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WEDDING IN DARLING DOWNS

Leah Martyn

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Wedding in Darling Downs

Аннотация

City surgeon – to country GP!Surgeon Declan O'Malley has just sauntered into Dr Emma Armitage's medical practice and revealed himself as her surgery's new partner! Emma might say she doesn't need him, but she knows the practice does. Gradually Emma's annoyance turns to admiration, and she can't imagine life not working side-by-side with the charismatic and roguish doctor…GP of a small town is not what high-flying Declan imagined as his ideal job, but a motorbike accident has left him unable to continue working as a surgeon. There is one plus-side to Darling Downs, however: working with beautiful – if feisty! – Emma is a very enticing challenge!

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‘I thought about you a lot over the weekend.’

Emma swallowed. Her heart tripped. He was bending towards her, his blue eyes capturing hers with an almost magnetic pull. ‘I…’

‘Thought about me too?’ he murmured hopefully.

She had. She couldn’t deny it. But would it help either of them if she told him that? Did she need the complication an admission would undoubtedly bring?

Declan leaned closer to her, slowly.

‘Emma…’ he said, his voice low in this last second before his kiss.

Her mouth trembled. She lifted her gaze and stared at him, mesmerised by the yearning she saw in his eyes. The desire to be kissed by him was irresistible, and before she could second-guess the wisdom of it all she was leaning into him.

Declan took her face in his hands, his need materialising in the softest sigh before his mouth found hers. The kiss rolled through his blood, and raw need slammed into him like nothing he had ever known before.

Emma clung to him and the kiss deepened, turned wrenching and wild. She felt a need inside her, an overwhelming need to be touched and held by him.

But it wasn’t going to go that far. At least not today. She felt Declan pulling back, breaking the kiss slowly, gently, his lips leaving a shivering sweetness like trails of insubstantial gossamer.

A long beat of silence while they collected themselves.

‘Have we broken every rule in the official partnership handbook?’ Declan asked, wrapping her closer.

She licked her lips. ‘Possibly…probably.’

Wedding in Darling Downs

By

Leah Martyn

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LEAH MARTYN loves to create warm, believable characters for the Mills & Boon® Medical™ Romance series. She is grounded firmly in rural Australia, and the special qualities of the bush are reflected in her stories. For plots and possibilities she bounces ideas off her husband on their early-morning walks. Browsing in bookshops and buying an armful of new releases is high on her list of enjoyable things to do.

Recent titles by the same author:

OUTBACK DOCTOR, ENGLISH BRIDE
THE DOCTOR'S PREGNANCY SECRET
A MOTHER FOR HIS BABY

Chapter One

IT WAS winter. Early morning. And cold.

Emma burrowed her chin more deeply into the roll-collar of her fleece as she jogged the last of the way home across the park.

The cawing of a crow disturbed the peace. Emma slowed her step and looked about her. She loved this time before sunup. The moist atmosphere never failed to lift her spirits. And heaven knew she could do with a bit of that. Mist was everywhere, as translucent and filmy as a bridal veil. It seemed to have a life of its own, breathing up from the earth, softening the stark winter outlines of the trees.

Emma clicked back into the present, regaining her momentum. She hadn't time to be indulging in fanciful thoughts. Another long day at the surgery loomed. But time for Kingsholme to keep functioning as a viable medical practice was running out. Her father's sudden death almost three months ago had left Emma in disarray. Both personally and professionally. If she didn't line up another partner quickly, the medical practice that had been founded by her grandfather would have to close. One lone doctor, namely *her*, couldn't hope to generate enough income to keep the place functioning.

The end result would be for the practice and the beautiful old home that encompassed it to go under the auctioneer's hammer.

The new owner, perhaps someone with an eye to the tourist

potential of the district, would probably turn it into a bed and breakfast. And their little town would be left without a resident medical officer.

Emma's spirits plummeted to a new low. The nerves in her stomach began knotting up again.

I *should* be able to get a doctor interested enough to work here, she berated herself. Even a decent locum who could fill the gap until a suitable partner came along. Perhaps her interviewing technique was all wrong. The few people who had actually showed, had taken one look at the set-up and promptly, if a bit awkwardly, fled.

Lifting the latch on the back gate, she made her way along the path and ran quickly up the steps to the verandah. She had time for a shower and marginally less time for breakfast. And then she'd better open the surgery and start seeing patients.

In her consulting room later, Emma threw her pen aside and lifted her arms in a long stretch. It had been another crazy morning. She couldn't go on like this. She just couldn't…

A soft tap sounded on her door before it opened. 'Moira—' Emma managed a passable smile for the practice manager '—come to tell me it's lunch time already?'

Moira Connelly, who'd been with the practice for at least twenty years, came into the room and closed the door. She looked pointedly at Emma's untouched cup of tea and the half-eaten muffin and clucked a motherly concern. 'You don't eat enough, Emma.'

Emma lifted a shoulder in a resigned shrug. 'I'll be out in a tick. Perhaps we could open a can of soup for lunch.'

'I'll manage something.' Moira flapped a hand in dismissal. 'Actually, I came to tell you there's a Dr Declan O'Malley here to see you.'

A sudden light leapt into Emma's green eyes. 'Has he come about the job?'

Moira shook her head. 'Apparently, he knew your dad.'

'Oh—' Emma bit her lips together, the grief she felt still raw and unchannelled.

Moira paused, pulling the edges of her cardigan more closely together, as if warding off a sudden chill. 'I expect he wants to offer his condolences.'

'I guess so…' Emma's short ray of hope faded into a heavy sigh. 'Give me a minute, please, Moira and then ask Dr O'Malley to come through.'

Emma watched the door close behind Moira and then swung off her chair and went to stand at the picture window, looking out. She imagined this Dr O'Malley was a contemporary of her father's from Melbourne. In earlier times Andrew Armitage had forged a rather distinguished medical career before the call of *home* had brought him back here to the town of Bendemere on the picturesque Darling Downs in Queensland.

Emma had spent holidays here, been happy here. So it had seemed only natural to come flying home when her world had fallen apart. Her return had coincided with the resignation of her

father's practice partner. Emma had stepped in, proud to work alongside her father. In the past year she'd begun to pull the shattered bits of her life together until it was almost making a whole picture again.

Then her father had suffered a massive heart attack, leaving her to cope alone.

Declan O'Malley prowled the reception area. In a few seconds he'd know whether Emma Armitage would welcome his visit or tell him to go to hell. God, he hoped she'd be reasonable. The situation demanded she be reasonable.

'Oh, Dr O'Malley—' Moira fluttered back into reception. 'Sorry to keep you waiting. Emma was just finishing up.' She waved towards an inner corridor. 'Second door on your left.'

'Thanks.' Declan acknowledged the information with a slight lifting of his hand. He paused outside what was obviously Emma's consulting room, took a deep breath, gave a courtesy knock to warn of his imminent entry, and then moved in with every intention of being at his diplomatic best.

Emma turned from the window. Her throat dried. Every molecule in her body felt as though it had been swiftly rearranged. She'd been expecting a man in her father's age group, a man in his sixties. But Declan O'Malley in no way fitted that description. He looked in the prime of his life, all six feet of him. Mentally roping off the very mixed emotions she felt, she went forward and offered her hand. 'Dr O'Malley.'

'Emma.' Declan ditched formality, enfolding her hand easily

within his own. 'Your father told me such a lot about you.'

Well, it's more than he told me about *you*, Emma thought, blinking several times in quick succession, long lashes swooping against her pale cheeks.

'I can imagine what a difficult time this must be for you.' Declan's words filled an uncomfortable gap. 'I would have been in touch before this but I've been out of the country. I've just caught up with things in general.'

She nodded. His voice was deep and resonant. Smooth like red wine. Emma could feel its impact like a thump to her chest, momentarily disarming her. 'Please…have a seat.' She indicated a conversation area in front of the big bay window.

As they settled, Emma took several quick, all-encompassing peeks at him, recording short finger-combed dark hair, a lean face, strong features, olive complexion. And blue eyes reflecting a vivid intensity that could see things she didn't want seen…

Declan looked at the woman he had to deal with here. Emma Armitage was strikingly lovely. She had amazing facial bones and her hair looked cornsilk-soft, blonde and straight, just brushing her shoulders. But it was her eyes that drew him. They were green like the deepest part of the forest, framed within thick tawny lashes. And they were accessing him warily. He had to step carefully here. He didn't want to embarrass her, hurt her. But he'd come on a mission and, somehow, he had to accomplish it.

