



*Medical  
Romance™*

**CAROLINE ANDERSON**

A Very  
.....  
Special Need  
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Caroline Anderson  
**A Very Special Need**

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## **Anderson C.**

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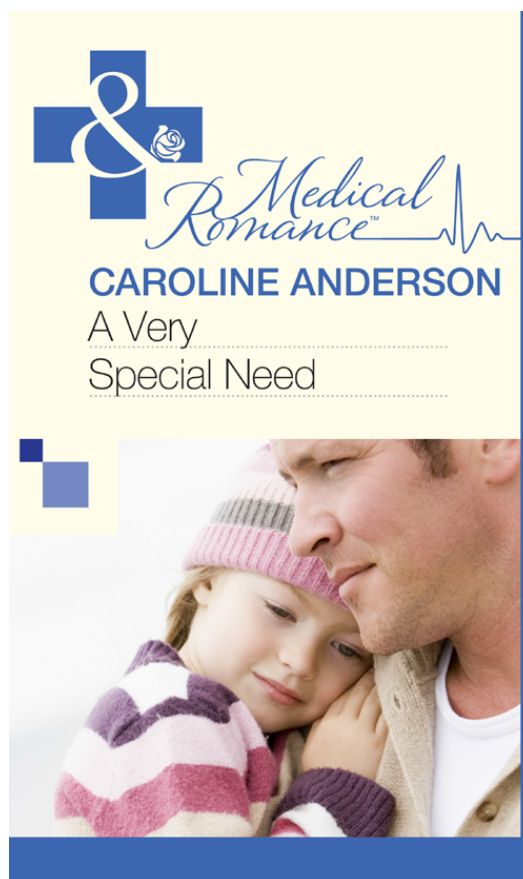
**A FAMILY FOR CHRISTMAS** The last thing single mum Judith Wright expects when she takes her young son to a new osteopath is to be offered a much needed job. But practitioner Hugh Barber is in a fix and he needs a secretary now. Hugh's impressed—not only by Judith's secretarial skills, but also by her warmth and courage. As a single father of two he knows how tough and lonely her life must be. Judith's company is something Hugh comes to cherish, and as Christmas approaches he can't help proposing to her. But with three youngsters between them tensions emerge, and their children's happiness has to come first. Except life apart is unbearable, and Hugh and Judith know they all really need each other—they just have to find a way to have the most wonderful Christmas ever...as one big happy family.

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# **A Very Special Need**

## **Caroline Anderson**



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## CHAPTER ONE

‘HAPPY birthday.’

‘Thanks.’

‘Thirty today and still looking as good as ever.’

Judith gave her reflection a jaundiced sneer. ‘You’re biased,’ she told it. ‘And a lousy liar.’

The reflection sneered back—the little snub nose wrinkling, the eyes unflinching—taking inventory with no holds barred. They scanned the skin, pale under the superficial light tan of summer, and the eyes smudged with shadows of worry and fatigue—the laughter lines unused in recent weeks. Hmm, she thought. The bone structure was all right, but the top dressing lacked a certain sparkle, and the hair today was definitely mouse brown.

The eyes scanned down her body over the soft curves that despite the scrimped diet failed to disappear, assessing the charity shop clothes—the clever buys that managed to look almost reasonable if not at the cutting edge of fashion—then back up, meeting themselves with relentless honesty.

‘OK,’ the reflection conceded. ‘So you’re looking thirty today. And tired. And jaded, and dissatisfied with your lot. And you’ve got a white hair—see it there, sticking out?’

She turned away from the unblinking grey lasers. She didn’t need that much honesty, even from herself—and especially not today.

Thirty, she thought, and what had she got to show for it? She looked round the living room of the small flat, at the furniture that, like her, looked tired and jaded and dissatisfied. A rented home, second-hand furniture, Oxfam clothes, temporary work in the term time to keep them ticking over—she had nothing to show for her thirty years at all.

There was a shuffling, bumping noise in the hall.

No. Not nothing, she amended. She had Edward—and she hadn’t even managed to do that right.

She turned a bright smile to the door as it swung open. ‘All ready?’

He nodded, slowly and deliberately, and his mouth twisted into a parody of a smile. His eyes went from her to the mirror just beside her. ‘Looking for the wrinkles?’ he teased in his halting, reluctant speech.

‘Cheeky monkey,’ she said with a grin, and went over and hugged him. ‘All ready for school?’

‘I suppose so.’

She eyed him worriedly. ‘Want to talk about it?’

He shrugged, a slow, deliberate shrug that matched his other movements. ‘New kids—nothing I can’t handle.’

New kids looking at him, wondering what was wrong with him, calling him ‘Spaz’ and laughing at his hesitant speech and awkward gait. The first day of the new school year was always the same. A wave of maternal protectiveness almost swamped her, but she crushed it back down ruthlessly. He didn’t need her pity.

‘You’ll be fine,’ she assured him briskly. ‘They’ll soon get used to you and they won’t think anything of it in a week or so—less if they join the chess club.’

He grinned, his courage as always bringing tears very close to the surface. She turned away and gathered up her bag and a light jacket against the chilly September wind, and blinked hard.

‘Let’s go, then,’ she said, turning back with her smile firmly in place again. ‘And tonight we’ll have a treat and go out for a pizza.’

‘Can we afford it?’ he asked with a shrewd wisdom well ahead of his thirteen years.

She punched his arm gently. ‘Hey, you let me worry about that. It’s my birthday—we ought to celebrate.’

‘Yeah.’ His smile was sad, and he shifted his school bag on his shoulder and turned, picking up his sticks from by the door. ‘Let’s hit the road, then.’



They walked down the path and turned left, coming out within a minute or so onto the road along which the bus ran. There was a crowd of youngsters gathered at the stop, and she could feel the tension pouring off him as he braced himself and walked towards them.

‘See you, Mum,’ he mumbled, and she made herself hang back and watch from a distance as he joined the group.

A black boy separated from the crowd, tall and gangling in baggy jeans, his head completely shaved. ‘Yo, Woody, how you doin’, man?’ he yelled and gave her son a high five, then flung an arm around his shoulders and dragged him into the crowd.

She grinned to herself and turned away. He’d be all right now. Al would take care of him. Al’s baby sister had cerebral palsy, too—the double disadvantage of being black *and* disabled. Al understood Woody—and Al was a good kid with a heart of gold, even if his hairstyle made Judith flinch. Yes, he’d take care of her son.

And who would take care of her? She stifled a sigh, tugged her jacket closer against the wind and walked briskly towards town and the job centre. Term time meant finding a job to hold body and soul together—and she’d have to find one or there was no way she dared to take Woody out tonight for a pizza, or it might be the last meal they ate for a long, long while.

‘So, how was it?’

He shrugged. ‘OK. I’ve got Mr Greenhill for Maths.’

Her eyebrows shot up and pride surged in her chest. ‘Really? Well done.’

She watched as he pulled off another slice of pizza and wrapped his tongue round the trails of stretchy cheese, hooking it into his mouth with conscious deliberation.

‘It’s no big deal. I can do the work easily.’

