HIS VERY SPECIAL BRIDE

Joanna Neil

MILLS & BOON 100 YEARS of pure reading pleasure

MILLS & BOON® MEDICAL™

Joanna Neil

His Very Special Bride

Содержание

HIS VERY SPECIAL BRIDE 5
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента. 51

‘I’m sorry,’ Ben said softly. ‘This must be really upsetting for you.’

For a moment or two Sarah gave in to the wonderful feeling of comfort that his nearness evoked. His head rested against hers, and she absorbed the warmth that came from being near him. His arms were strong and capable, and she was sure that he meant what he said, that he would lift any burden from her, given the chance.

When **Joanna Neil** discovered Mills & Boon®, her life-long addiction to reading crystallised into an exciting new career writing Medical™ Romance. Her characters are probably the outcome of her varied lifestyle, which includes working as a clerk, typist, nurse and infant teacher. She enjoys dressmaking and cooking at her Leicestershire home. Her family includes a husband, son and daughter, an exuberant yellow Labrador and two slightly crazed cockatiels. She currently works with a team of tutors at her local education centre, to provide creative writing workshops for people interested in exploring their own writing ambitions.

Recent titles by the same author:

PROPOSING TO THE CHILDREN’S DOCTOR
A CONSULTANT BEYOND COMPARE
THE DOCTOR’S LONGED-FOR FAMILY
THE CONSULTANT’S SURPRISE CHILD

HIS VERY SPECIAL BRIDE

BY
JOANNA NEIL

www.millsandboon.co.uk

HIS VERY SPECIAL BRIDE

CHAPTER ONE

‘ARE you quite sure that you want to do this?’ Carol Farley laid a hand lightly on Sarah’s shoulder, her grey eyes skimming her face with a hint of anxiety. ‘I can’t help thinking that you’re not ready to make it on your own in the world just yet. You do know that we’re happy for you to stay here with us for just as long as you want, don’t you?’

‘I know.’ Sarah managed a smile. ‘You and Tom have both been so good to me, and I want you to know that I appreciate all that you’ve done, both for me and for Emily. It’s just that if I don’t step out now and try to manage on my own, I don’t think I’ll ever pluck up the courage to do it. I feel that I have to get back to a normal kind of life…whatever that might be.’

‘But it hasn’t been all that long since you came out of hospital…just a matter of a few months…and I’m sure you need more time to adjust.’ Carol frowned. ‘You suffered a nasty head injury, and even now there are things that you struggle with. How are you going to cope, especially with a small child in tow?’

‘It’s been six months at least…and it’s high time that I started to manage things for myself. Somehow, I’ll find a way.’ Sarah pulled in a deep, steadying breath and glanced across the sunlit kitchen to where Emily was playing with a doll’s house in a far corner of the dining area. She was nearly three years old, and was just beginning to break out of the subdued state she had been in not too long ago. ‘I have to.’

The little girl was chattering softly to a small, golden- haired doll that she was walking in and out of the rooms of the house. ‘We have to cook dinner,’ she said in a piping voice. ‘Put the saucepan on the cooker.’ Then she looked up at Sarah and added with a chuckle, ‘Mummy, look…Dolly’s holding the saucepan.’

‘So she is.’ Sarah smiled, her gaze remaining on her daughter as Emily turned back to her game.

She was a pretty girl, with silky blonde hair that curled softly into the nape of her neck and fell in wispy tendrils around her temples.

Unconsciously, Sarah pushed back a lock of her own honey blonde hair that had fallen across her cheek, tucking the spiralling strand behind her ear.

At the hospital they had told her that Emily was her child, and

certainly she loved her dearly, the bond between them growing stronger day by day. It was just that nothing in her life made sense to her any more, and she felt as though she was trapped in a place where all was chaos and confusion.

Her hair had grown to shoulder length since that fateful day when she had been injured, and it seemed strange to her that she had such a wild mass of unruly curls. But, then, every feature seemed strange to her in the mirror.

'Do you mind watching Emily for me while I go and look over the cottage?' Sarah said now, turning to look at the woman who had been her mainstay over these last few months. 'I could take her with me, if you like.'

'No, you don't want to be doing that.' The older woman's response was firm. 'You'll want to check things out without any distractions. Of course she'll be all right with me.' Carol gave a faint smile, her motherly features creasing lightly, but there was a glimmer of sadness in her eyes. 'She's still my foster-child, after all.'

Perhaps there was a hint of anguish in the words, or maybe it was resignation that Sarah heard. Whatever it was, it caused her to glance afresh at the older woman, a troubled look in her eyes.

'Are you afraid that you'll lose her? I know how much you've come to love Emily.' Her voice softened, and she reached out a hand to touch Carol's arm. It suddenly seemed important to do what she could to reassure this woman who had become her friend over the last few months. 'I will take good care of her,

you know, and, whatever happens about the cottage, we won't be going far away. I'll bring her back to see you, and you'll always be welcome to come and visit.'

Carol slipped her arms around her and gave her a hug. 'Yes, I know you will, and I'm glad of that. Take no notice of me. You've been like a daughter to me, and I worry too much, I know I do. I just wish that you had been able to recover your memory, or at least some portion of it, before now. That would have made me feel more certain that you were ready to take on this move.'

'I'll be fine,' Sarah murmured. She straightened, preparing herself. 'Physically, at least, there's nothing wrong with me, and this is something that I need to do, for myself and Emily.' She fingered the key in her pocket. 'I have the key from the estate agent, so I'll head over to the house right away and see if it has everything that I need. Don't worry about me. It's just that I have to do this for myself—a first stab at independence, if you like.'

Carol nodded. 'I can see that you've made up your mind, and I won't stand in your way. I just hope that you'll remember that we're always here for you.'

'I will.' Sarah smiled and then went over to the little girl, crouching down beside her and saying lightly, 'I have to go out for a little while, Emily, but Auntie Carol will look after you. Will you be a good girl for her while I'm gone?'

''Course I will.' Emily gave her a bright smile, her blue eyes reflecting the colour of Sarah's gentle gaze.

'Love you,' Sarah said, giving the child a kiss, and then she

stood up and turned away, going in search of her bag.

The drive to the cottage didn't take long, but as the countryside swept by, Sarah had time to reflect on how easily the skill of driving had come back to her, as though it was second nature to her. The local authority had made special provision for her to take her test under the name that she was now using, and once she had passed she had been able to pick up this little runabout for next to nothing. It had been one more step on the way to getting her life back.

The hamlet where she had been living these last few months nestled in a green valley, set between the rolling hills that formed the southern tip of the Pennine range. All around there was lush vegetation, heather-clad moorland and trees whose branches swayed in the gentle summer breeze. Here and there she caught a glimpse of a river in the distance, the sunlight glinting on the surface of the water so that it looked like a ribbon of silver winding its way through the verdant meadowland.

After a while, Sarah turned the car off the country road into a narrow lane that led towards two isolated properties. Approaching the small cottage, she drew the car to a halt on the gravelled forecourt and gazed around her. This had to be the right place. There was a wall plaque that read BRIDGE END COTTAGE.