But how to begin?

'So, how come you knew my father?' In a lightning strike,

Emma took the initiative.

Declan refused to be put on the back foot; instead he cut to the chase. 'When I was an intern at St John Bosco's in Melbourne, your father was my boss. I'm where I am today in medicine because of Andrew. In the early days of my training, I was ready to chuck it. Oh, boy was I ready! But your dad talked me out of it. He was an amazing man.'

A new loneliness stabbed through Emma's heart. 'Yes, he was…'

A pause. Awkward. Until Declan resumed gently, 'Over the years I kept in touch with your dad. Any career-change I considered, I ran it past him first. He was my mentor and I considered him my *friend*. And I don't use the word lightly.'

Emma nodded, swallowing past the lump in her throat. 'I appreciate your taking the time to come here.' Her mouth compressed as if shutting off the flow of emotion. 'You must be very busy in your own practice.'

'I'm between jobs, actually. That's another reason why I'm here.'

Emma straightened in her chair, the oddest feeling of unease slithering up her backbone. 'I don't understand.'

Declan's perceptions whipped into high awareness. Something in her eyes and the defensive little tilt of her chin held him back from explaining further. The last thing he needed was for her to start resenting him before they could speak properly. So, softly-softly. 'Uh…this could take a while.' He glanced

briefly at his watch. 'Could we perhaps have a spot of lunch somewhere and talk?'

Emma held back a harsh laugh. He just had no idea. 'I don't have time to go out to lunch, Dr O'Malley. Patients will be arriving soon for the afternoon surgery.'

'You're the sole practitioner?'

'Yes,' she said, thinking that was another story in itself.

He'd assumed she'd have engaged a locum, but obviously not. Declan thought quickly. Emma Armitage had a brittleness about her—she was obviously worked to death. He cursed his lack of foresight and sought to remedy it swiftly. 'Understood.' He gave a brief shrug. 'I'm here and available. Put *me* to work.'

So, what was he saying? That he'd share her patient list? Emma's eyes widened. She didn't want to be blunt but she had only this man's word he was a competent doctor. First and foremost, she had a duty of care to her patients…She turned her head slightly, raising a hand to sweep her loose fair hair away from her neck. 'Is that a good idea, do you think?'

Declan sat riveted. Her little restive movement had briefly exposed her nape, with skin as tender and sweet as a baby's. He tried without success to dismiss the unexpected zip of awareness through his gut. What was the question again? Idiot. Got it. 'Sorry.' He gave an apologetic twist of his hand. 'You'll need some ID.' Reaching back, he took out his wallet and spun it open in front of her. 'Driver's licence.'

Emma nodded, registering that the photo on the licence

matched the face of the man sitting opposite her. So he was who he claimed he was.

'My card as well.' He held out the buff-coloured business card towards her.

Frowning a bit, Emma took it, almost dazzled by the impressive array of letters after his name. 'You completed your orthopaedic speciality in Edinburgh, Scotland?'

His hesitation was palpable. Then he said, 'Yes. It was always the discipline I felt drawn to.'

She handed the licence back with the ghost of a smile but retained his card. 'Should I be addressing you as Professor O'Malley, then?'

'I wouldn't think so.' In a second his eyes were filled with unfathomable depth and shadows. 'Declan will do just fine. So —' he slid his wallet back into his pocket '—going to let me loose on your patients, then?'

'Why wouldn't I?' Emma felt a curious lightening of her spirits. To be able to share her workload, even for a few hours, would be wonderful. 'I'll give you the ones who like a good chat.'

'I guess I asked for that.' Declan's look was rueful and he uncurled to his feet. 'I'll grab a burger somewhere and my bag and be back in—' he checked his watch '—twenty minutes?'

Swept along by his enthusiasm, Emma stood hastily. 'Take whatever time you need.' She began to usher him out. 'You can use Dad's consulting room.'

Declan stopped, looked down at her, his expression closed. 'If

you're sure?'

Emma nodded, leading him down the corridor to the room next to her own. She opened the door and went in.

Declan followed hesitantly. Soft early afternoon light streamed in through the windows, leaving a dappled pattern across the large desk and the big leather chair behind it. A big chair for a big man, Declan thought. A man with a big heart that had in the end let him down far earlier than it should have.

'It's been cleaned but basically everything is as Dad left it.' Emma moved across to touch the tips of her fingers to the rosewood patina of the desktop.

Declan felt emotion drench him. Yet he knew what he felt at the man's loss was only a fraction of what his daughter must be feeling. He spun to face her, questioning softly, 'Are you sure about this, Emma?'

'Quite sure. It will be good to see the place being used again.' The words were husky, as though she was pushing them through a very tight throat.

Declan wanted to reach out to her. Hold her close. Feel the press of her body against his. Take her grief into himself…Oh, for crying out loud! He cleared his throat. 'I'll see you back here, then, in a half-hour or so.'

'Feel free to come straight through and get yourself set up,' Emma said as they left the consulting room and she pulled the door closed. 'I'll just need to make a call and verify your registration before you take surgery.'

Declan inclined his head, acknowledging her eyes were clearly weighing the effect of her statement on him. He gave a mental shrug. As far as his accreditation went, he had nothing to hide. 'Good,' he agreed. 'You should do that.'

'And I'll brief Moira,' Emma added. 'She'll make sure the patients find you.'

'Moira.' Declan lifted a dark brow. 'The lady I spoke to in reception, right?'

Emma nodded. 'She's been with us for years. I sometimes think she could treat most of the patients herself.' Her eyes lit impishly, her full mouth hooking into a half smile.

The impact of that curve of her lips hit him like a sandbag to the solar-plexus. He flicked back the edges of his jacket, jamming his hands low on his hips. 'Let's try to push through early, then.' He paused, his blue gaze roaming over her in an almost physical caress. 'We do need to talk, Emma.'

For a second Emma felt as though she could hardly breathe, his proximity sending a warm rush of want to every part of her body. Feminine places she'd almost forgotten existed. She pulled back, regaining her space. 'We'll arrange something…'

Even though the circumstances weren't ideal, it was good to be back in a consulting room with his feet under a desk again, Declan thought. At least he was doing something useful and if it lasted no more than the rest of the day, he'd give it his best shot.

He was amazed how the time flew. He saw a steady stream of patients, each without exception with a comment about his

presence in the practice. He'd answered as honestly as he could, 'I'm helping out Dr Armitage for the moment.' And whether that situation became permanent still depended on so many things. So many.

He called in his final patient for the day, Carolyn Jones. She looked anxiously at Declan. 'I was expecting to see Emma—Dr Armitage.'

'Emma's passed some of her patients over to me today, Mrs Jones,' Declan offloaded with a cheerful smile. 'I'll do my best to help.'

Carolyn gripped her handbag more tightly. 'I…really just wanted a chat…'

'That's fine,' Declan encouraged, leaning back in his chair, his look expectant. 'I'm here to listen.'

'I want to go back on my sleeping pills. I've tried to do without them for a couple of months now but I just can't manage—' Carolyn stopped and swallowed heavily.

For a second Declan considered a quick consult with Emma. But she had enough on her plate. He could handle this. He leaned forward, speed-reading the patient notes.

The lady was sixty-one but there was nothing leaping out at him to warrant extra caution. He raised his gaze, asking, 'Is there a reason why you can't sleep, Carolyn?'

'I've a difficult family life. Emma knows about it—'

'I see. Suppose you tell me about it as well and see how we go?'

Carolyn lifted her shoulders in a long sigh. 'My husband, Nev,

and I are bringing up our three grandchildren. Their ages range from seven to ten.'

'Hard going, then,' Declan surmised gently. 'What circumstances caused this to come about?'

Carolyn gave a weary shrug. 'The whole town knows about it. Our son was a soldier serving overseas. He was killed by a roadside mine. Our daughter-in-law, Tracey, took off and then got in with the wrong crowd. Started seeing someone else. She was always a bit *flighty*.'

Declan raised his eyebrows at the old-fashioned word.

