him.

Assuming she'd let him, because her biological clock was obviously ticking so loud it was deafening her to reason. And as for his crazy reaction, that absurd urge to give her his baby—and without the benefit of any damn turkey baster—

Swearing viciously under his breath, he pulled up in a slew of gravel, and immediately he could hear Saffy yipping and scrabbling at the gate.

'Do you reckon she can smell the shopping?' Connie asked, smiling tentatively at him over the top, and he laughed briefly and turned his attention to the shopping bags, wondering yet again how on earth he was in this position. Why she hadn't warned him over the phone, said something, anything, some little hint so he hadn't been quite so unprepared when she'd just come out with it, though quite how she would have warned him—

'Probably,' he said drily. 'I think I'd better put this lot away in the fridge pronto. I take it she can't open the fridge?'

‘She hasn’t ever done it yet.’

‘Don’t start now,’ he said, giving the dog a level stare immediately cancelled out by a head-rub that had her shadowing him into the kitchen.

Connie followed him, too, hesitating on the threshold. ‘James, I’m really sorry. I didn’t mean to put you in a difficult position.’

He paused, his hand on the fridge door, and looked at her over his shoulder. ‘You didn’t,’ he said honestly. ‘Joe did. It was his idea. You were just following up on it.’

‘I could have let it go.’

‘So why didn’t you?’

Her smile was wry and touched with sadness. ‘Because I couldn’t,’ she answered softly, ‘not while there was any hope,’ and he straightened up and shut the fridge and hugged her, because she just looked so damned unhappy and there was nothing he could do to make it better.

No amount of taking care of her was going to sort this out, short of doing what she’d asked, and he wasn’t sure he would ever be able to do that, despite that visceral urge which had caught him off guard. Or because of it? Just the thought of her pregnant with his child …

He let her go, easing her gently away with his hands on her shoulders and creating some much-needed distance between them, because his thoughts were suddenly wildly inappropriate, and the graphic images shocked him.

‘Why don’t you stick the kettle on and we’ll have a cup of

tea, and then we can take Saffy for a walk and go to the pub for supper.'

'Are we still going? I thought you'd just been shopping.'

He shrugged. 'I didn't bother to get anything for tonight. The pub seemed like a good idea—unless—is Saffy all right to leave here while we eat?'

She stared at him for a second, as if she was regrouping.

'Yes, she's fine. I've got a big wire travelling crate I use for her—it's a sort of retreat. I leave the door open all day so she can go in there to sleep or get away from it all, and I put her in there at night.'

'Because you don't trust her?'

'Not entirely,' she said drily. 'Still early days, and she did pinch the steak and the sausages.'

'The crate it is, then.' He smiled wryly, then glanced at his watch. 'Why don't we bring your luggage in and put it in your room while the kettle boils? I would have done it before but things ran away with us a little.'

Didn't they just? she thought.

He carried the dog's crate, she carried her overnight bag and the bag of stuff for Saffy—food, toys, blanket. Well, not a blanket, really, just an old jumper of Joe's she'd been unable to part with, and then when Saffy had come home she'd found a justification for her sentimental idiocy.

'Can we leave the crate down here?' she asked. 'She'll be fine in the kitchen, she's used to it.'

‘Sure. Come on up, I’ll give you a guided tour. It’ll take about ten seconds. The house isn’t exactly enormous.’

It wasn’t, but it was lovely. There were doors from the entrance hall into the ground floor living space, essentially one big L-shaped room, with a cloakroom off the hallway under the stairs, and the landing above led into three bedrooms, two doubles and a single, and a small but well-equipped and surprisingly luxurious bathroom.

He showed her into the large bedroom at the front, simply furnished with a double bed, wardrobe and chest of drawers. There was a pale blue and white rug on the bare boards between the bed and the window, and on the edge of it was a comfy armchair, just right for reading in. And the bed, made up in crisp white linen, sat squarely opposite the window—perfect for lying there drinking early morning tea and gazing out to sea.

She crossed to the window and looked left, over the river mouth, the current rippling the water. The window was open and she could hear the suck of the sea on the shingle, the keening of the gulls overhead, and if she breathed in she could smell the salt in the air.

‘Oh, James, it’s lovely,’ she sighed.

‘Everyone likes this room.’ He put her bag down and took a step towards the door. ‘I’ll leave you to settle in.’

‘No need. I travel light. It’ll take me three seconds to unpack.’

She followed him back out onto the landing and noticed another flight of stairs leading up.

‘So what’s up there?’ she asked.

‘My room.’

He didn’t volunteer anything else, didn’t offer to show it to her, and she didn’t ask. She didn’t want to enter his personal space. Not under the circumstances. Not after her earlier speculation about his love life. The last thing she needed was to see the bed he slept in. So she didn’t ask, just followed him downstairs, got her walking boots out of the car and put them on.

‘In your own time, Slater,’ she said lightly, and he gave her one of those wry smiles of his and got off the steps and led her and Saffy out of the gate.