She slid out of the car and went to take a closer look. Everywhere was silent, deserted looking, and there were no other cars to be seen. Perhaps whoever lived in the neighbouring house

was out at work.

She let her glance trail over the adjacent property. It was a grand affair, well kept and truly impressive, with a steeply sloping roof and dormer windows and an attractive single-storey extension to the main building. She gave a faint sigh. Unfortunately, that wasn't the house she was here to look at.

She turned her attention back to Bridge End Cottage and frowned. There was a general air of neglect around the stone-built house, and the shrubs that scrambled against the front wall were overgrown and unkempt. It wasn't at all what she had expected to see after the brief, enthusiastic summary the estate agent had given her.

'You're really fortunate,' he had said. 'The cottage has only just come into our hands, and we haven't put the details out on the market yet. You'll be the first to view it, and I'm sure it will suit your needs down to the ground. The rent's not too high, it's compact, with a garage on the side, and there's a mature garden at the back.'

Sarah wasn't sure what the rest of the house would reveal, but she could see right away that the garage roof was in need of repair. Some of the tiles were missing, and it looked as though there was a tear in the roofing felt. As to the main building, it was clear that the window-frames hadn't seen a lick of paint in a long, long time.

She steeled herself to go and take a look at the rest of the property. It was small wonder that the rent was so low, but could

she afford to be picky? Did she really have much choice about what she could take on when her budget was limited, to say the least?

She walked over to the porch and tried her key in the lock, but when she attempted to turn it, nothing happened. It wouldn't budge. Frustrated, she took it out and examined to see if it was damaged in some way. It wasn't, as far as she could tell, so she tried again.

Still nothing. She ground her teeth in silent frustration. Had the agent given her the wrong key? He had been pushed for time, and certainly he had appeared to be distracted by other customers walking into the office, all of which had left her with this dilemma. The last thing she wanted was to have to go all the way into town to pick up another one.

Maybe she could take a look around the back of the house and peer in through the windows? At least that would give her some idea of what the place had to offer.

She pushed open the wooden side gate, wincing as it creaked on its hinges in protest, and went through to the garden at the back of the house. Her eyes widened as she looked around. The estate agent's jargon had termed it mature, but that had been an understatement. This was a jungle, an overgrowth of rampant shrubs and tangled trees. It had obviously been a long while since any work had been done in this garden.

Turning her attention towards the house, Sarah tried the back door and found that it was locked. Then, as she stood

considering her options, her gaze brightened a fraction. There was a window open on the ground floor, and that brought all kinds of possibilities to mind. She was slender enough to wriggle her way through it if she could climb up on something and reach up as far as the sill. After all, it wouldn't be breaking and entering, would it, or even trespass, as she had permission to be here and view the property?

The thought was no sooner in her mind than she was acting on it. An overturned metal bucket made a handy step, and in the blink of an eye she had clambered up and was aiming to slide through the narrow window space. The pocket of her denim jeans snagged on the latch that jutted from the sill, and she halted for a moment or two, trying to free herself.

The bucket fell with a clatter, but she ignored the commotion and after a moment she continued to squirm through the gap. The window opened into a kitchen, and the sink unit was handily placed for her to ease herself into the room.

Success was just a breath away. One more thrust of her hips and she would be in.

'Can I help you in any way?' The firm male voice cut into the silence like the smooth crack of a whip, and Sarah froze.

Where had he come from? Whoever he was, he didn't sound as though he was at all ready to lend a helping hand. Just the opposite, in fact.

'Uh…I don't think so,' she murmured, stuck in the incongruous position of being caught half in and half out of the

window, with her back to the intruder.

'Really? Only you seem to be having some difficulty getting into the property. It occurs to me that the reason for that could be that you aren't following the normal procedure. Most people would prefer to make use of the door.'

'Yes. That's very true.' She started to twist around, easing herself into a sitting position. 'I wonder what on earth could have made me think that going through the window would be easier?' Cautiously, she let her fingers lightly rest on the window-frame so that she could keep her balance.

Her sarcasm was clearly lost on him, because he answered smoothly, 'Those were my thoughts exactly. I have to say it occurred to me that there's the advantage of not being seen from the front of the house.' He paused. 'Of course, that's assuming you don't kick buckets over and make your whereabouts known.'

Her gaze flicked downwards in the direction of the voice, and she found herself looking at a pair of long legs encased in olive-green chinos. Letting her glance sweep upwards, she saw that her interrogator was flat stomached, and that his chest, covered by an expensively tasteful linen shirt, broadened out to complement a pair of wide, capable-looking shoulders. His body was fit, honed to lean perfection, and even before her eyes had reached his face and meshed with his dark, piercing gaze, the breath had snagged in her throat.

Good looking was not an apt description. She swallowed hard. He was awesome, and well worth a second glance, if only

she hadn't been diverted by the way he was standing there, calmly assessing her, his grey eyes glimmering with a brooding expression that she found hard to fathom.

She managed to find her voice once more. Breathing evenly to keep her composure, she said, 'Actually, you don't need to concern yourself about me being here. I know it must look odd, but there is a perfectly reasonable explanation.'

'I'm glad to hear it,' he said. 'Perhaps you'd care to enlighten me?'

'Yes, of course.' She frowned. Surely he wasn't the owner of the property, who had come back to take a last look around? No one with his muscular build and general look of vitality would have left the place to fall into ruin, would they? She said carefully, 'I have the wrong key. I mean, I thought I had the right key, but something's wrong with it.'

'Hmm. I can see how that would be a problem.' His gaze narrowed on her, and she had the strong impression that he believed she was making it up as she went along. 'Perhaps you should let me help you down from there and we might be able to find a way to sort this out.'

Sarah gave him a direct look. 'Is that possible? Do you have a key?'

His mouth made a wry slant. 'You're not one to give up, are you? First things first…let's start with me helping you down from there, shall we?'

She frowned, torn between ignoring him and gaining entry in

her own way, and on the other hand acquiescing to his request. But since this man obviously didn't intend going anywhere until she complied, she really didn't have any choice but to follow his bidding. If she went on with her attempt to gain access to the house, it was more than likely that he would simply call the police, even though anyone could see that she wasn't a burglar, couldn't they?

'I think I can manage by myself, thanks all the same.' The bucket had long since rolled away and that would make her descent a trifle more precarious, but she wasn't going to let that hamper her. She began to ease herself down from the window-sill and prepared to jump the last bit of the way.

He forestalled her, though, before her feet had even left the bulwark of the wall, reaching out to her and splaying his hands around her waist, so that she felt herself being lifted from her vantage point. Holding her close by using his long body as support, he allowed her to slide gently down the last couple of feet to the ground, leaving her humiliatingly aware of the taut proximity of his muscled length as her feminine curves were softly held against him.