'She's with this new boyfriend now. We've heard they're into drugs. I don't understand how she could just dump her children…'

Declan's caring instincts went out to his patient. But, on the other hand, there were strategies she could try that might induce natural sleep—

'The children are still unsettled, especially at night,' Carolyn said, interrupting his train of thought. 'I just can't get off to sleep and then I'm useless the next day.' She paused and blinked. 'I've really had enough…'

So, crisis time then. Declan thought quickly. As a general rule, sleeping pills were prescribed in small doses and only for a limited time-span. But his patient sounded desperate—desperate enough to…He got to his feet. 'Carolyn, excuse me a moment. I've been out of the country for a while. I'll just need to recheck on dosage and so on.'

Declan came out of his office the same time as Emma emerged from hers. Her brows flicked in question. 'Finished for the day?'

'Not quite.' He accompanied her along to reception. 'Actually, I wanted a word about a patient, Carolyn Jones.'

'The family have ongoing problems,' Emma said quietly.

'I gathered that.' Declan backed himself against the counter and folded his arms. 'Carolyn wants to go back on her sleeping pills. I wondered about her stability.'

'You're asking me whether she's liable to overdose on them?'

'Just double-checking.'

'She cares too much about those children to do anything silly,' Emma said.

'Quite. But still—'

'The sleepers Carolyn takes are quite mild,' Emma cut in. 'They don't produce a hangover effect next day.'

A beat of silence until Declan broke it. 'You realize more than two weeks on those things and she's hooked?'

Oh, for heaven's sake! Emma almost ground her teeth. Declan O'Malley needed to stand outside the rarefied air of his theatre suite and realize family practice was about people not protocol. 'If you're so concerned, make it a stopgap solution. In the meantime, I'll try to figure out some other way to help her. But if Carolyn can't get sleep, she'll go dotty. Then where will the family be?' she pointed out.

'OK…' Declan raised a two-fingered salute in a peace sign.

This obviously wasn't the time to start a heated discussion with the lady doctor. 'I'll go ahead and write her script.' He took a couple of steps forward and then wheeled back. 'Are you around for a while?'

Emma felt the nerves in her stomach tighten. What was on his mind now? 'My last patient just left so I'll be here.'

'Good.' Declan's eyes glinted briefly. 'I'm sorry to push it, but we do need to talk.'

Emma twitched her shoulders into a barely perceptible shrug and watched him go back to his consulting room. Then she went into the work space behind reception and began slotting files back into place.

Moira joined her. With the information Emma had discreetly passed on to her about the new doctor, Moira's eyes were rife with speculation. 'Do you think he'll stay?'

At the thought, Emma managed a dry smile. 'I haven't offered him a job yet. And, even if I did, I expect Dr O'Malley has far more exciting challenges than working in a run-down practice in a country town.'

'You never know.' Moira's voice held a bracing optimism.

No, you never did. Thinking of her father's untimely death, Emma could only silently agree. 'Moira, it's way past your home time. I'll lock up.'

'If you're sure?' Moira looked uncertain.

'I'll be fine. Go.' Emma flapped a hand. 'And have a nice evening.'

There was still no sign of Declan some ten minutes later. Carolyn was obviously still with him. Perhaps it would help her to talk to a different practitioner, Emma thought philosophically. Heaven knew, she herself had no extra time to allot to her needy patients. Well, even if Declan helped only *one* of her patients in the short time he was here, it was a plus. Deciding there was no use hanging round in reception, she went through to the staffroom.

Declan found her there. He gave a rat-a-tat on the door with the back of his hand to alert her.

Emma's head came up, her eyes blinking against his sudden appearance. 'Hi…'

'Hi, yourself.' One side of his mouth inched upward and a crease formed in his cheek as he smiled. 'I smelled coffee.'

Emma averted her gaze to blot out the all-male physical imprint.

In a couple of long strides, he'd crossed the room to her.

Emma lifted the percolator, her fingers as unsteady as her heartbeat. 'Milk and sugar's there on the tray.'

'Thanks.' He took the coffee, added a dollop of milk and lifted the cup to his mouth. 'Could we sit for a minute?'

Emma indicated the old kitchen table that been in the staff room for as long as she could remember. 'You were a long time with Carolyn. Everything OK?' she asked as they took their places on opposite sides of the table.

'I hope so.' Declan's long fingers spanned his coffee mug and

he said thoughtfully, 'We talked a bit and I suggested a few things. Some tai chi, a good solid walk in the early evening could help her relax enough to induce a natural sleep. Even a leisurely swim would be beneficial.'

'The school has a pool but it's not open to the public.'

'Pity. She's obviously quite tense.'

'And it's a situation that's happening more and more,' Emma agreed. 'Grandparents taking on the caring role for their grandchildren. Even here in this small community, there are families in similar circumstances as the Joneses.'

Declan took a long mouthful of his coffee. 'Does Bendemere have anything like a support group for them? Somewhere they can air their fears and worries in a safe environment?'

Emma resisted the urge to shriek. 'This isn't the city, Dr O'Malley. We're a bit short of facilitators and psychologists who could lead a group.'

'But a doctor could.'

Was he serious? 'Don't you think I would if I could?' she flashed. 'I'm so stretched now, I—'

'No, Emma, you're misunderstanding me.' His look was guarded and cool. 'I meant *me*—I could help.'

'You?' Emma huffed her disbelief. She wasn't understanding any of this. 'Are you saying you want to stay on here?'

'You need a practice partner, don't you?'

'But you know nothing about the place!' Emma's thoughts were spinning. 'Nothing about the viability of the practice.

Nothing about *me*.'

He stared at her for a long moment. 'I know you're Andrew's daughter.'

'And you'd make a life-changing decision on the basis of that?' Emma's voice had a husky edge of disquiet.

Oh, hell. He was doing this all wrong. No wonder she was confused. He'd meant to lead up to things gently and objectively, explain himself, choose his words carefully. But just getting his head around Emma's crippling workload, the plight of Carolyn Jones and others like her had spurred him on to get matters sorted and quickly.

'Emma—' He paused significantly. 'I didn't just come here to offer my condolences. There's another reason why I'm here in Bendemere.'

Emma tried to grasp the significance of his words. 'Perhaps you'd better explain.'

Declan watched as she drew herself up stiffly, almost as if she were gathering invisible armour around her. He knew what he was about to tell her would come as a shock, maybe even wound her deeply. But he had to do it. 'Your father contacted me shortly before his death. He offered to sell me his share of the practice. I'm here to arrange payment and finalise the details of our partnership.'

Emma's mouth fell open and then snapped shut. She clutched the edge of the table for support, becoming aware of her heart thrashing to a sickening rhythm inside her chest. 'I don't believe

Dad would have done something like that.'

'I have a letter of confirmation from your father and the legal documents.'

'Dad wouldn't have just *thrust* someone on me. Someone I didn't even know!' She felt the pitch of her anger and emotion rising and didn't care. 'And I don't have to accept your money, Dr O'Malley, nor do I *have* to take you on as my practice partner.'

Declan's gaze narrowed on her flushed face, the angry tilt of her small chin. Damn! He hadn't reckoned on any of this. 'It was what your father wanted, Emma.'

Emma gave a hard little laugh. 'Emotional blackmail will get you absolutely nowhere, Dr O'Malley.'

'Please!' With a reflex action Declan's head shot up, his vivid blue gaze striking an arc across the space between them. 'Give me a little credit. I realize this has come as a shock to you. And I'm sorry. I'd hoped Andrew might have given you some idea of what he wanted, paved the way a bit, but obviously time ran out on him. But we can't leave things here, Emma. We really can't.' His mouth compressed briefly. 'I suggest we take a break and let things settle a bit. I'm staying at the Heritage Hotel. We could link up there later this evening and talk further. Dinner around seven. Does that suit you?'

'Fine,' Emma responded bluntly. It seemed she had no choice in the matter.

'Let's meet at the bar, then.' Declan grabbed at the grudging acceptance.

Chapter Two

EMMA hitched up her little shoulder bag and determinedly pushed open the heavy plate glass door of the restaurant. She loved this place. As it was winter, the lovely old fireplace was lit, sending out warmth and flickering patterns to the wood-panelled walls. The atmosphere was charming and tonight was the first time she'd come here since…Her teeth caught on her lower lip. She and Dad had come here often. The Sunday lunch at the Heritage was legendary.

But this evening her dinner companion was someone far different than her father.