CHAPTER THREE

SHE PUT SAFFY on a lead because she didn't really want to spend half the evening looking for her if she ran off, but the dog attached herself to James like glue and trotted by his side, the lead hanging rather pointlessly across the gap between her and Connie.

Faithless hound.

'So, where are we going?' she asked, falling in beside them.

'I thought we could go along by the river, then cut inland on the other side of the marshes and pick up the lane. It'll bring us out on the sea wall from the other direction. It's about three miles. Is that OK?'

'Sounds good.'

The path narrowed on top of the river wall, and she dropped back behind him, Saffy still glued to his heels, and in the end she gave him the lead.

'You seem to have a new friend,' she said drily, and he glanced down at the dog and threw her a grin over his shoulder.

'Looks like it. Is that a problem?'

'No, of course not,' she said promptly. 'I'm glad she likes you. She does seem to like men, I expect because she's been used to them looking after her out in Helmand, but she'll have to get over it when we go home tomorrow. I hope it won't unsettle her.'

'Do you think it might?'

‘I don’t know. I hope not. She’s doing so well.’

‘Apart from the thieving,’ he said drily, and she gave a guilty chuckle.

‘Yeah, well. Apart from that.’

They walked in silence for a while by the muddy shallows at the edge of the river, and then as they turned inland and headed uphill, he dropped back beside her and said, ‘So, how was Afghanistan? You haven’t really told me anything about it.’

‘No. It was a bit strange really. A bit surreal, but I’m glad I went. The facilities at Camp Bastion are fantastic. The things they do, what they achieve—for a field hospital it’s unbelievable. Did you know it’s got the busiest trauma unit in the world?’

‘I’m not surprised. Most of them aren’t in an area that has conflict.’

‘No. No, they aren’t. And I found that aspect really difficult.’

‘Because of Joe?’

She nodded. ‘Sort of. Because of all of them, really. I had second thoughts about going, after he died. I didn’t know how I’d feel facing the stark reality of it, but I realised when the first wave of grief receded that I still wanted to go. There was so much I wanted to try and understand, such as why it was necessary, why he’d gone in the first place, what he’d been trying to achieve.’

‘And did you?’

‘No. No, I still don’t understand, not really. I don’t think I ever will and I’m not sure I want to. People killing each other, maiming each other—it all seems so pointless and destructive.

There must be a better way than all this senseless violence.'

'It must have been really hard for you, Connie,' he said, his voice gentle. 'Very close to home.'

She nodded slowly, remembering the shock of seeing the first casualties come in, the realisation that this was it, this was what really happened out there. 'It was. I'd seen videos, had training, but I hadn't really understood what it was like for him until then. Seeing the injured lads there, though, fighting so hard to save them—it brought it all home to me, what he'd gone through, the threat he'd faced every day, never knowing when or if it might happen to him. That was tough.'

'I'm sure. He mentioned you were talking about going. I got the feeling he didn't like it much.'

'No, he didn't. I don't think he wanted to be worrying about me while he was trying to do his job, and he'd tried to put me off when I joined the Territorial Army as a volunteer doctor four years ago, but I thought, if Joe can do it, so can I. Not in the same way, but to do something, to do some good—and I'm glad I did, even though it was tough, because it's an incredible experience as a doctor.'

They fell silent for a while, then she went on, 'It's amazing what they can do there, you know, saving people that in civilian medicine we simply couldn't save because we just don't get to them fast enough or treat them aggressively enough when we do.'

He followed her lead and switched the conversation to practical medical aspects. 'So what would you change about the

way we do things here?'

'Speed. Blood loss. That's the real killer out there, so stopping that fast is key, and transfusions. Massive transfusions. We gave one guy a hundred and fifty units of whole blood, plasma, platelets—you name it. No mucking about with saline and colloids, it's straight in with the blood products. And total body scans, the second they're stable enough to go, so they can see exactly what's wrong and treat it. We should really be doing that with multiple trauma, because it's so easy to miss something when there's loads going on.'

He nodded. 'If only we could, but we just don't have the resources. And as for the time issue—we lose people so often because they just get to us too slowly.'

'Oh, they do. We have the golden hour. They have the platinum ten minutes—they fly out a consultant-led team, scoop them up and bring them back and they're treating them aggressively before the helicopter's even airborne. Every soldier carries a tourniquet and is trained to use it in an emergency, and it's made so much difference. They save ninety per cent of multiple trauma patients, where in the rest of the world we save about twenty per cent. And I realised that if Joe died despite everything they were able to throw at him, it was because he was unsaveable. That was quite cathartic.'

He nodded slowly. 'I can imagine it would be. So, will you go again?'

'No,' she said softly. 'I'm glad I went, because it helped me let

go of Joe, but I've done it now, and I've said goodbye and I've left the TA. I need to move on. I have other goals now.'

A baby, for one.

He went quiet for a while, then turned his head and looked at her searchingly.

'So how come you aren't working at the moment?'