Steadying her as her feet finally touched the ground, he waited for what seemed like endless moments before he gently released her. Sarah didn't know where to look. She was having strange difficulty with her breathing, and her face must surely be flushed from that close encounter. She wasn't at all confident that she wanted to look him in the eye just then.

‘Are you OK?’ His voice drifted over her, a deep rumbling sound that had her skin tingling in response. He was altogether too male, and far too close for comfort for her peace of mind.

‘I’m fine,’ she murmured, trying to shake off the sensation of heat that his touch had evoked in her, and which even now was racing out of control through her bloodstream. It was a distraction that she could do without, but one that nevertheless persisted in clouding her mind.

‘If you’re sure about that,’ he said, ‘perhaps you could tell me what you’re doing here?’

She looked up at him then, a hint of annoyance flashing in her blue eyes. ‘I would have thought that was fairly obvious,’ she retorted. ‘I want to look around the house. What did you think I had in mind—an attempt to make off with the antiques?’

He inclined his head a fraction. ‘I have to admit that thought had crossed my mind. Alfred left some valuable bits and pieces in the house when he went into hospital, and I promised him that I would pack them up and send them on to his family. I’ve been too busy of late to finish the job, but I planned on crating up the last few items today.’

Sarah’s jaw dropped. ‘I didn’t realise… I mean…I had no idea that there were any such things in the house.’ She pressed her lips together momentarily and then added in a husky tone, ‘Look, do you think we could start again? This is not at all what it must appear. I really do have a key that the estate agent gave me, but I think he must have mixed it up with one for another property.

Perhaps the numbers are the same, or maybe there's a Bridge End Road somewhere.'

He studied her thoughtfully for a second or two, his grey gaze flicking over her, and she looked away, feeling awkward. Then pride came to her rescue and she braced herself to deal with the situation. Why should she feel guilty for simply trying to counter the estate agent's mistake?

Dragging her eyes back to his tall frame a moment later, she forced herself to meet his gaze.

To her surprise, he nodded. 'You're probably right.'

Sarah gave a soft sigh of relief. Was he finally accepting that she wasn't an intruder? His expression was noncommittal, though, and she studied him closely, trying to work out what might be going on in his mind. It was a doomed effort, and after a moment her thoughts wandered idly. She couldn't help but notice how well the short-cropped cut of his midnight-black hair suited him. It seemed somehow at one with his strongly defined features, the angular jaw and the straight line of his brows.

He said crisply, 'I dare say there must have been a mistake somewhere along the way…only the property wasn't supposed to be going on the market for another couple of days. By then I would have finished with the clearing up.'

Sarah's attention came back with a jerk. 'Yes, the agent did tell me that they weren't quite ready…but he didn't seem to be at all concerned about me coming to look the place over.'

'That doesn't surprise me at all.' His mouth made a crooked

shape. ‘The cottage is in such bad condition that they’ll probably struggle to find a tenant. I wouldn’t have thought many people would want to take it on, and Alfred’s family haven’t yet managed to find a buyer.’

A small line indented her brow. ‘Has something happened to Alfred? You said that he went into hospital.’ All at once Sarah found herself concerned with the fate of the poor man who had been too ill to maintain his property and who’d had to abandon all his worldly goods to another’s care. ‘You’re a friend of his?’

‘Neighbour. I live next door. I used to call round to make sure that he was all right. Then, one day, I found him in a state of collapse after he’d had a fall. It turned out that his heart had gone into an abnormal rhythm, causing him to black out for a short time. He cracked a rib as he fell against the sideboard and he wasn’t able to get up again.’

Sarah sucked in a quick breath. ‘Had he been lying there for a long while?’

He shook his head. ‘A matter of minutes, I believe. I think he was just about to prepare for bed when he became ill. Luckily, I was on a late shift that day, and when I came home happened to check on him.’

‘So you called for an ambulance and waited with him?’

He nodded. ‘I did. It wasn’t too long before the paramedics arrived.’

She tried to imagine how she would have coped under those circumstances. ‘Even so, that must have been nerve- racking

wait.'

'From the point of view of a friend wanting to lend a helping hand, yes, it was, but I'm a doctor, so at least I knew what to do to stabilise his condition. I had my medical bag to hand, fortunately.'

'A doctor…' Sarah studied him all over again. Perhaps that accounted for his calm, confident manner, both in his handling of Alfred's crisis and in his way of dealing with finding a potential trespasser on the premises. It was beginning to look as though this man was a force to be reckoned with.

'And how is he now? Did he pull through?' It hadn't been all that long ago since Sarah herself had been in a desperate, helpless situation, and she could readily identify with the injured man. She had no idea who it was who had attacked her and left her fighting for her life, but someone had come along and rescued her, just as this man had done for Alfred.

'He did.' He made a brief smile. 'He's OK, but he's not well enough to live on his own any longer. His family live some distance away, down in Somerset, and I don't think they realised how frail he was until I called them.'

'So, are they taking care of him now?'

'Yes, they are.' He glanced around. 'As to the cottage, Alfred has a sentimental attachment to the place, but he's leaving it up to his family to sort things out. I believe they would like to sell, but they decided to put it up for rent while they make up their minds. Not that anyone is likely to take it on, given the state it's in.'

‘Well, you never know, do you? Perhaps I could take a look around?’ Sarah ventured. ‘I really need to find somewhere to live.’

He frowned. ‘I doubt very much that this will be what you want, but certainly I can let you into the house. I’m Ben, by the way. Ben Brinkley.’

‘Sarah…Hall.’ She hesitated over the words that still seemed strange to her. She had no idea who she really was, but the name Sarah had been on the tip of her tongue when they’d asked her at the hospital, and from the outset, as young as she was, Emily had called herself Emily Hall. So that was the name that had stuck. Despite all the attempts that had been made to track Sarah’s origins, though, none had revealed anything of who she was and where she had come from.

He reached into his pocket and took out a key, inserting it into the lock of the back door. ‘If you take my advice, you’ll look elsewhere. I’ve been opening the windows to air the place, but I suspect there’s a problem with damp, and I don’t think anyone’s going to be dealing with it any time soon. I arranged for someone to come and put in a new fire for Alfred in the living room, so that he could be warm at least, and I’ve decorated the main bedroom and replaced the rotting window-frame in there, but there’s a limit to how much I’ve been able to do, given the hours I work.’ He pushed open the door to the kitchen and waved a hand for her to go inside.

Sarah walked into the room, and her spirits sank as soon as she looked around. It seemed as though the kitchen hadn’t been

touched since the turn of the previous century, with battered stand-alone cupboards lining the walls and a plain, rectangular wooden table in the middle of the room. The north-facing wall showed patches of damp, extending along its length. As for any means of cooking, there was a rusty old range up against one wall. She frowned. 'I wonder how Alfred managed to cook his meals.'

'I think he mostly relied on the microwave to heat things up,' Ben said, 'or he would come round to my place to share a meal with me.'

Sarah smiled. 'It sounds as though you were a good neighbour to him.'