She smiled. ‘I know.’

He pushed the pizza towards her. ‘Here. You’ve only had one bit.’

‘I’m not hungry,’ she lied. ‘You eat it.’

He put the slice down and met her grey eyes with his blue ones. ‘Did you get a job?’

She swallowed the fear that seemed to grow ever larger in her chest. ‘Uh—not today. They’ve got another one or two they’re looking into for me,’ she lied, and wondered if her thirties were going to be remembered for the number and range of lies she was to tell her son.

‘Something will turn up,’ she promised him, and to take the worry out of his eyes she picked up the slice of pizza she’d meant to save for her lunch tomorrow and ate it. As it was they had bought one from the supermarket to save money rather than go to the Pizza Hut, and she’d only done that because she’d promised him pizza and the fresh ones from the supermarket were nearly as nice and not quite as expensive.

Tomorrow would be sausages or mince or fish fingers as usual.

Please, God, she thought, let me find a job.

‘How about a game of chess?’ she suggested brightly.

Woody eyed her sceptically. ‘Does that mean I have to let you win because it’s your birthday?’

‘Cheeky monkey. I might beat you anyway.’

He grinned, lopsided and teasing. ‘Yeah. After all, there’s always room in the world for another miracle.’

She chuckled, cleared away the pizza plates and put the chess board on the table. ‘Right, you, do your worst,’ she challenged, and wondered, if there was a spare miracle lying around, whether it could please be dedicated to her finding a job and not thrashing her cocky son at chess...

Nothing was ever easy. There was no job, neither the next day nor the one afterwards, and on the Thursday evening Woody was late back from the bus. She was walking down the path to investigate when he came into view, walking even more awkwardly and his face twisted with pain.

‘Woody? Whatever’s wrong?’ she asked, running the last few steps towards him.

‘I fell,’ he said tersely. He looked withdrawn and mutinous, and she could tell he was suffering.

‘OK. Let’s get you in and inspect the damage. I want to hear all about it.’

‘I’m fine, I just fell,’ he repeated, limping painfully up the little step to their front door.

Judith doubted that he ‘just’ fell. Oh, he did sometimes genuinely fall, of course. She knew that. She also knew that look on his face, that stubborn, determined look which overtook him when someone had cut him to the bone—just as she knew that there was more to this than a simple fall, but she could do nothing.

To interfere and fuss would simply make it worse.

‘Cup of tea?’ she offered, allowing him to deal with it in his way.

‘Mmm, please.’ He sat at the kitchen table, a muffled groan escaping from his tightly closed mouth, and she shut her eyes and counted to ten.

She put the mug down in front of him. ‘Here. Drink this while I run you a hot bath,’ she said softly, and went out before she gave in to the urge to cry her eyes out.

He didn’t deserve this—whatever ‘this’ was. Life was tough enough without some bully going for him. She wondered if he would ever tell her what had really happened.

He wouldn’t let her help him with the bath. That didn’t surprise her. He’d been independent in that department for some years now, struggling to cope alone while she metaphorically bit her nails on the other side of the door.

This time, though, he was ages and she could hear the groans from the kitchen.

There was a time for his pride, she decided, and a time when she just had to be a mother.

She waited until he had gone into his bedroom, then knocked on the door.

‘What?’ he growled.

‘Edward, I want to come in.’

The door opened to reveal her son, clad only in a pair of briefs and some colourful bruises. ‘Why do you always call me Edward when you want to pull rank?’ he said mildly, and turned away.

She swallowed a retort and studied his body. Thin, a little twisted, never moving smoothly, it was even more stiff and jerky than usual tonight. She ran her practised eye over him, looking for strains and stresses, and her eyes settled on his spine.

‘Have you put your back out, falling?’

He nodded. ‘I’ll live.’

‘I don’t doubt it. Where did you fall?’ She tried to keep the edge of irony out of her voice but failed.

‘On the stairs,’ he told her defiantly. ‘I tripped over my foot.’

Plausible but not the truth. Her son could never lie to her, she knew him far too well. Sure, he’d tripped over a foot, but whose? ‘I’ll bring you some ibuprofen tablets.’

‘I’ll come. I’ve got homework to do,’ he told her, and followed her a few painful minutes later, dressed in a baggy tracksuit which hung on his gaunt frame. Heavens, he was getting so tall now...

‘How about your physio?’ she suggested, wondering if that would give her an opportunity to find out how hurt he really was.

‘I don’t think so. Not tonight. Perhaps tomorrow.’

It must be bad, she thought. Painful as his physio was, he never shirked the chore they had shared each evening for so many years.

She went in to his room to tuck him up and turn off his light at ten. He was asleep, his lashes black against the pale, drawn cheeks. He looked so fragile. She brushed the thick dark hair away from his brow and dropped a kiss on his cheek, surprised yet again at the fine dark fuzz that covered his jaw. He would need to start shaving soon, she realised with a shock.

He was growing up so fast. Up and out and away from her, his battle for independence every bit as fierce as any other teenager’s, only the other kids didn’t have to deal with disability as well.

‘I love you,’ she whispered soundlessly. ‘Please don’t be hurt.’

In the morning he could hardly walk. Knowing his courage and knowing from her own experience that bad backs were best treated by specialists, she sent him back to bed and left the flat.

In the next street, just a few hundred yards away, there was an osteopath. As well as being so convenient for her home, he had also established an excellent reputation. She had heard his name at several clinics and support group meetings, and she understood he treated lots of children with cerebral palsy and other disabilities. Not that she could afford any treatment, more's the pity. No, but she would go and ask his advice. Hopefully it would be free.

It was a strange area, she thought as she set off. Their flat was a maisonette, the lower half of a conventional-looking two storey house in a little street with several similar ones, drab and ordinary but functional. Aesthetic appeal seemed to have passed it by, and yet round the corner the next street was altogether grander, the houses imposing Victorian double fronted status symbols, very des-res and so far out of her reach that she hardly even dared to imagine what they were like inside.

At the entrance to one of them she hesitated, looking up at the impressive red-brick façade, at the large bay windows and ornate stone lintels and the immaculate garden with shrubs and perennials creeping onto the tarmacked drive in carefully orchestrated profusion.

It was gorgeous—and intimidating. It was also the home and workplace of the man she wanted to talk to. Mentally girding her loins, she walked up the driveway, past the cars parked at the front, and found the outer door propped open. Beyond the glass door into the hall she saw a reception desk ahead of her, a beautiful walnut desk with the glorious patina of age. It was probably worth more than her entire flat contents.

Her heart sank. This man was wealthy and successful. Why should he help her? She was about to turn tail and run when the receptionist, a woman of about Judith's own age, looked up and smiled through the glass, and beckoned her in.

She went. It would have been impossibly rude not to have done so, and she dredged up an answering smile.

'Good morning,' the receptionist said as she approached. 'Can I help you?'

Where to start? How about the obvious? she thought. 'My name's Judith Wright. I wonder if it would be possible for me to have a word with Mr Barber about my son.'

'Is he a new patient?' the woman asked, turning to a card index on the desk. Judith noticed that she was very pregnant. His wife?