Heart thrumming, Emma made her way along the parquet flooring towards the bar. Declan was there already. She saw him at once, his distinctive dark head turning automatically, almost as if he'd sensed her approach. A shower of tingles began at the base of her backbone, spiralling upwards and engulfing her. She swallowed. He was wearing dark jeans and an oatmeal-coloured sweater that looked soft and cuddly. Oh, get real, Emma! Cuddles and Declan O'Malley were about as compatible as oil and water.

'Hello again.' Declan nodded almost formally. And blinked. Wow! Gone was the harassed-looking medico. Emma Armitage could have sauntered in from the catwalk. She was wearing black leggings and a long-sleeved, long-line silver-grey T-shirt, a huge

silky scarf in a swirl of multicolour around her throat. And knee-high boots. 'You look amazing.'

'Thanks.' Her shrug was so slight he hardly saw it. 'I love your outfit too.'

So, the lady did have a sense of humour after all. A quirky one at that. Declan's grin unfolded lazily, his eyes crinkling at the corners. 'We seem to have that sorted, so let's try to enjoy our evening, shall we? Would you like something to drink?'

In a leggy, graceful movement, Emma hitched herself up on to one of the high bar stools. 'A glass of the house red would be nice, thanks.'

For a while they talked generalities and then Declan glanced at his watch. 'I reserved us a table. Shall we go through?'

'It's rather crowded for a week night,' Emma said stiltedly as they took their places in the restaurant adjoining the bar.

'I've been quite taken with the town,' Declan rejoined. 'Tell me a bit about its history.'

Emma did her best to comply and it wasn't until they'd come to the end of their meal and were sitting over coffee she said pointedly, 'It's been a long day, could we wind things up so we can both get on about our business?'

'OK, then.' Declan's moody blue eyes were fixed unflinchingly on hers. 'I'll get straight to the point. About six months ago I received a letter from your father telling me about his deterioration in health.'

For a few seconds Emma stared at him in numb disbelief.

‘Dad told *you* and he didn’t tell me? Why? I was his daughter, for heaven’s sake.’

Declan could hardly bear to watch her grief. ‘I know it sounds an old chestnut, Emma,’ he said gently, ‘but perhaps he didn’t want to upset you any further than you had been. You had other things going on in your life, didn’t you?’

Emma’s face was tightly controlled. ‘What did Dad tell you about that?’

‘Almost nothing—just that you’d had a few personal problems.’

Like mopping up the emotional fallout after her rat of a fiancé had dumped her for her best friend…

‘And that you’d come back to work in the practice,’ Declan finished diplomatically.

Emma curled her hands into a tight knot on her lap. ‘What did he tell you about his health? That he had only a short time to live?’

Declan’s frown deepened. ‘Nothing like that. But, from what he told me, I drew my own conclusions. If it hadn’t been for the fact that I, myself, was in somewhat of a personal crisis at the time, I’d have come back to Australia to see Andrew immediately. Instead, I called him. He was concerned for you, for the future of the practice if the worst happened. We talked at length. It was then he offered to sell me his half of the practice.’

‘I see.’ Emma swallowed through a suddenly dry throat. But she understood now why her father hadn’t told her anything about

his plans. He would have had to reveal the uncertain state of his health. So instead he'd trusted Declan O'Malley to set things right. But did that mean she had to accept him as her partner? She didn't think so. 'I'm sure Dad wouldn't have wanted you interfering in my life.'

'That's not what Andrew had in mind, Emma.'

'So, you're here as some kind of…white knight?' she grated bitterly.

'I'm here because I want to be here,' Declan said simply. 'Because it seems like a worthwhile thing to do. You need a partner. I need a job. Isn't that the truth of it?'

She looked at him warily. 'Why do you need a job? You obviously have medical qualifications beyond the norm. Career-wise, the world should be your playground. Why aren't you working in your chosen discipline somewhere?'

'It's a long story.'

'There's plenty of coffee in the pot,' Emma countered. 'And we're quite private here.'

Declan felt the familiar grind in his guts at the thought of rehashing everything.

At his continued silence, something like resentment stirred in Emma and she couldn't let go of it. 'Dr O'Malley, if you've ideas of entering into partnership with me, then I need to know what I'm getting. That's only fair, isn't it?'

He took a long breath and let it go. 'My surgical career is, to all intents and purposes, finished. I can't operate any longer.'

Faint shock widened Emma's eyes. How awful. She knew only too well what it was like to have your world collapse with no redress possible. 'I'm sorry.'

'Thank you.' The words escaped mechanically from his lips.

And that was it? Emma took in the sudden tight set of his neck and shoulders. He had to know she needed more information. Much more than the bald statement he'd offered. She felt about for the right words to help him. But in the end it was a simple, softly spoken, 'What happened?'

Declan rubbed a hand across his forehead. 'After I'd completed my general surgery training, I decided to go ahead and specialize in orthopaedics.' His blue eyes shone for a moment. 'On a good day when everything in the OR goes right and you know it's your skill that's enabling a patient to regain their mobility, their normal life, and in some instances their whole livelihood…it's empowering and humbling all rolled into one.'

'Yes, I imagine it is,' Emma said, but she had the feeling he had hardly heard.

'I was fortunate enough to be accepted at St Mary's in Edinburgh.'

Emma's eyes widened. 'Their training programme is legendary. I believe they take only the brightest and best.'

'I was lucky,' he said modestly.

Hardly. Obviously, he was seriously gifted. Which fact made Declan O'Malley's reasons for opting to come in as her partner in a country practice odd indeed, she thought, noticing he'd hadn't

touched his coffee. Instead, he'd spanned his fingers around the cup, holding on to it like some kind of lifeline.

'After a long stint in Scotland, I'd decided to head back home. I was still finalizing dates when I had a call from an Aussie mate. He was coming over for a holiday in the UK, beginning in Scotland. I postponed my plans and Jack and I bought a couple of motorbikes.'

'Fuel-wise cheaper than cars, I guess,' was Emma's only comment.

'Jack and I found a couple of high-powered beauties for sale locally. Those bikes took us everywhere. Life was sweet—until we had the accident.'

Emma winced and she automatically put her hand to her heart. 'How?'

He gave a grim smile. 'A foggy afternoon, an unfamiliar road. A bit too much speed. And a truck that came out of nowhere. Jack received a broken leg. I was somewhat more compromised. I ended up with lumbar injuries.' He expanded on the statement with technical language, ending with, 'The outcome was partial paralysis in my left leg.' He grimaced as if the memory was still fresh.

Emma gripped her hands tightly. He must have been sick with worry and conjecture. And fear. Her antagonism faded and her heart went out to him. 'What was the result? I mean, you don't appear to have any deficit in your movement.'

His eyes took on a dull bleakness. 'I've regained most of it but

my muscles are unpredictable, my toes still get numb from time to time. Added to that, I can't stand for excessively long periods. And that's what orthopaedic surgeons have to do. You need to have muscle strength, be in control. I can't risk a patient's life by breaking down in the middle of a long operation. So, career-wise, I'm stuffed.'

'But you could do other kinds of surgery,' Emma said hopefully.

'I don't even want to think about that. I want to do what I was trained to do—what I do—*did* best.'

But sometimes you had to compromise. Emma knew that better than most. 'You could lecture, Declan.'

He made a disgusted sound. 'Take up a *chair* in a hallowed hall somewhere? That's not me. I'm a doer. I'd rather change direction entirely.'

'In other words, come in as my partner—' She broke off. 'You might hate it.'

'I don't think so.' Blue eyes challenged her although his mouth moved in the ghost of a wry smile. When she remained silent, he went on, 'Emma, don't you think it's just possible Andrew considered he was acting in the best interests of *both* of us? He knew the extent of my injuries, the uncertain state of my career in medicine and he knew, without him, you were going to need a partner—someone you could trust. And you *can* trust me, Emma,' he assured her sincerely.

Emma felt almost sick with vulnerability. Heaven knew there

was no one else beating the door down to come and work with her. But this man? On the other hand, what choice did she have? He had all the power on his side and, she suspected, the determination that her father's wishes would be carried out. There was really no get-out clause here. None at all. 'How do we go about setting things in motion, then?' Her voice was small and formal.

Declan breathed the greatest sigh of relief. They'd got to the trickiest hurdle and jumped it. 'You're overworked and under-capitalised. If we tackle the problems together, Kingsholme could be brought up to its potential again. Why don't we give it six months? If we find we can't work together, I'll get out.'