Ben gave a negligent shrug. 'I did what I could.' He glanced around. 'Let me show you the rest of the place. It won't take long, because there's only the kitchen and living room downstairs, and just the two dormer bedrooms and a small bathroom upstairs. It's all very much on a par with what you see down here.'

He sounded as though he thought the tour was a waste of time, and Sarah gave him a quick sidelong look. Why was he so sure that she wouldn't want to live here?

'Are you hoping to put me off?' she queried lightly.

He pushed open the door to the living room. 'I think the house will do that all by itself,' he said. His glance skimmed over her. 'Besides, you're as slender as a string bean and you don't look as though you have the wherewithal to tackle the work that would be needed to put things right.'

Sarah made a face at that. His comment about her slender

shape had struck home. People had remarked on how slim she was. Perhaps it had been the time she had spent in hospital and the confusion as to who she was and what had happened to her that had made her lose weight. The clothes she had been wearing when she had been found no longer fitted her, but hung on her slender frame.

She stiffened her shoulders. All that was going to change. She was determined to make a new start, if only for Emily's sake.

'Isn't that the landlord's responsibility?'

'Maybe, but it's unlikely that Alfred's family will be doing any renovations in the short term. Their responsibilities end with matters of health and safety…things like making sure that the appliances are in sound condition.'

So any changes to make the place comfortable would be left to the tenant, assuming that permission was given. Sarah pressed her lips together, absorbing that fact before she started to look around.

The living room was drab, in need of decorating, and the heavy curtains tended to block out the light, lending a sombre air to the place. On the plus side, there were one or two small pieces of furniture that pointed to someone with a collector's eye, and she noted a cabinet housing several antiques that wouldn't have been out of place in a fine country mansion.

Upstairs, the main bedroom was clean and comfortable, with softly patterned walls and freshly painted woodwork, though the second bedroom was in a sorry state. The floor covering was

brittle and cracked, and the paper on the walls was yellowed with age. Poor Alfred must have been in desperate need of help until Ben had come along.

'The bathroom isn't too bad. It's a bit cramped, but at least the plumbing is in order.' Ben showed her into the room and then waited outside on the landing while she took a look around.

The bath was Victorian in style, with clawed feet and chipped enamel, and, as he had said, there was very little room to spare. Sarah suspected that what had once been a large bathroom had been divided to allow for a second bedroom.

'Thank you for showing me around,' she said, as they started down the narrow stairs. 'I do appreciate you taking the time. I'll have to call in on the estate agent tomorrow and tell him about the mix-up.'

'I expect he already knows. Like you said, someone looking at a Bridge End Road property is probably wondering right now why his key isn't working.'

Back in the kitchen, Sarah took a last look around. None of what she had seen filled her with enthusiasm, and perhaps that showed in her expression because Ben said, 'Don't think of it as a waste of time, but more as a guide to comparing properties in the future. You've gained an idea of what there is at the bottom of the heap.'

He walked with her out into the garden and turned to lock the door. 'Better luck next time.'

She sent him an oblique glance. 'You're very sure that I won't

be coming back, aren't you? Are you going to be this way with all your potential neighbours, or are you hoping that the place will stay empty?'

'Now, there's an appealing thought,' he said in a musing tone. 'I could enjoy the tranquillity of a country retreat, with nothing to disturb me except for the birdsong every morning. I think I might work on that some more, and maybe I'll be able to come up with a plan of action.'

Sarah might have believed that he was joking if it hadn't been for the pensive flicker that stirred in the depths of his grey eyes. Maybe he was something of a loner, content to spend his leisure time in solitary comfort.

Either way, he was already walking her back to her car, and she guessed that for him the incident was over and done with. He would see her on her way, and then retreat to his peaceful hideaway.

As for Sarah, she had a decision to make. Would the cottage make a suitable home for Emily? And how would the doctor take to having a lively child around the place? Not too well, she would imagine, if he really valued a quiet life.

CHAPTER TWO

A GENTLE smile touched Sarah's lips as she gazed down at the sleeping child. Emily's honey-coloured curls were splayed out over the pillow, her golden lashes brushing the softness of her cheeks. Her tiny hands held the bedspread lightly as she began to stir.

‘Emily, sunbeam, it’s time to wake up.’ Sarah stroked her daughter’s silky hair and Emily’s eyelids fluttered open.

She rubbed the sleep from her eyes with her fists and then lifted her arms up to Sarah, winding them around her neck. ‘Am I going to nursery today?’

‘Yes.’ Sarah gave her a kiss and a hug. ‘I’m going to take you there as soon as we’ve had breakfast. That will be good, won’t it? You’ll be able to play with the other children.’

Emily scrunched up her nose. ‘I want to go in the little cars. Joseph pusheded me out the way last time and the teacher telled him off.’ She frowned. ‘Will we be able to go outside?’

Sarah smiled. ‘I expect so. It’s a beautiful day today, so you’ll probably be playing outside for quite a lot of the time. And I’m sure the teacher will be looking out for Joseph, to make sure that he takes his turn along with everyone else.’

Emily smiled contentedly. ‘Don’t want that T-shirt,’ she said, pointing to the pile of clothes that Sarah had laid out ready. ‘I want the pink one with the shiny writing.’

‘Oh, you do, do you, madam?’ Sarah put her head on one side, looking on with amusement as the little girl scrambled out of bed. ‘And I suppose you want the pink hair slides as well, do you?’

The child nodded and scampered into the bathroom, leaving Sarah to follow. ‘Well, I dare say we can do that,’ Sarah murmured. ‘Let’s see how we get on with you washing and dressing yourself, shall we? Perhaps you can manage to pull your top on all by yourself today.’

‘I can.’ Emily’s voice rose with astonishment. ‘I can do it. Mummy forgetted.’

Sarah laughed. ‘Perhaps I did. You’ll have to show me all over again.’ She knew very well that Emily was beginning to manage her clothes for herself, but even so she had to acknowledge that it wasn’t unusual for her to have trouble recalling the small everyday things that cropped up. There were still times when she felt confused, as though her mind was playing tricks on her.

She was getting better every day, though, and yesterday’s visit to the cottage had been something of a landmark achievement, albeit that it had been marred by her unexpected meeting with the good-looking doctor.

What must he have made of her? He probably thought that she was a strange young woman with a decidedly nonconformist manner. Then again, she had at least managed to recover her composure, and she had been able to talk to him as though her actions were perfectly normal.

Even Carol had to admit that she was stronger in all ways… Sarah frowned. All but the one that really counted.

It was a fact that she still didn’t know who she was, and her past remained a mystery to her. Much as she loved her daughter, it still seemed alien to her to have discovered that she was the mother of this beautiful child. These last few months had been like a rebirth, in every sense, and each day that passed brought with it new challenges.

‘See, Mummy? I done it myself.’ Emily shrugged into her T-

shirt and beamed at Sarah, bringing her out of her reverie.

'So you have. Clever girl.'

After breakfast, Sarah gathered up her bag in readiness for the day ahead, and then started to look around for her notebook. Her brow furrowed. She was sure that she had put it somewhere safe, in a place where she would easily find it.