'No. Well, that is, he isn't a patient—not yet. That was what I wanted to discuss,' she lied boldly.

The woman smiled. 'I see. If you'd like to take a seat, Mrs Wright, I'll have a word with him in a few minutes in between patients.'

She didn't bother to correct the mistake. She was so used to being called Mrs Wright that she ignored it now. Returning the smile, Judith went through the door indicated and found herself in a waiting room overlooking the front. It was light, airy and welcoming—and most of the chairs were upright, wooden armchairs, ideal for people with bad backs, she thought with a slight smile. She armed herself with a magazine and sat in one of the chairs. There were two other people in there, a man and a woman sitting on opposite sides of the room, their noses buried in magazines.

She looked round the elegant, high-ceilinged room with the ornate plaster cornice and beautiful marble fireplace with a lovely iron and tiled centre. It was a wonderful room, she thought. The decor was subdued but effective, soft smoky green colour-washing below the dado rail and a very traditional stripe above, with the green echoed on the ceiling and the plasterwork picked out in off-white. The muted brick tones of the carpet warmed the scheme and gave it colour, reflected in the curtain fabric and the tiles of the fireplace. Very clever. Very effective. Very restful. She wondered who had chosen the scheme. His wife? The receptionist?

No. Probably a fancy interior designer who had been paid a fortune. She glanced at her watch and wondered how long she would have to wait. Ten minutes? Fifteen? Perhaps until both of these patients had been treated—if he would even see her then—

‘Mrs Wright?’

She looked up—straight into a pair of the most startlingly blue eyes she had ever seen—and felt a jolt of something that rocked her to the core.

Lightning? If she hadn’t felt so shaken by it, she might have laughed. She didn’t laugh, though. She couldn’t. She stood up, pulled to her feet by the power of those astonishing eyes, and crossed the room, dropping the magazine absently on the table as she passed it.

‘Hugh Barber,’ he said by way of introduction, and held out his hand. She took it, her own engulfed by the powerful fingers in a firm and yet gentle handshake. Their palms met briefly, and she dropped his hand at once, shocked by the searing heat. No, not heat. Warmth, and something else—something big and strong and comforting that made her want to bury her head against that solid chest just in front of her eyes and give in to all the anguish and worry and torment of the past fourteen years.

She didn’t, though. By a miracle she managed to avoid hurling herself into his unsuspecting arms and went through the door he indicated. The room was the mirror image of the one she had just been in, the colours a similar soft, muted green and cream, designed for relaxing in.

Judith didn’t feel relaxed. She was about to do something she hated doing, and she could feel the tension coiled in her like a watchspring. He waved her to a chair beside the desk, perched on the treatment couch with one leg dangling and smiled encouragingly at her.

‘I gather you wanted to talk to me about your son,’ he said, and his voice swirled through her like dark chocolate.

She looked down at her hands to avoid those searching, stunning eyes. ‘Yes. He’s had a fall—he says he tripped. He’s got mild cerebral palsy—he is a little clumsy at times, but I think this was deliberate. Whatever, his back’s injured in some way—jarred. I wondered if you could tell me what I should do to help him.’

Of course. I’ll have to see him, obviously. I have a children’s clinic on the other side of town on Tuesdays. Is that any good to you?’

She grimaced slightly. ‘Transport’s difficult,’ she told him, hoping that would be enough. It wasn’t.

‘I’ll see him here, then, if it’s easier. Have a word with my receptionist and she’ll make you an appointment. I take it you are able to get here?’

‘We only live round the corner, but just at the moment I don’t know that he could walk that far. I’ll have to see,’ she flannelled. ‘If you could just give me some advice initially...’

‘I really should see him to be on the safe side. Have you taken him to the hospital for an X-ray?’

‘Um—no. I’m sure he’s just jarred it. There’s nothing broken.’

‘Then if you could manage to get him in to me—perhaps a taxi?’

Damn. He wasn’t going to just give her advice, that was clear. She swallowed. A taxi was totally out of the question. Al’s mother, Belle, might be able to give them a lift if she wasn’t working, but she was a community midwife and worked strange hours—as well as juggling Al and Flora as a single parent.

No. She couldn’t ask Belle. ‘We’ll manage. We’ve got a wheelchair we can use.’ Judith drew in a steadying breath, lifted her head and met the man’s searching eyes. He seemed to be waiting, as if he knew there was something to follow—something difficult and awkward and embarrassing. She hated what she was going to have to do, but she’d do it for Woody.

‘I haven’t got any money,’ she told him with quiet dignity. ‘I’m hoping to get a job soon for the term. I wondered...’ she swallowed ‘... if you would be able to bill me for the treatment and let me pay you back as I earn the money.’

There. It was said. She held his eyes, resisting the urge to run away, and brazened it out.

Hugh looked deep into the challenging eyes of this gutsy little woman daring him to turn her down, and wondered at the hurdles she’d had to overcome and the struggles she’d had to face.

There was such determination in the jut of her chin and the tilt of her head, such uncertainty deep in those lovely, soft grey eyes. What had she had to cope with? She hadn't said how old her son was, but he guessed around ten, probably. She looked as if she was in her early thirties—maybe not that old if life had been cruel.

He was sure it had. Life was. His own had been cruel, leaving the indelible marks of grief etched on his face. It didn't hurt so much now, but it had and the scars showed.

Mrs Wright had scars, too—worry and strain engraved on such soft, fine skin that it seemed a travesty. His fingers ached to soothe away the worry.

That wasn't all that ached. For the first time in what must be years, he felt attracted to a woman, not only physically but somewhere deeper in the hidden recesses of his subconscious. When he'd touched her he'd felt the most unbelievable warmth flow through his hand. He'd never felt anything like it before. It was more than simple sexual chemistry. It felt almost like—destiny?

Lord, he was going nuts. Anyway, inevitably she was married to the probably undeserving Mr Wright. Hugh wondered if the lucky dog realised just how lucky he was. If not, he wondered if there was some other fortunate ingrate keeping this lovely woman warm at night.

He felt a sharp, shocking twist of something which could only be jealousy. Good grief! What on earth was the matter with him?

Anyway, he'd probably imagined his reaction and, even if not, it was almost certainly not reciprocated.

He curled his fingers over his still-tingling palm and got back to the reason for her visit.

'How old is your son, Mrs Wright?'

'Thirteen—and it's Miss. I'm a single parent.'

He ruthlessly suppressed the urge to whoop with delight. 'And has he had any back trouble before?'

'Aches and pains—nothing the physio and I couldn't keep under control.'

'And what makes you think he needs to see an osteopath and not a physiotherapist this time?' Hugh asked, curious about her motives.

'Experience. I know him, and I know the limitations of physio. I also know about bad backs to an extent. There are times when nothing else works.'

'And you think this is one of those times?' Hugh pressed.

'Yes, I do.'

Even her voice was wonderful. Soft, well modulated, almost a caress. He forced himself to stop fantasising and engaging her in needless conversation, and got to the point.

'It may take several treatments.'

She swallowed. 'I know.'