'And where will that leave me?'

'Hopefully, with a fully functioning practice. You'd have no difficulty attracting a new partner and I'd recoup my investment. It would be a win-win situation for both of us.'

Emma knew the decision had already been made for her. She wanted to—*needed* to—keep Kingsholme. Declan O'Malley had been Dad's choice of a suitable practice partner for her. She had to trust his judgement and go along with that. Otherwise, she was back to the mind-numbing uncertainty of the past weeks. 'Have you come prepared to stay, then?'

'I've brought enough gear to keep me going for a while.' Declan kept his tone deliberately brisk. 'If it suits you, I'll continue at the surgery until Friday and then, on the weekend, we can go over what practical changes need to be made. I'd imagine

you'd have a few ideas of your own about that?'

'It depends on how much money you want to spend,' Emma shot back with the faintest hint of cynicism.

He answered levelly, 'There'll be enough.'

On Friday afternoon, they held a quick consult after surgery. 'What time do you want to begin tomorrow?' Emma asked.

Declan lifted his medical case up on the counter. 'I'm flexible. What suits you?'

'I need to do an early hospital round. We could meet after that.'

'Why can't I come to the hospital with you?'

Emma looked uncertain. 'It's all pretty basic medicine we do here.'

'And nothing I'd be interested in?' Declan's gaze clouded. 'Emma, if we're partners, we share duties. Right?'

She coloured slightly. 'I was just pointing out there'll be none of the drama associated with Theatres.'

'So, it'll be a change of pace. I can handle that.'

Could he, though? Emma wished she felt more certain. On the other hand, why not think positively? She'd already capitulated over him becoming her partner. It was time to just get on with things. 'Hospital at eight o'clock, then? I'll give you the tour.'

'That's what I want to hear,' he drawled with his slow smile.

For a split second Emma registered a zinging awareness between them. Raw and immediate. Like the white-heat of an electric current. She repressed a gasp. Declan O'Malley exuded sex appeal in spades. He was about to step in as her practice

partner. And they were going to be working very closely together for at least the next six months…

Emma had enjoyed her Saturday morning run. Leaning forward, hands on the verandah railings, she breathed deeply and began to warm down.

'Great morning for it,' a male voice rumbled behind her and she jumped and spun round, her heart skittering.

Emma straightened, one hand clenched on the railings, her senses on high alert, as Declan O'Malley came up the steps. His sudden appearance had made her flustered and unsure. 'I run most mornings.' She felt his eyes track over her and, before she could move or comprehend, he'd lifted a hand and knuckled her cheek ever so gently. Emma felt her breath jam.

'It's good to see those shadows gone,' he said, his voice throaty and low and further tugging on her senses. His eyes beckoned hers until she lifted her gaze. 'I gather you slept well?'

She nodded, breath rushing into the vacuum of her lungs. She'd slept well for the first time in weeks. She wasn't about to analyse the reason. But she had a fair idea it was all to do with the fact that at least for the next little while, her future was settled. Her teeth caught on her lower lip. 'I thought we were to meet at the hospital.'

Hands rammed in his back pockets, Declan shifted his stance slightly as if to relieve tense muscles. 'I was awake early. Thought I might come over and persuade you to have breakfast with me.'

'Or you could stay here and have breakfast with *me*,' Emma

rushed out. 'I'm sure I could cobble something together.'

'I didn't mean to gatecrash—'

'You're not.' She took a thin breath. 'Give me a minute to have a shower and change.'

He followed her inside to the kitchen. 'I could knock us up some breakfast—that's if you don't mind someone else rattling around in your kitchen?'

'Not remotely.' In a reflex action, Emma jerked the zipper closed on her track top right up to her chin. 'Uh…I did a shop last night. There's plenty of stuff in the fridge.' She almost ran from the room.

Sheesh! Declan spun away, thumping the heel of his hand to his forehead. Why on earth had he done that? *Touched* her. He hadn't meant it to happen but at that moment his hand had seemed to have a life of its own. Oh, good grief. Surely, the idea had been to reassure her he was trustworthy. Well, that premise was shot. Instead, he'd gone to the other extreme and created a damn great elephant in the room. He hissed out a breath of frustration and tried to take stock of the kitchen. He'd promised her breakfast. He'd better start delivering.

Emma showered in record time, towelled dry and dressed quickly in comfortable cargos and a ruby-red sweater. She wasn't about to drive herself crazy thinking about earlier. It was hardly a professional thing for Declan to have done. What she couldn't work out was her instinctive response to his touch…Oh, Lord. Suddenly, her body was stiff with tension. Almost jerkily, she

lifted her hands, bunching her hair from her shoulders and letting it spiral away. At least he'd got on with the breakfast. There was a gorgeous smell of grilling bacon coming from the kitchen.

'How's it going?' Emma asked, buzzing back into the kitchen, determined not to start walking on eggshells around him. They were about to become partners in practice. Nothing else. 'Find everything?'

Declan looked up from the stove. 'No worries. It's a great kitchen.'

'Tottering with age but very user-friendly,' Emma agreed. Opening the door of the fridge, she peered in and located the orange juice. She poured two glasses and handed one across to Declan.

'Thanks. I'm doing bacon and scrambled eggs.'

'Lovely.'

Declan lifted his glass and drained it slowly as he watched the eggs begin to thicken and fluff. He could get used to this. The warmth and the clutter of the old-fashioned kitchen. The comforting aroma of food cooking. The feeling of solidness, of family. The place just breathed it. He could get some idea now of how desperate Emma had been to hang on to her home. 'Your idea?' He pointed to the sun-catcher crystal that dangled from the window in front of the sink.

Her tiny smile blossomed to a grin. 'My *alternative* period. You about done here?'

'I hope it's up to scratch,' he said, catching the drift of her

flowery shampoo as her head topped his shoulder.

'Mmm, smells good.' Emma gave him a quick nod of approval. 'I'll get the plates.'

'I used to run a bit,' Declan said as they settled over breakfast.

'You can't now?'

His mouth pulled down. 'I seem to be stuck with a set of prescribed exercises these days.'

Emma looked up sharply with a frown. Did that mean he didn't trust his legs on a simple run? 'I understood you to say it was standing for long periods you had trouble with. Short bursts of running would seem OK, surely? And drawing all that fresh air into your bloodstream works magic.'

Well, he knew that. 'Maybe it'll happen. In time.'

So, end of discussion. Emma pursed her mouth into a thoughtful moue, realizing suddenly that her own emotional baggage didn't seem nearly as weighty as her soon-to-be-partner's. Determinedly, she pulled out her social skills and managed to create enough general conversation to get them through the rest of the meal. She glanced at her watch, surprised to see the time had gone so quickly. She swung up from the table. 'If you'll start clearing away, I'll just feed the cat.'

Declan gave a rusty chuckle, looking sideways to where the big tabby sprawled indolently on the old-fashioned cane settee. 'Looks like he wants room service.'

Emma snorted. 'Lazy creature. I think the mice run rings around him. He belonged to Mum.'

Declan hesitated with a response, a query in his eyes.

'She moved back to Melbourne about a year ago,' Emma enlightened him thinly. 'Dad bought her an art gallery in St Kilda. It had an apartment attached so the whole set-up suited her perfectly and Dad went there as often as he could before he died. She never really felt at home here in rural Queensland. Missed the buzz of the city, her friends.'

Declan was thoughtful as he stood to his feet, processing the information. At least now he knew where the bulk of Andrew's estate had gone and why the practice was all but running on goodwill. And why Emma's stress levels must have been immense as a result.

Between them, they put the kitchen to rights in a few minutes. Hanging the tea towel up to dry, Emma felt an odd lightness in her spirits.

'Emma, I wonder if you could spare a few minutes now? There are a couple of business decisions I'd like to run past you.'

His voice had a firm edge to it and Emma came back to earth with a thud. 'Let's go through to Dad's–*your* surgery,' she substituted shortly. 'I'll give the hospital a call and let them know we'll be along a bit later than planned.'

They took their places at the big rosewood desk. 'Fire away,' Emma invited, locking her arms around her middle as if to protect herself.

Declan moved his position, sitting sideways in his chair, his legs outstretched and crossed at the ankles. 'First up, I'll need to

see some figures from your accountant. Could you arrange that, please?'