She gave him a fleeting smile and looked away again. 'I wondered if you'd ask that. I could blame it on Saffy, say she'd taken a lot of time, a lot of training, and in a way it's true, but really she's just an excuse. I guess I was—I don't know … Taking time out to regroup, maybe? I worked solidly for the first year after he died, and I didn't give myself time to think, and then I went off to Afghanistan and put even more pressure on myself. That was a mistake, and by the time I got back after Christmas I was wiped. I needed time just to breathe a bit and work out where I go from here. A bit of a gap year, in a way. So I took it—or a few months, anyway. Just to try and make some sense of it.'

She made herself meet his eyes again, and found a gentle understanding in them.' Yeah. I did that after Cathy died. Took a gap year and grabbed the world by the throat, trying to make sense of it.'

'Did it help?'

He thought back to the aching emptiness, the people he'd met who'd scarcely registered in the haze of grief that had surrounded him. 'No. I don't know. Maybe.

Maybe not. It took me away from it, but when I came back it

was still there, lurking in wait. The grief, the loneliness.'

It was the closest he'd ever got to talking about Cathy, so she pushed a little more, to see if he'd open up further.

'She had cancer, didn't she?'

The shadows in his eyes darkened. 'Yes. One minute she was fine, the next she was dying.'

Connie felt her heart ache for him. 'Oh, James. It must have been dreadful watching that.'

He could see her now, the image crystal clear, pale as a ghost against the crisp white sheets, trying to smile at him, the small, neat curve of her doomed pregnancy so prominent in that thin frame.

'It was,' he said simply.

They reached the lane then, and he led the way, walking in single file for a while, facing the oncoming traffic.

Convenient, she thought, since it meant they couldn't talk. Far from opening up, he'd shut down again, so she left him alone, just following on behind until they reached the sea wall again and turned left towards the harbour and the little community clustered around the river mouth.

As they drew nearer they passed a house, a sprawling, ultra-modern house clad in cedar that had faded to silver. It was set in a wonderful garden on the end of the little string of properties, and there were children playing outside on the lawn, running in and out of a sprinkler and shrieking happily, and a woman with a baby on her hip waved to him.

He waved back, and turned to Connie as they walked on. 'That's Molly. She and her husband used to own my house. They outgrew it.'

'I should think they did. There were a lot of children there.'

'Oh, they're not all hers,' he said with a fleeting smile. 'The baby's theirs and she's got a son of about twelve, I think, and they've got another little one. The others will be her sister-in-law's. They didn't want to move away from here, but with two children and room for her painting they were struggling for space, as you can imagine, and then that house came on the market and David pounced on it.'

'It's an amazing house. They must have had a stash of cash somewhere or a lottery win.'

He chuckled, the sombre mood seeming to slip away. 'Oh, it didn't look like that when they bought it, but I don't think they're exactly strapped. David's a property developer and he part-owns a chain of boutique hotels in Australia. His father's a local building contractor, and they extended the house massively. She's got a great studio space and gallery there, and they've done a lovely job of it. They're nice people. Good neighbours.'

She wondered what it must be like to live in one place long enough to get to know your neighbours. She'd moved so much with Joe, shifting from one base to another, never putting down roots, and it hadn't been much better in her childhood. She envied James the stability of his life, even if he was alone. Not that she knew that for sure, she reminded herself.

He cut down off the sea wall to his garden gate and held it for her. 'Right, I need a shower, and then shall we go over to the pub? I haven't had anything but those cookies since breakfast and I'm starving.'

'Me, too, but I need to feed the dog. You take the bathroom first.'

'No need. I've got my own upstairs.'

She felt the tension she'd been unaware of leave her. So, no sharing a bathroom, no awkward moments of him tapping on the door or her being caught in the hall with dripping hair.

Heavens, what was wrong with her? This was *James*!

'Half an hour?' he suggested.

'That's fine. I'll feed Saffy first.'

He disappeared up the stairs, and she fed the dog and put her in the crate, not taking any chances while she was getting ready to go out. This would *not* be the diplomatic time to find out that Saffy could, indeed, open the door of the fridge.

She put her hair up in a knot and showered quickly, then contemplated her clothes. She hadn't really brought anything for going out, it hadn't occurred to her, but it was only the pub and she'd got a pretty top that would do. She put it on over her cropped jeans, let her hair down and then put on some makeup. Not much, just a touch of neutral eyeshadow, a swipe of mascara and a clear, shimmery lipgloss. Just enough to hide behind.

'Stupid woman,' she muttered. They were going to the local pub for a quick meal to make up for the fact that Saffy had stolen

the steak. It wasn't an interview, and it sure as hell wasn't a date.

Not even remotely!

So why did she feel so nervous?

She looked gorgeous.

She wasn't dressed up, but she'd put on a little bit of makeup and a fine, soft jersey top that draped enticingly over her subtle curves.

She wasn't over-endowed, but she was in proportion, and when she leant forward to pick up her drink the low neckline fell away slightly, just enough to give him a tantalising glimpse of the firm swell of her breasts cradled in lace.

Fine, delicate lace, the colour of ripe raspberries.

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