He nodded. 'OK,' he murmured. 'I'm sure we can stagger the payments if that will help you,' he told her, and was rewarded by the bright glimmer of tears in her eyes before she dropped her head forwards.

'Thank you,' she whispered.

He stood up, angry with himself for dragging out her misery and making her justify herself just so he could hear her voice. 'Have a word with my receptionist—I can probably fit him in at lunchtime today so he doesn't have to wait over the weekend. I'm sorry, I'm going to have to press on, I've got a patient waiting. I'll see you both later.'

He watched her walk over to Christine, closed his eyes briefly to clear his mind of the sensual image burnt on his retinas and stuck his head round the waiting-room door. 'Mrs Parker, would you come in, please?'

Woody found even the wheelchair difficult. Sitting was nearly as bad as walking, and by the time they arrived at the lovely red-brick house he was tight-lipped with pain.

He still managed a smile for her, though, as she wheeled him in. Lord, he was a gutsy kid. Judith looked away from him, her eyes bright with tears, and found herself face to face with the man whose image she had been unable to get out of her mind since this morning.

‘Hi,’ he said cheerfully, then hunkered down beside Woody. ‘You must be Edward. Pleased to meet you. I gather you’ve hurt your back?’

Woody mumbled a response, and Judith watched as they shook hands, then Mr Barber looked up at her. ‘I wonder if you’d mind filling in a card with all Edward’s details while we go and have a chat and I have a quick look to see what he’s done to himself?’

He gave her a card, a pen and a wink, and disappeared into his consulting room, pushing her son ahead of him in the wheelchair. She chewed her lip. Should she be in there with him?

She’d been clearly dismissed. Oh, well, perhaps he’d have some joy getting the truth out of him without her hovering about being a fussy mother.

She sat down with the card and obediently filled in all the information.

‘So, Edward, I gather you fell down some stairs, is that right, and now your back hurts?’

The boy nodded slowly. He certainly had quite a bit of spasticity in his muscles, Hugh noted. His handshake had been slow and deliberate but strong, and Hugh knew the hardest part of the treatment would be getting the muscles to relax enough to allow him to work on the spine.

Inevitably after thirteen years there would be some deformity and contracture problems. Just how bad and how insurmountable, he would have to establish. ‘I wonder if you could stand up and let me take a look at you?’ he murmured.

Woody struggled out of the chair, wincing as his back twinged, and Hugh forced himself to stand back and observe. One shoulder was a little higher than the other, indicating a slight scoliosis—a sideways curve to his spine which would be more obvious, of course, without clothes—but basically his posture was better than Hugh had expected.

‘OK. If you could just slip off your clothes down to your pants I’ll go and see how your mother’s getting on. Do you want her to join us?’

The boy shrugged, a slow, deliberate shrug, his face expressionless.

‘I think we can probably manage without her, don’t you? I’ll give her a cup of tea and we can get started.’

He left the lad undressing and went to find Judith. She was sitting in the waiting room with her head bent forwards, resting on a book on her knee while she filled in the record card. Her bottom lip was caught between small, even white teeth in an endearing little gesture that tugged at something inside him. The sun caught her hair, gleaming off the red-gold lights in it, and he had to fight against the urge to pull the band off the back and tunnel his fingers through it, fanning it out over her shoulders and spreading it across the crisp white pillow—

He yanked himself up short, shocked by the unruly direction of his thoughts, and cleared his throat. She looked up, straight into his eyes, and he had the sudden ghastly feeling that she could read his sordid mind. ‘Ah—how are you doing?’ he asked, conscious of the slow crawl of heat up the back of his neck.

‘All done,’ she replied, her voice soft and husky and unbelievably sexy. ‘I was just checking it.’

‘Good.’ He cleared his throat again and took the card from her outstretched hand, carefully avoiding touching her. ‘Look, I think your son might appreciate it if I treat him without you there?’ He phrased it almost as a question, to give her the chance to discuss it, but to his relief she nodded.

‘I rather thought you wanted to. Perhaps you’ll be able to find out what really happened.’

‘That’s what I was thinking,’ he told her honestly. Obviously he doesn’t want you to know the truth because he doesn’t want you hurt by it, and he knows you would be.’

Her smile nearly blew a fuse in his mind. ‘I’m so glad you understand,’ she said fervently. ‘They’re so convoluted, kids.’

He grinned at her. 'I make an art form of understanding teenage boys—I've got one of my own. Look, I tell you what, you sit here and have a cup of tea while I get to grips with Edward. OK?'

She looked astonished, her eyes wide and soft and grateful. 'Um—fine. Thank you.'

'How do you take your tea?'

'White, no sugar.'

'Right.' He escaped, almost running down the hall to the kitchen. Christine was sitting on the sofa with her feet up, resting her hands on the smooth swell of her pregnancy.

'Hi. Any tea in the pot for Miss Wright?'

'Should be. Hugh, my back's giving me hell—I don't suppose you could have a go at it, could you? It's been dodgy all day again.'

He looked across at her. She seemed pinched, a bit tired. Hell. He really must find another receptionist so she could start her maternity leave—

'I'll just get this kid out of the way and I'll have a look at you then, I promise. You stay here and take it easy for a few minutes—get some shut-eye. Oh, and while I think about it, Edward Wright's bill is going to be staggered and I'm going to tell her I charge half-price for children under sixteen.'

Christine managed a wan smile. 'Softy,' she murmured.

He grinned. 'That's me. Just a sucker for a sob-story. Rest now. I won't be long.'

She nodded, and he took the tea back to the waiting room and handed it to Edward's mother. 'Here—one cup of tea, white, no sugar.'

'Thanks.' She flashed that dazzling smile at him again, and he had to swallow hard and dredge in a great lungful of air before he could make his legs work again. How his system could have gone from years of near-coma to absolute screaming wakefulness in such a short time, he didn't know, but it certainly had.

He shook his head to clear it, went back into his consulting room and shut the door. There, propped against the edge of the couch in some pain, was the reason this beautiful woman had come into his life—the only reason, he reminded himself—and he would do well to remember it.

'Right, Edward, let's see what we can do for you,' he said briskly, and banished his intrusive libido from his thoughts.

## CHAPTER TWO

‘RIGHT, Edward, if you could stand up and turn round so I can see your back, perhaps we’ll be able to sort this pain out a bit for you. Can you tell me where it hurts?’

The boy put a finger on his back, just below his waist and slightly to one side, over the lumbosacral joint which linked his flexible spine to the less flexible ring of his pelvis. It was a common spot for difficulties, being the junction between the two areas and so subject to more stresses than the other joints.

Hugh watched as Edward bent slowly forwards, tipped sideways, rotated, straightened up and tipped back, generally showing a grossly restricted range of movement in that whole area. It wasn’t all due to the current injury—that much Hugh could see at a glance—but certainly the injury was compromising the movement Edward did have, and making the situation much worse.

‘Right, if you could lie on the couch for me on your right side facing me,’ he said, making it perfectly obvious which way he wanted the boy to lie by taking up his position beside the couch, and waited to see if he was able to follow instructions.