'Have you lost something?' Carol asked. Emily's foster-mother was stacking crockery in the dishwasher, but now she stopped what she was doing in order to glance quizzically across the kitchen in Sarah's direction.

'My notepad,' Sarah murmured. 'I thought I had left it on the top of the sideboard, but it isn't there.'

'I saw you sliding it into your document wallet last night,' Carol said. 'You said that you had finished writing your pieces for the local newspaper and you would drop them in to the office today when you went into town to see the estate agent.'

'Of course I did.' Sarah slapped a hand to her forehead. 'I thought it would be easier if I kept everything together.' She sighed. 'I should have written myself a memo and stuck it on the fridge.'

Carol smiled. 'Not to worry. You're getting there, little by little.'

Sarah's mouth made a crooked slant. 'At least it's not just me having problems if the mishap over the key is anything to go by.'

'That's true. The estate agent must have had a momentary lapse.' Carol hesitated, sending her a thoughtful glance. 'So, are

you still set on taking on the cottage?'

Sarah nodded. 'It isn't in the best of shape, but I don't see that I have any choice. It's about all that I can afford until my job prospects improve—my freelance writing is beginning to bring in a modest income, but it isn't enough to provide a terrific standard of living. At least the effort I'll have to put in to make the cottage into a home will be good therapy for me.' She frowned. 'I just hope that Social Services won't decide that it's not a fit place for Emily.'

'I doubt they'll object. After all, from the sound of it, there isn't anything too untoward about the property, apart from some damp in the kitchen. Besides, having a doctor living next door might turn out to be an advantage.'

Sarah made a face. 'I don't think he'll see it quite that way. The impression I had was that he would much prefer to be left to himself and, to be honest, that actually suits me right down to the ground. I need some space so that I can clear my head.'

'Not too much space, I hope?' Carol was frowning. 'I know you want to take on more work, and that you're determined to go it alone, but you have to think of Emily in all this. She's been through a lot, with you being away in hospital for a time, and the last thing she needs is for you to suffer a relapse. That's why you have to remember that I'm here for you, for both of you.'

Sarah clasped her hand and gave it a gentle squeeze. 'I will. Like I said, I'm not going to be far away, and we'll be back to pester you on a regular basis.'

‘That will be fine by me.’ Carol’s face creased into a smile. ‘Did the neighbour say where it was that he worked? Perhaps he’s a GP, with a practice nearby. That would be handy for you and Emily, wouldn’t it?’

Sarah felt a rush of heat ripple through her at the mere thought. Ben Brinkley as her GP? Heaven forbid. Even now she could remember with startling clarity the feel of his long body brushing against hers as he had helped her. Her whole system had gone into overdrive.

‘I don’t think I would be in any hurry to sign up on his list,’ she said on a husky note. She could well imagine that her blood pressure would soar sky high just as soon as she stepped into any surgery run by him. ‘I’d much rather settle for a more genial, fatherly type.’ She frowned. ‘Anyway, he was at home in the middle of a weekday afternoon, so I doubt he’s in general practice. Maybe he works shifts at the local hospital.’

That would make living near to him easier to handle, from her point of view. After all, it meant that he would probably be working some weekends, and that would narrow down the risk of her running into him, wouldn’t it?

A short time later, after she had dropped Emily off at nursery school, Sarah drove into the local town. Parking her car, she walked across the cobbled square, and headed for the estate agent’s office.

‘I’m so sorry about the trouble you had,’ the young man said, getting up from behind his desk and coming towards her. ‘I must

have put the wrong label on the key. It was lucky for you that the neighbour happened to be around yesterday when you visited the property.'

Sarah stared at him. 'I remember ringing you to tell you about the mix-up,' she said, 'but how did you know about the neighbour? I don't recall telling you about him.'

'No…no, he rang me.' His expression was something between apologetic and awkward. 'I think he wanted to check that you were who you said you were. The property wasn't meant to have been put on the market for another day or so and he wasn't expecting anybody to be viewing it.'

Sarah winced. Dr Brinkley was certainly thorough in his way of getting to the bottom of things. He'd obviously had doubts about her version of events and somehow that didn't seem to bode well for their forthcoming relationship as neighbours.

'But the cottage is still up for rent, isn't it?'

'Oh, yes, it is.' His face brightened. 'Are you interested in taking up the tenancy, then?'

'I am. Do you have some papers for me to sign?'

He nodded. 'Yes, yes…I'll sort them out right away.' Clearly, he was eager to finalise things before she had the opportunity to change her mind, and just a few minutes later Sarah left the office. In her bag, she had the correct set of keys, and all the necessary documentation for her new tenancy.

Was this the beginning of a new life? The thought was a little daunting, but at least she had made a start. Straightening her

shoulders, she began to walk along the street, heading in the direction of the offices of the local newspaper.

'Oh, no… Stop…stop… Slow down…' A woman's voice rang out, shrill with desperation, and she put up a hand as though to indicate that someone should stop. The woman was walking towards her, looking beyond Sarah to a point behind her. Sarah's purposeful stride slowed to a halt and she glanced behind her to see what was happening.

A motorcyclist was slowing down, indicating that he wanted to turn right at a junction, and he had positioned himself in the centre of the road. All appeared to be well, except that in the background there was the aggressive, speeding drone of an oncoming car.

Sarah turned round fully to take a better look. On the brow of the hill, she saw that a driver of a black saloon was overtaking on a bend in the road, and he was heading straight for the motorcyclist. The woman who had been shouting was gesticulating now, miming a frantic warning, but Sarah was very much afraid that it had come too late.

At the last moment the man behind the wheel of the car seemed to realise what was about to happen. He wrenched the steering-wheel, swerving to the left as he tried to avoid the motorbike, but he was going too fast and it was clear to Sarah that his actions were too late.

She watched in horror as he hit the bike with the front wing of his car and then smashed into another driver who was innocently

heading straight on in the left-hand lane of the road. The front of the black saloon crumpled like a concertina and the car that had been hit swung round violently.

Sarah ran towards the mangled cars and the bike, anxious to do what she could to help.

To her dismay, she saw that the motorcyclist was lying on his side, his leg trapped beneath the bulk of his motorcycle. He appeared to be unconscious, but after a swift check she discovered that his airway was clear and he was still breathing, albeit faintly.

Instinctively, she reached for her phone. 'Emergency services—I need an ambulance,' she said, her breath coming in short gasps as she realised the enormity of the situation.

'Will you help me to lift the bike off him?' Sarah flung the question at a man who had come to stare at the devastation all around.

'Of course.' Together they freed the young man from the weight of the vehicle that was trapping him, and Sarah knelt down to check him over more thoroughly.

The woman who had been shouting earlier appeared to be in a panic, flapping her arms wildly and running about as though she was unsure what to do next.