'I do have some current figures,' she replied. 'I organized that when I needed to see what state the practice was in after Dad—' She stopped. 'I'll get them for you directly. Perhaps you'd like to study them over the weekend.'

'Thanks.' He nodded almost formally. 'That will help a lot. Now, your office system—'

'Yes?'

'It seems a bit outdated. You obviously have computers installed but no one seems to be using them.'

She'd wondered when they'd get to that. 'I encouraged Dad to get them soon after I moved back and we had the appropriate software installed. Moira did an evening course at the local high school, but at the end of it she said it was all beyond her. Dad said he felt more comfortable with his own way of doing things.'

'I see.'

'I tried to get things operational myself, but then, with Dad gone, it all came to a screeching halt. Any time I had to spare has had to go on face-to-face consults.'

'The system must be got up and running,' he insisted. 'If it's too onerous for Moira, then she'd be better—'

'I won't let you sack her, Declan,' Emma swiftly interjected.

He raised his head and looked at her coolly. 'Emma, don't go second-guessing me, please. I was about to add, Moira would be better staying with what she does best. She's obviously invaluable

to the practice. She knows the patients well and that helps facilitate appointments. But what we do need is someone with expertise who can come in on a permanent basis and get our patient lists up to date and their medical history on to the computers. Can you think of anyone suitable?'

'Not offhand,' she said stiffly. It all made sense though and, belatedly, she realized the shortcomings he'd pointed out had probably been one of the reasons the doctors she'd interviewed had vetoed working here. 'I'll have a chat to Moira. Better still, I'll call her now.' She felt almost goaded into action, reaching for the phone on his desk. She hit Moira's logged-in home number and, after a brief conversation, replaced the receiver in its cradle. Raising her gaze, she looked directly at Declan. 'Moira's coming in now. She says she may have a few ideas. I hope that's in order?'

Declan spread his hands in compliance. He wished Emma didn't see him as the bad guy here. But he'd promised Andrew he'd do what he could to save the practice and if along the way he had to tread on a few toes—gently, of course–then he'd do it. He hauled his legs up and swivelled them under the desk. 'I noticed we don't seem to have the services of a practice nurse. What's the situation there?'

'We used to have one, Libby Macklin. She took maternity leave, intending to come back, but found it was just too much with the demands of the baby. We didn't get round to replacing her.'

Declan placed his hands palms down on the desk. 'Would she

like to come back, do you think?'

Emma nodded. 'I see her quite often. The baby's older now, of course, and Libby's managing much better. I know she'd appreciate some work but I just haven't been in a position to offer her any…'

'Sound her out then,' Declan said, refusing to acknowledge Emma's wistful expression.

'I'll go and see her after we've been to the hospital. Now, about patient lists.'

'I'm listening.'

'I'm not sure how you'd like to work it, but perhaps we could do a clean swap? You'd take over Dad's patients,' she suggested.

'That sounds fair. And I'm thinking we could schedule a weekly practice meeting, air anything problematic then. Suit you?'

Heck, did she even have a choice in the matter? A resigned kind of smile dusted Emma's lips. 'Fine.'

Declan frowned and glanced at his watch. 'How long will Moira be?'

'Not long. She lives only a few minutes away.'

'Yoo-hoo, it's me!' As if on cue, Moira's quick tap along the corridor accompanied her greeting.

Declan uncurled to his feet and dragged up another chair. 'Thanks for doing this, Moira.'

'No worries.' She flapped a hand and leant forward confidentially. 'I'll get straight to the point. My granddaughter is

looking for work.'

'Jodi?' Emma's gaze widened in query. 'I thought she was full-time at McGinty's stables.'

Moira's mouth turned down. 'James, the youngest son, has returned home so he's taken over much of the track work. Jodi's there only one day a week now.'

Declan exchanged a quick guarded look with Emma. Moira was obviously a doting grandmother but they couldn't afford to be giving jobs away on her say-so. 'Moira, we'd need to have a chat to Jodi about what the job here entails,' he stressed diplomatically.

'Of course you would.' Moira smiled. 'That's why I've brought her in with me. She's outside in reception.'

'Ask her to come in then,' Declan said briefly, turning to Emma as Moira left the room. 'What do you think?' he asked quietly. 'You obviously know this young woman. Are we doing the right thing here?'

'Jodi is very bright. Providing her technical skills are up to speed, then I think she'll do a good job. Oh—here she is now.'

Declan got to his feet again as Jodi bounded in, all youthful spirits and sparkling eyes. 'Hi.' She linked the two doctors with a wide white smile.

'Jodi.' Declan stuck out his hand in greeting. 'Declan O'Malley. Emma you know, of course.'

'Hello, Jodi.' Emma beckoned the teenager to a seat. 'Moira says you're looking for some work.'

‘Yes, I am.’ Jodi slid her huge leather satchel from her shoulder and on to the floor beside her chair. ‘Nan’s told me a bit about what you need here. I could easily manage to give you three days a week, if that suits. I work track at McGinty’s on Fridays and I’ve just got a day’s work at the supermarket on Thursdays. So I could give you from Monday to Wednesday.’

Declan leaned back in his chair and folded his arms. ‘How old are you, Jodi?’

‘Eighteen. At present I’m taking a gap year before I start Uni.’

‘What are you studying?’ Declan asked.

‘Applied science. Eventually, I want to be associated with the equine industry, combine research and field work. Horses and their welfare are my great passion. I’ll need to do my doctorate, of course.’

‘That’s really worthwhile, Jodi,’ Emma said warmly. ‘Best of luck with your studies.’

Declan made a restive movement in his chair, his dark brows flexed in query. ‘How are your computer skills, Jodi? We’d need you to be able to collate information, get the patients’ histories logged in and kept up to date.’

‘I’m thoroughly computer literate.’ Jodi twitched a long hank of dark hair over her shoulder. ‘I work quickly and thoroughly and I’m quite aware of the confidential nature of the job here. I’ll sign a clause to that effect if you need me to.’

Emma bit hard on the inside of her cheek to stop the grin that threatened. This kid was something else. ‘We’ll probably get

round to that, Jodi. But, if Dr O'Malley agrees, I think we can offer you the job. Declan?'

'Uh—' Declan's eyes looked slightly glazed. He rocked forward in his chair. 'Let's agree on a trial period, Jodi, if that suits—say a month? And we'll see how things are going then?'

'Absolutely.' Jodi shrugged slender shoulders. Bending down, she flipped open her satchel. 'I'll leave you my CV. And there are several character references as well.' She placed the file on the desk. 'If there's anything else you need to know, I'll be available on my mobile.' She smiled confidently and whirled to her feet. 'So, I'll see you both on Monday, then.'

'Good grief,' Declan said faintly after Jodi had swished out of the door. 'Do you get the feeling *we're* the ones who have just been interviewed?'

Emma chuckled. 'It's the Gen Y thing. They're inclined to set out terms and conditions to prospective employers. But isn't she marvellous?'

'Made me feel about a hundred and six,' Declan growled. 'Hell, was I ever that young and enthusiastic about life?'

Emma stood and pushed her chair back in. 'Probably we both were.'

'Mmm.' Declan's tone was non-committal. 'Well, we seem to have made a dint in what needs to be done here so, if you're ready, I'd like to see over your hospital.'

Chapter Three

BENDEMERE'S hospital was old but beautifully kept. Declan looked around with growing interest. 'This place has a long history, obviously,' he remarked.

'My grandfather actually funded the building of it,' Emma said proudly. 'These days, much of the accommodation is given over to nursing home beds for our seniors. Anything acute is sent straight on to Toowoomba by road ambulance. Or, in the case of serious trauma, we stabilise as best we can and chopper the patient out to Brisbane.'

'Do you have a theatre?' Declan began striding ahead, his interest clearly raised.

'A small one—just here.' She turned into an annexe and indicated the big oval window that looked into the pristine operating space. 'Dad did basic surgical procedures. And Rachel Wallace, our nurse manager, has extensive theatre experience. She insists the maintenance is kept up. Shame it's not used any more…'

'It's all here though, isn't it?' Declan's gaze roamed almost hungrily, left and right and back again, as if to better acquaint himself with the layout. 'Who did the gas when your dad operated?'