He could tell by the brightness of his eyes and the few things he had said that he was certainly intelligent. How much his brain had been damaged in the trauma which had caused his cerebral palsy Hugh didn’t know, but he wanted to find out for himself and not from the boy’s mother. He wanted no preconceptions.

Edward lay down exactly as asked, and when Hugh bent his knees up, propped them against his hip and rocked the boy gently, curling and uncurling his spine with slow, careful movements, he could feel the pull of the taut, spastic muscles fighting him all the way. ‘I just want to get this area moving a little,’ he explained. ‘See if I can get some freedom back into this joint.’ He supported the spine with the flat of his hand, rocked away gently for a while and gradually the muscles began to give a little and he was able to get more movement through the joint.

‘It’s very tight, isn’t it?’ he said to Edward. ‘Is it often?’

‘It always is,’ the boy replied. ‘I have a lot of spasticity in my psoas muscles as well.’

No flies on this kid, Hugh thought with interest as he worked on the tight muscles. What a damn shame he’d been damaged at birth. He made a mental note to ask Judith—no, Miss Wright—the circumstances. ‘Who does your physio?’ he asked.

‘Mum—and the physio comes to school once a week to see how things are going. I have a special session with her when the others have got games.’

‘Do you do any games?’

‘I work out in the gym a little with some special exercises when the others are there, but I can’t play football, of course. I go riding on Thursday with the RDA.’

Hugh had heard of the RDA—the Riding for the Disabled Association—a charity which with the help of volunteers and fundraisers offered an opportunity for disabled children and adults to ride carefully chosen ponies and horses. The Princess Royal was a great supporter of the organisation, he knew.

‘Do you enjoy it?’ he asked.

‘Yeah.’ There was an enthusiasm in his tone Hugh hadn’t heard before, and he guessed this was one part of being disabled that Edward didn’t find too irksome! ‘Although,’ he continued in his slow, careful speech, ‘sometimes I’m not sure who’s disabled, the ponies or the riders.’

Hugh laughed. ‘Are the ponies all old crocks, then?’

‘Not really. Some of them are quite young, but most of them have arthritis. There’s one, Pipkin, who’s new. He’s only nine but he can’t do much any more because of his leg. He’s a lot like me. He’d like to do more—I can feel it in him. He was sort of boiling inside with enthusiasm, but his body just won’t do it any more.’



‘I guess you would identify with that,’ Hugh said gently.

Edward gave a little snort. ‘Just a bit. I get so sick of everyone thinking I’m thick, just because I talk slowly and can’t move fast. People talk down to you—patronise you. It makes me mad. I get so frustrated.’

Hugh moved round to the other side of the treatment couch and spread some cream on Edward’s back, then turned on the ultrasound machine and ran the head lightly over the area of his sacrum and lumbar spine.

‘Do you get bullied much at school?’ he asked casually.

Edward stiffened a little, and Hugh rested a warm hand on his hip and squeezed gently. ‘Don’t tense up. Just let the ultrasound do its work. Just breathe deeply and let go.’

Gradually the boy relaxed again.

Hugh tried a different tack. ‘So, tell me again how you fell,’ he said softly.

The silence was broken only by the ticking of the timer on the ultrasound machine. For a long time Hugh didn’t think Edward was going to answer, then he drew in a shuddering breath and let it out.

‘This kid tripped me up on the stairs. He’s a new kid in my year. He’s been gunning for me all week, trying to prove something to the others—make his place or something.’ There was a wry chuckle. ‘Big mistake. They’re all used to me now, and they get a bit defensive. That’s why I don’t want to say anything. They’ll trash him if they know.’

‘They?’

‘Al and his mates. He’s my best friend. He’s Jamaican—his kid sister Flora’s got CP too. He gets really mad if anybody messes with me—makes the Mafia look like kindergarten. He’ll get in trouble if he’s caught sorting this kid. He’s done it before for me.’

‘And you think he would again?’

Edward snorted again. ‘I know he would.’

‘Perhaps you need to have a quiet word with the one who tripped you up—warn him off.’

‘Yeah, right—like he’ll really listen to me!’

‘He might—it’d be worth a try if it’ll keep your friend Al out of trouble.’ Hugh put the ultrasound head down and, using his knuckles, kneaded gently into the taut muscles.

‘That feels a little better. How does it feel from your side?’

‘Easier. Thanks.’

‘I won’t manipulate it today—it’s too fresh and fragile at the moment. What I want you to do is go home, ice-pack it three times a day for ten minutes and rest as much as possible. I’ll see you again on Monday evening at the end of surgery so I can spend as long as I need without time restrictions. I think the diary’s looking a bit hectic for early next week and I don’t want to just cram you into a little slot. Can you manage to get dressed again?’

Edward gave him a withering look. ‘I expect I’ll cope.’

Hugh laughed softly. ‘Often my patients need help. A bad back’s a bad back, Edward. It would be silly to mess yours up even more and make it worse just for the sake of your fool pride, wouldn’t it?’ He winked. ‘I’ll send in your mother in a minute.’

He found Miss Wright—not Judith, he reminded himself—where he’d left her, staring out of the window at the front garden. She swung round as he came in, and he felt the now-familiar thunderbolt slam him in the midsection.

At last! She was beginning to wonder if she’d ever see her son again. She found a smile. ‘Hi. How is he?’

‘Stiff, tender—he’s got a partial subluxation of the lumbosacral joint, caused by his fall, and the spasm of his psoas muscles isn’t helping him stand properly.’

‘They give him trouble,’ she said with a sigh. ‘It’s postural, and because of his spasticity.’

‘Yes. Anyway, he should be a bit more comfortable now. I’ve told him to rest over the weekend and he needs some frozen peas on it three times a day for a few minutes. Put them in a plastic bag

and tie them up, and wrap them in a teatowel so he doesn't get freezer burns. Just refreeze them after each session.'

She smiled again. 'We have a bag of peas on the go most of the time,' she told him softly. 'Injuries are no stranger to him. He often turns his ankles.'

'He would. It's unfortunate—'

A noise in the distance caught their attention and he lifted his head. 'Was that Edward? Did you hear him call?'

Judith shook her head. 'No—is it someone at the back? I thought I heard someone a moment ago.'

'Christine. Let me just check she's all right. Would you like to go and make sure your son's managing to dress himself, and then we'll make you an appointment for next week?'

He excused himself and went down the corridor. She was just crossing the hall when he came back, looking distinctly harrassed.

'Problems?' she said instantly, searching his face for clues.

He rammed his hands through his hair. 'You might say that. Miss Wright, have you ever delivered a baby before?'

Judith froze for a moment. A baby? Oh, Lord, no, don't let her have to get involved with a delivery. Not after the disaster of Edward's birth...

'Well? Have you?'

'Only Woody,' she told him automatically.

His brow creased in puzzlement, but he moved on. 'I'll call an ambulance, but if you could go through there and talk to her? I think things are moving really very fast and she's a bit scared.'

She wasn't alone, Judith thought. She forced herself to walk down the corridor on legs like jelly. Please, God, don't let this be happening to me, she thought. Let him be wrong.