'Do you think you could try to stop the oncoming traffic?' Sarah suggested briefly. She could see that the biker had a thigh wound, with blood seeping through his jeans, and now she laid the heel of her hand on to his thigh and applied pressure. 'Perhaps

you could position yourself over the brow of the hill to stop anyone from coming any closer,' she told the woman, 'but make sure that you stay on the pavement.'

The woman nodded, and Sarah guessed she was glad to be able to do something useful. The man who had assisted her must have decided that was the best option, too, because he went with the woman, saying, 'You take the near side to the brow of the hill, and I'll go further along, to slow them down.'

Another man was already heading across the far side of the road to halt the traffic there.

Sarah took off her light cotton jacket and folded it up, making it into a tight wad. Then she whipped the leather belt from the waistband of her jeans and used it to strap the wad in place over the man's thigh, close to the source of bleeding.

After that, she hurried over to the other two vehicles and she quickly checked the condition of the drivers. The man who had caused the accident was still sitting upright in the driver's seat, looking dazed, and when she spoke to him he said in a thready voice, 'What have I done? I didn't realise…'

'Don't worry about that for the moment,' Sarah said. It seemed that his air bag had failed to deploy fully, and his leg was trapped by crumpled metal. 'Are you hurt? I've called for an ambulance. Is there anywhere in particular that's causing you pain?'

'My leg,' he said, and then added in a shaky tone, 'I'll be all right. Will you go and see to the others?'

Sarah nodded. 'I'll be back in a minute. Don't try to move.'

The driver of the other car was clutching his chest and his breathing was rapid and gasping. He was complaining of back pain, but his whole body was trembling, and Sarah guessed that he had gone into a state of shock. She stayed with him for a moment or two, trying to calm him and reassure him that he would receive medical attention soon.

It worried her that she had to leave the drivers, but her main concern had to be the young man who was lying in the road. He had been bleeding profusely from his leg wound, and she didn't know whether her attempt to stem the flow would be sufficient. She went back to him and saw that the pressure pad she had put in place was soaked with blood. The only comfort she could take was that at least he was still breathing.

It was a relief, some time later, to hear the sound of the ambulance siren in the distance, and to know that help was on its way at last. She felt out of her depth, but she knew that these people needed to be taken to hospital at the earliest opportunity. She got to her feet.

The woman who had been stopping the traffic came to stand beside her. 'The police have arrived,' she said. 'They're setting up cones to keep the area clear.'

'That's good.' The woman was much calmer now, and Sarah guessed that she would be able to give a good account to the police of what had happened.

She waited beside the motorcyclist as a paramedic walked towards him and knelt down. He tried to talk to him, but there

was no response, and so he looked up at Sarah. 'Do you know if he has been unconscious the whole time?'

'Yes, he has.' She hesitated, then added, 'The two drivers were both conscious when I went to look at them. One seems to have a chest injury and is struggling to breathe, and the other is complaining of leg pain.'

'Thanks. Perhaps you'd like to show my colleague the one with the chest pain.' He nodded towards a second paramedic who was emerging from the ambulance.

Sarah did as he'd asked, and when she was satisfied that both drivers had been assessed and the man with chest pain was being attended to she went back to the driver who had caused the pile-up and tried to reassure him that help was on the way.

By this time a second ambulance had arrived, along with a fast-response car, and more emergency practitioners began to come forward.

Feeling a trifle redundant by now, Sarah went to see how the motorcyclist was doing. The paramedic she had spoken to earlier was working side by side with someone else now, a dark- haired man who was wearing the outfit of an emergency doctor.

Sarah looked him over. Something about this man caught her attention, but she couldn't quite make up her mind what it was that was bothering her. He was kneeling down, but his demeanour was striking in that every move he made was decisive and self-assured. There was no hesitation, no doubting what needed to be done.

‘As soon as I’ve finished intubating him, we’ll splint that fractured limb,’ he said. ‘Once that’s done we can safely transfer him to the spinal board.’

Sarah felt the hairs prickle along the back of her neck. That voice was all too familiar, and she must have inadvertently let out a breathy sigh of recognition because the man shifted his head a fraction to look up at her. He frowned.

Sarah blinked. What was Ben doing here? Was this his job, working for the emergency services? Or was he based at the local hospital? The questions were on the tip of her tongue, but she stayed silent, because right now she didn’t want to distract him or in any way impede the work he was doing.

For a few seconds he held her gaze and the atmosphere seemed to be filled with tension.

‘It must be something in the air,’ he murmured. ‘We seem fated to meet under unusual circumstances.’ Then, almost as though that strange collision of minds had never happened, he simply turned away and continued attending to his patient.

It was only when the intubation was completed and the man was receiving life-giving oxygen that Ben looked at her once more and said briskly, ‘If you want to do something to help, you could squeeze this oxygen bag. Keep up the momentum, and make sure you keep to a regular rhythm.’

Sarah nodded to show that she understood, and crouched down beside the young biker. ‘He’s still unconscious. Does he have any other injuries, apart from the leg?’

‘I imagine he has a head injury, and there may be internal injuries, but we won’t know until we’ve done scans at the hospital. Either way, it looks as though he has a broken thighbone, and he’ll most likely need to have surgery to pin it in place. He’s lost a lot of blood, but I might be able to make up for that by putting a line in and giving him fluids.’ He fixed her with his dark gaze. ‘What you need to do is to keep pumping the oxygen.’

Sarah did as she was told, and kept quiet so as not to distract him. The paramedic worked with him to splint the leg, and then between them they lifted him onto the protective board.

Ben stood up. ‘OK, you can hand over to the paramedic now,’ he told Sarah. ‘I’m going to take a look at the other patients.’

‘OK.’ She relinquished her hold on the oxygen bag and watched Ben cautiously as he moved away, not quite understanding his abrupt manner. Perhaps he thought it strange that she had a knack of turning up in odd situations, but that was his problem, not hers.

Paramedics were getting ready to move the man who had been clutching his chest. As to the driver of the black saloon, he had been released from the driving seat and removed to a place of safety. It appeared that he was suffering from pain and swelling around his knee. To Sarah’s untutored eye, it looked as though the knee had shifted in relation to his leg.

Perhaps she had said as much, because Ben glanced at her as she approached and said lightly, ‘Yes, it certainly looks that way.’ His mouth gave a faint twist. ‘I’m surprised to find that you’re

still here. You're not at all squeamish, then?'

Sarah lifted her shoulders in a noncommittal shrug. She had no idea whether she was or not. As far as she was aware, this was the first time that she had come across a situation like this. 'So, what's wrong with his leg? Do you know?' she asked. 'Is there a fracture?'

'I can't be sure whether there's any fracture, but I expect the force of the smash has caused him to hit the dashboard with his leg and consequently the knee was dislocated. From the looks of the swelling and discoloration, it's quite nasty.'

He turned his attention to the patient. 'I'm afraid that your circulation is not as it should be in that limb, Colin, so I think that I should try to get the knee back in position without delay. I don't believe we can wait until we get you to the hospital.'