'Oliver Shackelton. He's retired in the district. And, even though he won't see seventy again, I know Dad trusted his skills

to the nth degree.'

'Interesting.' Declan pressed his lips together and took a deep breath. This was his natural environment. But he didn't belong here any longer. Suddenly, it all came at him in a rush, a heartbeat, the past coming forward to link with the present. He felt the sudden tightening of his throat muscles. It was over. He was finished as a surgeon. He couldn't operate any more. At least not in any way that was meaningful—from his standpoint, at least…

'Declan…are you OK?'

Declan's head came up, looking at her without seeing. 'Sorry?'

'We should get on,' she cajoled gently.

'Yes, we should.' He turned abruptly, as if to shut out the scene he'd walked into so unguardedly. He felt weird, in no way prepared for the hollow feeling in his gut as he snapped off the light and closed the double doors on the annexe.

Emma's gaze moved over him. 'Sure you're OK?'

He saw the compassion in her eyes, the softening, felt her empathy. But he wasn't a kid who needed to cry on her shoulder. 'I'm fine,' he said, his tone gruff as if brushing her concern aside. 'Fill me in about hospital staff.'

Emma gave a mental shrug. He hadn't fooled her for a minute. Well, if that was how he wanted to handle it, that was his business, his life. 'I've sent out an email to the nurses to advise them you were joining the practice.' She didn't add they'd probably done their own research on the Internet in

the meantime. 'Rachel is our nurse manager,' she reiterated as they made their way along to the station. 'We have three other permanent RNs who alternate shifts and Dot Chalmers is permanent nights. Ancillary staff are rostered as necessary.'

'Leave and sick days?' Declan fell into step beside her.

'Covered by a small pool of nurses who mainly live in the district.'

'That seems like a reasonable set-up,' Declan said. 'I imagine the staff value their jobs quite highly.'

'And the folk hereabouts value *them*,' Emma said, leaving him in no doubt that any changes there would be unacceptable. Just in case he was thinking along those lines.

'Hospital maintenance is covered by a local firm, as is security. And Betty Miller is our indispensable hospital cook.'

Declan nodded, taking everything on board. He began to quicken his pace.

'Patients now?'

Emma rolled her eyes. He'd have to learn to slow down if he was going to relate to the locals. 'Is there a fire somewhere?' she enquired innocently.

'Forgot.' He sent her a twisted grin. 'I'm keen to get cracking, that's all.'

'Hello, people.' Rachel, tall and slender, came towards them, her nimbus of auburn hair stark against the white walls of the hospital corridor. 'And you are Dr O'Malley, I presume?' Beaming, the nurse manager stuck her hand out towards Declan.

‘I am.’ Declan shook her hand warmly. ‘And it’s Declan. I’ve just been getting the lay of the land from Emma. It looks like a great little hospital.’

‘We’re proud of it.’ Rachel spun her gaze between the two medical officers. ‘Um—I was just on my way for a cuppa.’

‘Don’t let us hold you up,’ Emma insisted. Despite it being a small hospital, she knew the nurses worked hard and deserved their breaks.

‘OK, then. I won’t be long.’ Rachel began to move away and then turned back. ‘I knew you’d be along so I’ve pulled the charts on our current patients.’

‘Take your time.’ Emma smiled. ‘And thanks, Rach. We’ll be fine.’

‘I guess you know this place like the back of your hand,’ Declan surmised as they made their way along to the nurses’ station.

Emma sent him a quick look. It still seemed surreal that this once highly ambitious, powerful man was now to all intents and purposes her practice partner. Her hand closed around the small medallion at her throat. No doubt, for the moment, the newness of what he’d taken on was enough to keep him motivated. But what would happen when the grind of family practice began to wear thin? Where would his motivation be then?

In a dry little twist of quirky humour, Emma transposed the scenario into equine terms. Surely what Declan was proposing was like expecting a thoroughbred racer to feel fulfilled pulling

a plough…

‘Something amusing you, Emma?’ Declan lifted a dark brow.

‘Not really,’ she said, going behind the counter and collecting the charts Rachel had left out.

‘OK, who’s the first cab off the rank?’ Declan asked, settling on one of the high stools next to her.

‘Russell Kernow, age seventy-five, lives alone,’ Emma said. ‘I saw him at the surgery a week ago. He was presenting with an incessant cough, raised temperature. I prescribed roxithromycin. His condition didn’t improve and I admitted him two days ago. He was seriously dehydrated, complained his chest felt tight. I’ve placed him on an inhaler twice daily and the cough seems to have diminished slightly. I’ve sent bloods off as well.’

‘So, you’re testing for what—serology, pertussis, mycoplasma?’

‘Plus legionella,’ Emma said.

Declan raised a dark brow. ‘Is that a possibility?’

‘A remote one, but Russell’s house is fully air-conditioned. He spends much of his time indoors. And we’ve since found out the filters on his air-con unit haven’t been changed for two years.’

‘Still…legionella is drawing a fairly long bow,’ Declan considered.

Emma bristled. If he was going to start telling her her job, they were going to fall out before the ink was dry on their partnership papers.

Their eyes met. He could see the spark of hostility in her gaze.

Hell, he didn't want to blow things with her before they even got off the ground. 'Just thinking aloud,' he said hastily. 'It's your call. When do you expect the results?'

'Soonish,' Emma said, faintly mollified. 'I've requested the path lab to fax them to us here.' She turned, stroking a stray lock of hair behind her ear. 'Next patient is Sylvia Gartrell, age sixty-five. Recently had surgery—hysterectomy and bladder repair. Post-op seven days. The air ambulance delivered her to us yesterday.'

Declan ran his index finger between his brows. 'What's the problem?'

'Her bladder function hasn't yet returned to normal. She's having to self-catheterise and she's finding the procedure difficult to manage. Currently, the nurses are giving her some guidance. It seemed the safest option to have her here until she feels competent to go it alone. At the moment she's convinced she'll be stuck with this problem for ever so she needs emotional support as well.'

'Why was she released from hospital in the first place?'

Emma sighed. 'Same old story. They needed the bed.'

'Oh, for crying out loud! We'll need to keep a close eye on her, be mindful of the possibility of infection.'

'We're all aware of that, Declan.'

He sighed. 'OK, then, who's next on our patient list?'

'Only one more. Ashleigh Maine, aged eleven. Poor little kid had a bad asthma attack yesterday. Scared the life out of her.'

‘So what’s her prognosis?’

‘She’s getting some relief from a nebuliser and of course she’s on a drip. Her home situation is not as good as it could be, though. Dad still smokes.’

Declan swore under his breath. ‘I realize tobacco is the drug some folk cling to when they’re under stress but surely, if his child is suffering, the man has to take stock of his actions?’

‘Normally, Ashleigh’s condition is fairly well managed but it only needs a change in routine and she’s struggling again.’

‘Are you aware of the study on asthmatics that’s been carried by the Jarvis Institute in Sydney?’ Declan asked pointedly.

Emma’s gaze was suddenly uncertain. ‘It’s a breathing technique, isn’t it? I think there’s a new physio in Toowoomba who’s a graduate from the Institute. We got some leaflets. I was going to investigate it further just before Dad…died. Do you want to take the child on to your list?’

‘Fine with me,’ he replied calmly. ‘I’ll chase up the physio and get the parents in for a round-table chat. I’ve a few ideas that might help as well.’

Emma defended her corner quietly. ‘I did try to put the parents in touch with the Asthma Foundation. They run camps and things that Ashleigh could attend with other youngsters with the same health problem. They declined.’

Declan’s response was swift. ‘Leave it with me, Emma. I’m new to the place. They’ll take notice, believe me.’

Emma opened her mouth and closed it. She hoped he wouldn’t

jump all over the family. It wasn't the way things worked in rural medicine. If the Maines took offence, that would be the end of the doctors getting access to Ashleigh. Oh, help. Which way should she jump? Forward, if she had any sense. 'You will tread gently, won't you, Declan?'

His jaw hardened. 'I'll do what I need to do, Emma.'

'Not with my patients, you won't,' she flared. 'Bendemere is a close-knit community. You can't go around upsetting people.'

Hell, this was a minefield. She was guarding her territory, whereas he was used to giving orders and having them carried out immediately. OK, then. Back off, he told himself. 'If we want this partnership to work, Emma, we have to trust each other's medical skills. You haven't had any complaints about my patient contact, have you?'