He wasn't. She found the woman lying on a comfy sofa, propped against one arm with her feet braced against the other—her face contorted with the effort of expulsion.

Judith didn't even have time to wash her hands, never mind make any kind of preparation for a sterile environment. She squeezed Christine's hand briefly, hitched up her dress and pulled down the tights and pants that the woman had tried—and failed—to remove. As Hugh came back into the room she was perched on the side of the sofa, the baby's head cradled in her hands, with no time to worry about her part in all this.

'Here,' Hugh murmured and, hitching Christine up a fraction, he slid a thick, soft towel under her, put his arm round her shoulders and let her hang onto his hand as the next contraction seized her in its grip.

'Aagh...' she groaned, tucking her chin down and straining.

Judith smiled at her. 'You're doing fine, Christine. Nice and gently. Just take it steady. Well done.' Heavens, was that her? She was talking on autopilot, functioning on two entirely different levels. God forbid that Christine should see the other level—she'd have hysterics!

Judith looked down at her hands. The baby's head lay there, streaked and smeared, the mass of dark hair pressed damply against the tiny skull. As Christine pushed the baby seemed to squirm and turn and twist in Judith's hands. Suddenly not only a head but a body lay there in her hands, tiny, dark red and utterly furious.

The blood-curdling yell was the most wonderful thing she had ever heard—second only to the siren of the ambulance which arrived at the same time, relieving her of the responsibility for the baby's welfare and any further part in its delivery.

'Thank God,' Hugh muttered beside her and, releasing Christine, he went to let them in. Judith lifted the baby up and laid him across Christine's now-soft abdomen. 'It's a boy,' she said, her voice choked with tears, and as the ambulancemen came in she went over to the sink, washing her hands as if she could take away the memory of the last wet, squalling newborn she had held.

His cry had been the same. Her joy in a new life had been the same. It was only later that she'd discovered how different he was to be...

Hugh appeared behind her, his hands cupping her shoulders with a gentle squeeze of support and thanks and all the other tumbling emotions childbirth brought kicking and screaming to the surface. 'All right?'

'Yes.' Surprisingly, her voice was steady. Now there's a miracle if you like, she thought. 'It's a boy,' she said unnecessarily.

'I know. Thanks for your help.'

She looked up at him, her eyes still misting with tears. 'It's all right,' she said, although it wasn't. Not for her—and not for Woody.

Hugh looked searchingly at her for a moment, then his hand came up and brushed her cheek. She was surprised to feel a tremor in his fingers. 'Do you want to go and make sure Woody's all right?' he suggested, as if he could read her mind. 'He may be a bit concerned.'

She nodded, smiled absently at the busy ambulancemen and fled down the corridor. She arrived in the hall to find her son there with another woman behind him. She smiled at them both, a little stronger now she was away from the scene in the kitchen.

'No Christine?' the woman said.

'No—she's just had her baby—that's why the ambulance is here.'

'Here? She's had it here? Oh, how wonderful!' the woman exclaimed, obviously delighted. 'Everything all right?'

Judith forced a smile. 'Seems to be.' Funny, she couldn't share the woman's enthusiasm.

'Oh, do give her my best wishes. I'm Mrs Jennings, by the way. I'll go through and wait, shall I? Oh, how exciting!'

'Fine. Thank you.' She turned to Woody. 'OK, love?'

He nodded. 'Yeah—much better. I take it the receptionist had her baby just this minute?' he murmured.

She nodded. 'Yes, that's right. A boy. He looked so much like you—'

She broke off, unable to continue along that line of thought, but as usual Woody didn't miss a trick.

'Mum, it wasn't your fault,' he began, and then Hugh arrived.

'Sorry about that,' he said with a rather bemused smile. 'Babies have a way of arriving when it suits them. Um—let's have a look and see if we can make you an appointment for Monday, Edward—oh, excuse me—' He picked up the ringing phone. 'Good afternoon. Hugh Barber speaking. Can I help you?'

It took three tries before he managed to look at the appointment book without interruptions, by which time he was looked fairly ragged and Judith was wondering if they would ever get away.

'This is ridiculous,' he muttered when the phone disturbed them yet again. 'Let's ignore it.'

Judith reached out and covered his hand, stilling him for a second. 'Can't you get her replacement in early?'

He snorted. 'What replacement? I'm so busy I haven't even got round to advertising her post again yet. Finding someone of the right calibre to handle confidential information is never easy, and the last crop of applicants was dismal.' He snatched up the phone. 'Barber.'

A job. My God, she thought, it's a job, right here in my lap!

'I could do it for you,' she offered quietly as he hung up the phone. 'I've done a similar job before.'

He met her eyes, hope written ten feet tall all over his face. 'Do you have the necessary skills?'

'I think so. I can type, answer the phone, organise filing systems, use a computer or fax machine, do accounts, keep records—'

'Stop! You're hired. When can you start?'

The phone, which had been briefly silent, rang again.

She smiled and reached for the receiver. 'How about now?'

Hugh was so relieved that he didn't know whether to laugh or cry. Since just after two, when Christine and her baby had been handed over to the care of the hospital, Woody had been ensconced in the snug in front of the television, he had been seeing patients and Judith—well, Judith had the place running like clockwork.

It had taken her about fifteen seconds to ask the questions she realised she needed to have answered, and after following his patients out and explaining things to her a time or two it dawned on him that his contribution was entirely unnecessary.

She was a natural. She dealt easily with the patients, she was warm and friendly but brisk enough to keep things moving; she offered a choice of two appointment times at the most, where the majority of people would have asked when they would like to come and given the patients enough rope to hang themselves. Not Judith. 'Monday?' she would say. 'Ten-thirty or twelve?'

And that was that.

She was wonderful. She was also very distracting. He found himself thinking about her in entirely un-employer-like terms and often, after seeing a patient out and exchanging a few words with Judith, he would have to drag himself away to the next patient, conscious of sporting a silly grin but unable to do anything about it!

Damn, she made him feel good. He found himself humming at one point as he went into the kitchen in a lull to tidy up after the pandemonium, only to find her in there, too, having already done it. 'I was just going to bring you a cup of tea,' she said with a smile, and left him in there with it while she went to check Woody.

And Hugh, sitting down on the now-cushionless sofa with his cup of tea, hummed cheerfully and thought that life was pretty damn good. He'd solved his maternity leave problem, Judith was employed and therefore able to support herself and Woody, Christine had had a lovely healthy baby and they had all survived the experience. And he had managed to end up working alongside the most attractive woman he had met in years.

Yup. Things were definitely looking up.

Judith couldn't believe her luck. She'd got a job! And not just any old job, either. She was working with people in a caring profession, which suited her much better than being trapped alone in an office all day or stuck at a VDU screen, tapping in numbers in a noisy, open-plan office complex, and she was in such lovely surroundings, too. From her position at the gorgeous antique desk she had so much admired she could see out into the front garden, which was a blaze of colour after the dry summer. The recent rains had started everything off again and the flowers were picking up, ready for the autumn flush. The roses were lovely, the Michaelmas daisies were just opening with brilliant spots of rich purply-blue against the green and the plants in pots and tubs around the door were full and lush and tumbling down towards the ground. Just sitting there looking at it all made her feel so much better.