Colin mumbled a response, and Ben obviously took that as agreement, because he said, 'I'm going to give you something to take away the pain while I do that.' He looked directly at the man. 'As the paramedics are dealing with other patients, I'm going to ask this young woman if she will lend a hand with the procedure. Are you OK with that?'

The driver nodded, and Sarah guessed that he was in too much pain and discomfort to care one way or the other. She gave Ben a wide-eyed look.

'I've never done anything like this before,' she said in a low voice. 'Are you sure that you want me to help?'

'Quite sure.' He was already drawing up a syringe of what

Sarah imagined was painkilling medication. ‘All you have to do is position yourself at his head and thread your arms underneath his armpits. Clasp your hands together over his chest and keep up a counter-pressure when I pull on his leg.’ He started to give the injection, glancing from time to time at his patient.

‘How does that feel? Is it any easier?’

‘That’s better,’ the man said after a while. ‘The pain is going.’ He gave a slow sigh, and Sarah guessed that he was feeling a surge of relief.

Ben glanced at Sarah. ‘Do you think you’ll be able to help me out?’

‘Yes. I can do that.’

‘Good. Let’s get on with it, then, shall we?’

Sarah followed his instructions, kneeling down at the man’s head and placing her arms around his upper torso.

Ben, in the meantime, positioned himself to grasp the man’s leg in a way that would allow him to straighten it. ‘Are you ready?’ he asked, glancing at Sarah. ‘It’s really important that you counter my pulling on the limb.’

‘I’m ready.’

It was all over in a matter of seconds, and as soon as Colin’s leg had been straightened out, Ben started to check the circulation around the joint. ‘That’s improving already,’ he told Colin. ‘I’m going to splint it for you now, and then we’ll get you into the ambulance and off to hospital.’

Sarah watched Ben as he worked. He had a sure touch, and

she could see that anyone who came into his care would be well looked after. There was no hesitation, no debating what to do, and each procedure followed on from the one before like the turning of a well-oiled engine.

'Is this what you do every day?' she asked softly, as he beckoned to the paramedics who were coming from one of the ambulances.

'Emergency work, you mean?'

She nodded. 'Yes. I was wondering if you worked with the ambulance service or whether you're based at the local hospital.'

'It's a bit of both, actually.' He worked with the paramedics to lift the patient onto a stretcher, and made sure that he was strapped securely in place. 'I'm based in the A and E department at Woodvale Hospital, but I'm often called out with the ambulance service if there's a multiple accident.'

'Oh, I see.'

He studied her for a brief moment. 'What about you? Are you not at work today?'

'I was on my way to work when this happened.'

He nodded, and then directed the paramedics to transport the patient to the ambulance. 'I expect you'll be delayed for a while longer. The police will want to hear your account of what happened.'

'Yes, I imagine they will.'

He was already turning away to go with his patient, and Sarah remained where she was. Ben inclined his head briefly towards

her, and then it was as though he had dismissed her from his thoughts. His attention was solely on the injured people.

That was how it should be, of course. He had been focused on his work the whole time, and finding that Sarah was already here had been just a momentary distraction, one that had actually worked to his advantage when he had enlisted her help. She doubted that he would even give her a second thought after this.

A small qualm of unease ran through her. Why did it bother her that he might so easily dismiss her from his mind? She frowned. Perhaps it was all part and parcel of her mindset since the trauma that had happened to her.

She had lost her memory and therefore she was by association unmemorable—wasn't that the case? After all, no one had come looking for her to tell her that she belonged within his or her family unit, had they? It was one more thing that made her doubt herself and wonder where she belonged.

She braced her shoulders. She had to put all that behind her. She had her child, her work and the chance of a new beginning, and wasn't it a fact that she could turn some of this to her advantage? Everything that had occurred this morning would make for an excellent news item for the local paper, wouldn't it?

It wouldn't take her long to write her exclusive account of what had gone on, and as she had her camera with her in her bag, this was an ideal opportunity for her to take some photos of the wrecked vehicles.

No sooner had the thought sparked in her mind than she

started to act on it. She rapidly took several snapshots of the scene, quelling a sudden uprising of guilt by telling herself that there had been no fatalities, and that she would be foolish to miss this chance of a story. This was her livelihood after all.

Then, while she waited for the policeman to come and question her, she took out a notepad and started to draft the article.

'What do you think you're doing?'

She jumped as Ben's voice sounded in her ear. 'I'm sorry. What do you mean?'

'I saw you taking photos. How could you do that? Don't you have any sense of propriety?'

'It's my job,' she said, on a defensive note. 'I write for the local paper.'

His expression was cynical. 'Is that supposed to be an excuse? Don't we have enough people behaving like ghouls, feasting on other people's tragedies?'

'You don't know anything about the way I write,' she said, her voice taut. 'Why should you assume the worst?' She glowered at him. 'Anyway, shouldn't you be concerning yourself with your patients?'

'You're right.' He glanced over at the ambulance where the paramedic was getting ready to close the doors at the back of the vehicle. 'I can see that I'm just wasting my time talking to you.'

He walked briskly over to the ambulance and climbed in the back without a second glance in her direction.

Sarah watched the vehicle pull away, aware of a slow tide of dejection washing over her. How would he react when he discovered that she was going to be living next door to him? He had already formed the worst possible opinion of her.

She pressed her lips together. Most likely, once he was over the initial shock, he would simply leave her to her own devices.

That suited Sarah well enough. She had enough problems to cope with, without having to fathom the mindset of a reclusive neighbour.

CHAPTER THREE

'I WANT you to come into the house now, Emily,' Sarah called from the kitchen. 'I'm just getting your supper ready, and then it will be time for bed.'

Emily, though, wasn't taking too much notice of what she was saying. The overgrown garden was proving too much of a temptation, with its sheltering shrubs and lots of hidden nooks and crannies, and so far she had only managed to explore a small part of it to her satisfaction.

Moving to the cottage had been a great adventure as far as Emily was concerned, and in a way that was a relief for Sarah, because she had been worrying about what effect changing homes would have on her.

The phone rang as Sarah was about to go and bring the child into the house, and she hesitated before deciding to answer the call. Keeping an eye on the little girl through the kitchen window, Sarah picked up the receiver.

‘How are you getting along?’ Carol asked in a cheerful tone. ‘Have you managed to make any more headway with the unpacking? I know Emily was keen to look through all the boxes.’

‘I’m nearly there,’ Sarah told her. ‘Emily thought it was a treasure trove, finding the toys that you had passed on to her, and I can’t tell you how grateful I am to you for giving me all that bed linen and the bits and pieces for the kitchen. It was so good having you here to help out this afternoon. I don’t know how I would have managed otherwise. Emily’s really excited. She seems to have taken to the place, but she did make me promise that I would bring her back to see you at the weekend.’

‘That would belovely.’ Sarah couldfeel the smile that must be on Carol’s face. ‘Actually, I might see you before then. I’ve just realised that I have a couple of good-sized rugs stored up in the attic that might come in useful for you. I had them cleaned before they went up there, so they should be in a reasonable condition, and they might make the place look a bit more cosy. I could bring them over tomorrow some time, if you like.’