'No…' She lifted her hands in appeasement. 'It's just—we're not used to working with each other yet.'

His mouth pulled tight. Was this what he was about to sign on for—bickering over someone who couldn't grasp that his inability to quit smoking was stuffing up his child's health? He lifted his gaze to glance meaningfully at her. 'Just let's try to keep it professional, then.'

Emma gritted her teeth. That was a low blow. She'd done everything she could under very difficult circumstances to keep their relationship professional. He'd been the one to overstep this morning when he'd touched her cheek! She tried to steady her thoughts. She'd have to swallow her angst with him if she didn't

want everything turned into ashes. New jobs had been promised and already there was an air of expectation about the town. She breathed a sigh of relief when she saw Rachel heading towards them, a tea tray in her hands. 'I thought you might need this,' she said. 'And Betty's made us some of her special ginger biscuits,' she added brightly, sensing an air of tension between the two.

'Lovely,' Emma said faintly.

'I'll take a rain check, thanks, Rachel.' Declan spun off his stool. 'I'll get on and make myself known to our patients.'

'Then I'll accompany you,' Rachel said.

'There's no need.' He gave an impatient twitch of his shoulder. 'I'm sure I can manage.'

Rachel's raised brows spoke volumes, before she swept up the patient charts. 'My hospital, my call, Dr O'Malley. Besides, I need to strut my stuff occasionally,' she said cheekily. 'It's ages since I walked the wards with a posh doc.'

Emma watched them walk away together, saw Declan turn his head, heard his rumble of laughter as he interacted with Rachel. She made a little sniff of disapproval. Shaking off a disquiet she didn't understand, she took up one of Betty's ginger biscuits and dunked it in her tea.

By Sunday afternoon Emma was going stir-crazy. It wasn't that she didn't have a million things she could be doing. She just couldn't settle to anything. Declan had offered to be on call for the weekend so that had left her with more free time than she'd had in months. She'd done a tour of the garden and picked a

bunch of winter roses to bring some warmth and friendliness to reception. At least Moira would appreciate her gesture. She doubted Declan would even notice.

She was back to *him* again. She still had the feeling of things being not quite right between them. He'd erupted into the practice and into her life and she'd hardly had time to take stock. He hadn't exactly steamrollered over her but he hadn't wasted any time in putting his plans into action. But then she'd given him tacit permission, hadn't she? Because the alternative had been too bleak to contemplate.

Oh, help. Emma turned her restless gaze towards the kitchen window. It would be dark soon. Suddenly she was beset with a strange unease. She couldn't begin the first week of their new partnership with so many of her questions unresolved.

They needed to talk.

Now she'd decided, she wouldn't hold back, although her heart was slamming at the thought of what she was about to take on. They'd already exchanged mobile phone numbers. She'd find him about the place somewhere.

He answered on the fourth ring. 'O'Malley.'

'Hi—it's me—Emma.'

'Problem?'

She took a shallow breath. He wasn't making this easy. 'Are you busy?'

'Er—no. I've just been for a jog.'

Emma blinked uncertainly. 'How did it go?'

‘Pretty good,’ he said, sounding pleased with himself. ‘What’s up?’

‘Nothing, really. I wondered whether we could get together this evening—just sort out a few things before work tomorrow…’

‘OK…’ He seemed to be thinking. ‘Want to grab a bite to eat somewhere, then? Or, better still, come to me. I’ve moved into the log cabin at Foley’s farm. Know where it is?’

‘Yes.’ Emma’s fingers tightened on the phone. The Foleys lived about a kilometre out of town. ‘I thought it was only a holiday let.’

‘I struck a deal with the Foleys. It’s mine for as long as I need it.’

‘I see…well, that’s good. About dinner—I’ve made soup. I could bring some over.’

He curled a low laugh. ‘You’re obviously intent on feeding me. But soup sounds good. I did a shop this morning. I’m sure we’ll find something to go with it.’

Declan felt a new spring in his step as he threw himself under the shower. How odd that Emma must have been thinking about him just at the same moment he’d been thinking about her…

Emma was glad he’d found somewhere to live, and the log cabin was a comfortable option for the time being, she thought, guiding the car carefully over the cattle grid that marked the entrance to the farm. The cabin was barely five minutes drive further on and in seconds she saw the lighted windows come into view. As she pulled to a stop in front of the cabin, her heart began

its pattering again, the nerves in her stomach lurching and flailing like a drunken butterfly.

Out of the car, she took a moment to look up at the sky. It was the same night sky she'd been seeing since she was a child, the same stars. But tonight she noticed them in a way she never had before. The Milky Way was its usual wash of grey-white light, peppered with twinkling stars. But tonight, as she watched, one lone star shot across the heavens, leaving a glittering trail of light before it disappeared.

'Stargazing?' Declan's deep voice was husky behind her.

'Oh—' Emma spun round, giving a jagged half-laugh. He was standing on the sheltered front porch. 'I didn't know you were there.'

'Saw your headlights. Coming in?'

'Mmm.' Suddenly, for no reason at all, anticipation was a sweet ache in her chest, a flutter in her breathing. She held her vacuum jug of soup tightly and followed him inside.

The cabin was open-plan and modern with the lounge area and kitchen melded into one living space. 'Oh, good,' Emma said lightly. 'You've got the fire going.'

'Glass of wine?' Declan offered as they moved across the timber floor to the kitchen. 'I have a nice local red.'

'OK, thanks.' Emma placed her soup on the counter top. 'You should be comfortable here.'

Declan didn't comment. Instead, he took up the wine he'd left breathing and poured two glasses. He handed one to Emma,

unable to stop himself gazing at her with an intensity that made his heart stall for a second and then pick up speed. She was wearing jeans that clung to her legs and outlined a pert little backside. Her top was a frilly button-up shirt, the neckline open just enough to expose a hint of cleavage. Her hair had a just-washed, just-brushed shine about it and when their gazes met and she smiled at him he felt a jolt to every one of his senses. Hell. How was he going to get through the evening without wanting to…?

'What?' Emma raised a quick brow.

He shrugged, breaking eye contact quickly. 'I guess we should drink to the future of our *partnership*.'

Emma's mind went blank. They seemed to have travelled half a lifetime in a few days. Even this morning, she'd woken with a start, wondering whether she'd dreamed it all—that she actually had a partner for the practice, someone to rely on, to confer with—to trust. 'I guess we should.' She gave a tinny laugh to disguise the sudden attack of nerves. Lifting her glass to his, she echoed, 'To our partnership.'

'What kind of soup did you bring?' Declan cringed at the banality of his conversation. But his brain felt like shredded cheese.

'Minestrone.'

'A meal in itself.' He sent her a crooked grin. 'I put some herb bread in the oven to warm when I knew you were bringing soup.'

Emma savoured another mouthful of the full-bodied wine.

‘You know about food, then?’

He lifted a shoulder modestly. ‘I went along to the farmers’ market this morning. I thought I might have seen you there.’

Emma blinked rapidly. ‘I used to go when I had time to cook.’

‘The produce is amazing,’ Declan said, indicating they should take their wine through to the lounge area. ‘I couldn’t stop buying stuff.’

Emma chuckled. ‘And I’ll bet the stall-holders couldn’t wait to sell you *stuff*._ The whole town will know who you are by now.’

‘They will?’ He looked startled.

‘And that you’re living here and fending for yourself.’

He groaned. ‘It won’t be daily casseroles at the surgery, will it?’

‘Not just casseroles.’ Emma sent him an innocent wide-eyed look and curled herself into the big squishy armchair. ‘There’ll possibly be apple pies as well. Bendemere will want you to feel at home here.’

‘I think I’m beginning to already.’ He’d taken his place on the sofa opposite her. ‘By the way, I released young Ashleigh this afternoon.’

‘Any problems?’

He was about to ask if she’d expected any. Except he’d seen the flash of worry in her eyes. ‘None at all,’ he elaborated. ‘And I have Aaron and Renee coming in for a chat tomorrow.’

Emma felt a flood of relief. If he’d already got on first name terms with the Maines, then he must have at least listened to her concerns and trod softly. ‘They’re not bad parents. They’re just

—’

‘Young?’ Declan gave a rueful smile. ‘I’ll be gentle with them, Emma, but I promise I’ll get through to them, whatever it takes.’

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