To be paid for the privilege seemed almost superfluous.

As for the job itself, she was really enjoying it so far, and once Hugh had time to show her the ropes and introduce her to the computer system he used for patient records she could be of some real use in the little office behind his consulting room.

It was a pity she hadn't had time to grill Christine for some information, but she had no doubt that Hugh could fill her in. In the meantime she asked him if she had a query, dealt with the obvious and in the rare lulls she popped her head round the door of the snug and checked on Woody, lying stretched out on a big settee in front of the television fast asleep.

Thank God she would now be in a position to pay for his treatment!

It was a little after four when the peace and tranquillity of the big house came to a grinding halt. Utopia was shattered with the slamming of a door and the thunder of footsteps up the stairs behind her.

‘Hi, Christine,’ a voice yelled, and then the footsteps slowed, stopped and started down again in the other direction. Judith turned her head and found herself face to face with a boy of about Edward’s age. And there, she thought wryly, the similarities ended.

He was a little taller, slim but muscular, and sported a superficial arrogance which she was sure was just a front. God forbid she should dare to mention such a thing, however! His mid-brown hair was just like his father’s but a little darker, his features were a younger version as well but the eyes were startlingly and exactly the same vivid blue.

‘Where’s Christine?’ he asked abruptly.

Judith blinked. ‘In hospital. She’s had her baby.’

‘Blimey. That was quick. She was here this morning. Are you from the agency?’

‘No. I’m the mother of a patient, but your father—I take it Mr Barber is your father?’ she checked, just to be on the safe side. The boy gave a quick nod, and she continued, ‘Your father offered me the job as I was here and available. Incidentally, if you go into the snug you’ll meet my son, Edward. He’s taking up rather a lot of your settee, I’m afraid, but he’s messed his back up. That’s why we were here.’

‘Oh. Right.’ The boy shoved a hand through his hair in a perfect reflection of his father’s own gesture and turned on his heel. ‘I’m going upstairs—Toots is in the kitchen. Keep an eye on her, could you?’

Toots? Who—or what—was Toots? And how was she supposed to keep an eye on her and watch the desk at the same time? Oh, well. She left the desk and went through to the kitchen. A little girl was in there, balanced on the edge of the worktop, rummaging in a cupboard. Judith didn’t want to speak for fear of making her jump and lose her balance so she stood by the door and waited as the child prodded about amongst the tins and packets.

Finally she came out triumphantly with a packet of chocolate digestives clutched in her hand and jumped down onto the floor, the long fair hair which was escaping from a rather tired ponytail bouncing and swaying as she landed. Then she turned and caught sight of Judith, and instinctively and instantly hid the biscuits behind her back.

Then with a total absence of guile she looked straight at Judith with those astonishing blue eyes and said, ‘Who are you?’

‘My name’s Judith. I’m the new receptionist.’

‘Oh. Where’s Christine?’

‘She’s had her baby.’

The child’s head tilted slightly, and she suddenly looked a little fearful. ‘Is she all right?’

Judith smiled and propped herself against the end of the sofa. ‘Yes, she’s fine. She’s gone to hospital to rest for a day or so. She had a boy.’

The little nose curled. ‘Yuck. Poor Christine.’ She chewed her lip. ‘She is alive, isn’t she?’

What an odd question. ‘Yes, darling, of course she’s alive.’

‘My mummy’s dead,’ she confided.

‘I’m sorry,’ Judith said gently, one of her questions answered. ‘That must be hard. Do you miss her?’

‘No. She died when I was born.’ Which, Judith realised, explained the strange question. ‘I’m seven,’ Toots added inconsequentially. ‘Have you got any children?’

‘Yes, Edward. He’s in the snug at the moment.’

‘A boy?’

The child's disappointment was so obvious Judith almost laughed. 'I'm afraid so,' she said with a wry grin. 'He's a nice boy, though. You might surprise yourself and like him.' She looked at the hand still hidden behind the child's back.

'Are you Toots?'

The little nose curled again with delicate disdain. 'My real name's Alice.'

'Well, Alice, why don't I put the kettle on and make us all a cup of tea? Or you could have milk or orange squash or whatever you usually have, and we can all have some of those biscuits you've got there.'

The child pulled the biscuits out and looked at them as if she'd never seen them before in her life. 'These biscuits?' she said innocently.

Judith hid the smile. 'Mmm. Would that be a good idea?'

Alice looked at her with guileless blue eyes and smiled. 'OK. Has Daddy got many more patients tonight?'

'About three,' Judith told her, 'but I'm sure you won't have to wait that long to have a biscuit—'

'Hi, Toots, what're you up to, tinker?'

Alice threw herself across the room into her father's arms and hugged him. 'Hi, Daddy. I helped Judith find some biscuits for us all,' she lied, and gave him the benefit of her megawatt smile.

He melted like ice cream in the sun. 'Well, what a nice idea. Are we going to have tea? Can you manage to put the kettle on, Toots?'

'Course I can.'

Hugh looked at Judith. 'I've dealt with Mrs Fraser. Mr Parkin isn't here yet, but he's so often late I'm not surprised. How's it going?'

'Fine.' She smiled. 'Excellent, I think. I hope I haven't made any howlers.'

He grinned, shedding years in the process and doing her blood pressure irreparable harm. 'I doubt it. Look, I tell you what, why don't you and Woody stay for supper and let me go through the ropes with you so you're all ready for Monday?'

'Oh.' She smiled weakly, still busily in the grip of her heightened blood pressure. Supper? Was that such a good idea? Good grief, girl, get a grip, she told herself. It's hardly a date! 'That would be very sensible, but I'd hate you to go to any trouble—'

'That's OK. We'll get a pizza delivered—we often do. Housekeeping isn't my best thing. Then we can really concentrate.'

There was a crashing sound from the hall and the kitchen door was hurled back on its hinges. 'Anything to eat in this place? I'm starving.'

Hugh raised an eyebrow a fraction. 'Hello, Martin. Good day at school?'

'Passable. Can I have a sandwich—hey, Toots, where did you get the biscuits from?'

'I helped Judith—' She caught Judith's eye and amended, 'They were in the top cupboard.'

Judith gave an almost invisible wink of approval, and Alice grinned just a tiny bit. Good, Judith thought. She knows I don't approve, and she also knows I won't rat on her.

Martin was looking at the sofa as he ripped open the biscuit packet. 'Where are the cushions?' he asked curiously.

'In the garden, drying off. I washed them,' Judith explained.

'Why?' Alice asked, as if washing anything was a totally foreign idea.

'Because that's where Christine had her baby,' Hugh explained, 'and they got a little bit wet. You remember what I told you about babies in tummies being in a sort of paddling pool? Well, when the baby's born the paddling pool empties—'

'Oh, yuck, Dad, all over our sofa?' Martin said theatrically.

'It was the tiniest bit, and I did wash it well,' Judith hastened to reassure him.