‘That would be great,’ Sarah said.

‘I’ll do that, then. Perhaps I’ll even get to meet your neighbour. Has there been any sign of him yet?’

Sarah winced. ‘Not so far. He’s been out all day. I’m not quite sure how he’s going to react when he finds that we’ve moved in next door to him. I expect that he thought nobody would want to take the place on.’

They chatted for a while longer, until Sarah glanced out of

the window and realised that she could no longer see Emily in the garden.

'I'm going to have to go and look for Emily,' she told Carol. 'She's been playing outside for the last half-hour, but it's growing dark now and I need to keep track of her in case she finds a way to get from the garden out into the fields. There's a good fence, but you know her. I wouldn't put it past her to find a way to climb over.'

'She's certainly a bundle of mischief,' Carol agreed. 'You go and find her. I'll give you a ring in the morning.'

Sarah hung up and hurried out into the garden. 'Emily, where are you?' she called.

There was no answer, and Sarah began to look around. It wasn't a particularly large garden, but the trees and shrubs cast shadows over the ground now that the light was fading, and there were so many corners that were hidden from view by trel-liswork and rustic pergolas that it took several minutes of searching before she realised that Emily wasn't anywhere to be found.

A feeling of panic ran through her. She had checked the fence earlier to make sure that there weren't any gaps in it, hadn't she? Now she looked to see if Emily had used anything to help her to climb up, but there was nothing resting against the fence, except for the twisted stems and branches of climbing plants.

Alarmed now, Sarah called out again. 'Emily, I need you to tell me where you are. I'm not playing hide and seek.'

She ran her hand along the top of the fence and at one point

discovered a slight indentation. It was a concealed gate, made to look as though it was part of the fence, and the bolt was on the other side. Leaning closer to get a better grip, she felt one of the panels give way slightly as her foot touched its base.

Crouching down to examine it more carefully, she realised that the wooden slats moved to one side when they were touched in a certain way, probably because some of the nails that should have held them in place from the other side were missing. Was it possible that Emily had squeezed her way through the panels and gone into the neighbouring garden?

She had to find out. Undoing the bolt, she opened the gate and went through.

Like the house it belonged to, this garden was a huge contrast to hers. It was wide, for a start, and it had been beautifully landscaped, with a velvet green lawn and low stone walls. There were curving pathways that led through ornate archways into areas beyond. Sarah followed one of the paths, peering into the shrubbery on either side.

'I don't believe this is happening,' she muttered to herself.

'Is something wrong?' The deep voice came from somewhere behind her and Sarah swung around to face her neighbour.

'Yes,' she said, recovering herself. 'There is, there definitely is, or I wouldn't be here, would I?' She flung the words at him, almost as though they were a challenge. Dismayed at being found in the wrong place at the wrong time once more, she stared at him.

‘I wouldn’t know about that,’ Ben said. ‘Going on past experience, all manner of things spring to mind.’

She gritted her teeth. Why did she have to deal with him, of all people, here and now? Wasn’t it enough that she was out of her mind with worry over Emily? ‘Before you start grilling me all over again, this isn’t what you think.’

‘I wasn’t intending to do anything of the sort,’ he said in a low drawl, and to her surprise, his mouth made a wry, amused shape. ‘To be honest, nothing you do surprises me any more. I’m sure you’ll fill me in on the details when it suits you.’

Her blue eyes glittered with frustration. ‘I’ve lost Emily. She must have come through here, because there’s nowhere else she could have gone. She wouldn’t have been able to do that if you had looked after your fence properly.’

She looked around in desperation, calling out, ‘Emily, I need you to come here—now.’

His dark brows lifted. ‘I’ve no idea what you mean. The fence is fine, as far as I’m aware.’

‘No, it isn’t—that’s just the point. The slats are loose on your side. I checked it earlier and I thought it was all right, but it isn’t, and now she’s gone, so I came in through the gate.’ She came to a sudden halt, gathering her breath. ‘And why would you need a gate in the fence anyway, if the cottage belongs to somebody else?’

‘I don’t think I’m following any of this.’ He looked perplexed. ‘Are we talking about a dog? What kind of dog is she? I suppose

she must be fairly small to get through a break in the fence.'

She sent him an exasperated look. 'No…Emily's not a dog. She's my little girl. She was playing in the garden, and then she wasn't, and I don't know where she could be, except here. She's only two years old, going on three. It's not her fault. She wouldn't know that she was doing anything wrong.'

He frowned. 'I didn't realise that you had a little girl.' He shook his head. 'I dare say I should have thought of the possibility.' He glanced towards her ringless left hand and Sarah's fingers curled into a fist.

She hadn't been wearing a ring when the paramedics had found her all those months ago, but there had been a thin, pale line on her finger, which pointed to the fact that she must have worn one at one time. It was another unanswered question about her past, and one that she would rather not deal with here and now.

'I have to find her.' She waved her hands about her in an agitated gesture.

'Of course you do.' He reached out and placed the palms of his hands over her shoulders, gripping her firmly, so that she stared at him in shock. 'But first of all you need to calm down, and deal with things one at a time. How long has she been missing?'

'A few minutes.' She tried to gather her breath, but her lungs felt as though they were constricted. 'I was in the kitchen, and the phone rang, and then when I looked back she wasn't there.'

'All right, take a few deep breaths and get yourself together.

We'll both look for her. She can't have gone far.' His warm hands still circled her shoulders and she realised that he wasn't going to let her go until she showed some sign that she was in control of herself.

'Yes,' she managed. 'You're probably right.' She pulled in a deep breath. 'I'm fine. You can let go of me now.'

'Are you sure?'

She nodded. 'I'm sure.'

'OK.' He slowly released her. 'Why don't you go on searching for her on this side of the garden while I go and get a torch from the house?'

Sarah hurried to do that, churned up inside because of the delay. Was Emily hiding from her, thinking that it was a game? Was that why she wasn't answering?

Ben was only gone for a minute or two, but although she had explored every part of that side of the garden while he'd been gone, she was still no nearer finding Emily.

'We'll do this area together,' he murmured, indicating the far side of the garden, 'and then, if we still haven't found her, we'll retrace our steps. I suppose she might have gone to hide behind the summerhouse.'

Some five minutes later they still hadn't found the little girl, and Sarah was beginning to feel shaky with anxiety. Ben must have sensed that because he put an arm around her, holding her in a way that was strangely comforting, considering that she barely knew him, and that for the most part they had been

at loggerheads. Now, though, he was letting her know that he understood what she was going through, and that he was there for her.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

Текст предоставлен ООО «ЛитРес».

Прочитайте эту книгу целиком, купив полную легальную версию на ЛитРес.

Безопасно оплатить книгу можно банковской картой Visa, MasterCard, Maestro, со счета мобильного телефона, с платежного терминала, в салоне МТС или Связной, через PayPal, WebMoney, Яндекс.Деньги, QIWI Кошелек, бонусными картами или другим удобным Вам способом.