'Even so,' he groaned.

Judith stifled a grin. Let Hugh deal with this one. She was on the point of escaping to the reception desk when there was a bump against the kitchen door and Woody entered in in his wheelchair.

He stopped abruptly as he saw the children, and Judith saw the familiar shutters come down over his features. He looked almost desperately at Judith. 'Are we going home soon?' he asked in his slow, rather fractured speech.

'No, not yet. Mr Barber's got a couple more patients to see, and then we're going to stay to supper so he and I can talk about the job.'

Oh.' He looked a little uncomfortable with that.

'Is that a problem, darling?'

He shrugged. 'No, I suppose not. Is there a loo?'

'Yes, of course.' Hugh jumped to attention and turned to Martin. 'Marty, this is Edward Wright, Judith's son. He's in the same year as you at school. Woody, my son, Martin, and my daughter, Alice, better known as Toots. Marty, would you take Edward and show him where the cloakroom is, please?'

Judith looked at Martin to gauge his reaction, and her heart sank. He had that 'Oh, no, I'm going to have to talk to a cripple' look that so many people got with their first contact with Woody. Mutinous, slightly appalled, uneasy.

'I'll show him,' she said, starting forward.

'That's all right, Martin can manage. We've got patients to deal with. Marty, make a pot of tea for us all when you've done that, could you?' He took her arm and steered her up the hall, and as they turned the corner he said softly, 'Don't worry about him. He'll be fine.'

She chewed her lip. 'He hates meeting new people.'

'So does Martin. They'll be fine together. Ah, Mr Parkin, come on in. How've you been?'

'Funniest damn thing—got caught in the dog's lead and fell over and, d'you know, I do believe my back's been better ever since?'

Hugh laughed. 'You don't say? Come on in, let's have a look at this miracle cure.'

They were out ten minutes later, Mr Parkin looking as pleased as punch and Hugh looking slightly relieved.

'No charge, Judith. As the man says, he's cured. Give me a ring if you don't stay better, now.'

'Will do—thanks, Doc. I don't suppose you want to buy a dog—instant remedy?'

Hugh laughed. 'No, thanks—and I shouldn't go trying it again. You might not be so lucky next time.'

She watched him go and turned to Hugh with a smile. 'Cured by the dog, eh? That won't do your reputation any good!'

He chuckled. 'There ought to be a law against unlicensed practitioners.'

'Absolutely—especially the canine variety.'

He glanced at his watch. 'We've got a minute or two—let's grab a cuppa and some of those biscuits, if the kids haven't finished them all.'

They went back to the kitchen and found the three children in there, sitting round the table. The television was on in the corner but the atmosphere seemed tense. Superficially they looked like a bunch of kids watching the telly, but there was an uneasy and almost rebellious silence underlying the canned laughter on the programme.

She looked at her son and read the misery in his eyes, and turned to Hugh. 'Look, do you mind if I get Woody home to bed instead of hanging on after your last patient? He's had a long day and we've still got to do his physio before he can go to bed. Perhaps we could spend Monday lunchtime going through the job instead?'

He looked a little taken aback—and disappointed—but he disguised it quickly. 'No, of course not. Go now. I can manage. I wasn't really thinking. Sorry, Woody, is your back giving you stick?'

He dredged up a smile. 'I'll live. Thanks for my treatment.'

Hugh smiled wryly. 'You're welcome. I'm sorry I stole your mother from you at such short notice. Look, Judith, I tell you what—why don't you hang on half an hour until Mrs Radley's been and I'll run you both home?'

She chewed her lip again. 'Are you sure that's not a nuisance?'

Of course it isn't. It's the least I can do—and, anyway, I really ought to pop down to the hospital and see Christine. I'll just go on from your place, then I'll get the kids a take-away on the way home.'

'OK.' What a relief, she thought, not to have to push the wheelchair round the corner and up the hill. It wasn't much of a hill but she wasn't much of a Mr Universe either, and she realised she was tired after her unexpected afternoon sloshing about in the deep end of her new job.

She swallowed her tea, took a bite of Woody's biscuit, squeezed him reassuringly on the shoulder and went back to the reception desk just as a young woman with a baby in her arms arrived.

Oh. Christine's not here.'

'No, she's had her baby. I'm Judith, the new receptionist. Are you Mrs Radley?'

'Yes, that's right. Oh, how exciting. What did she have?'

'A boy—here, at lunchtime. It was all very quick and rather dramatic.'

'Really! What fun! Are they both OK?'

Judith shrugged and smiled, but the smile was a little forced. 'So far as we could tell,' she said, thinking of Edward and how normal and healthy he had seemed.

Mrs Radley looked down at the sleepy bundle in her arms. 'I brought Lucy in to show to her—I don't suppose you could hang on to her while I go in and see Hugh?'

Hugh appeared behind her and hijacked the baby. 'Hello, little one. My, what a lovely baby. Are you going to throw up on me?' he asked with tender teasing. Lucy blinked sleepily and her eyes drooped shut again.

'Dear me, I must be boring. Here you go, Judith—have a baby. Right, Jenny, how've you been? Any better?'

They disappeared, leaving her gazing transfixed at the soft, downy cheeks of the tiny girl, her lashes faint crescents against the pale, blue-white skin. Her hair was fair, tiny soft wisps of it sticking up in little points, and it brought a lump to her throat. Two babies in one day. So many memories.

She bent her head and sniffed, and gave a ragged little sigh. She even smelled the same as Woody had. It had been such a happy time, for all the struggle it had been. Those few short halcyon months before she had realised anything was wrong held the most precious memories of her life.

She sniffed again, inhaling the soft scent of baby powder and ultra-fine skin, and sighed wistfully.

If only things had been different...



## CHAPTER THREE

‘NIGHT-night, sweetheart.’ Hugh bent and kissed the soft little cheek, and smoothed the silky strands of hair back from his daughter’s brow. ‘I’ll see you in the morning.’

‘Night, Daddy,’ she mumbled.

His hand was on the light switch when her voice stopped him. ‘Daddy?’ she whispered.

He paused. ‘Yes, darling?’

‘Did you see Christine, really?’

‘Yes—I told you all about it.’

‘And was she really all right?’

His arm dropped back to his side and he went over to the bed again and perched on the edge. ‘Toots, she’s fine. She’s just had a baby—that’s why she’s in hospital.’

‘But my mummy died.’

So that was it. Hugh swallowed the lump in his throat and squeezed her little hand. ‘I know, sweetheart, but your mummy was sick—her heart had a problem and she got suddenly much worse. Nobody could have prevented it.’

‘Daddy?’

His heart sank. ‘Yes, sweetheart?’

‘If she hadn’t had me, would she still be alive?’

It was a question he had asked himself over and over again, and he gave her the only answer he could—the one he gave himself. ‘I don’t know. I doubt it. I just know that part of her is alive in you, and if we hadn’t had you then I would have lost that part, too, as well as all the rest of her. As it is, I’ve got a bit of her in Marty and a bit in you so I’ll never really lose her completely. She’ll always be with me, in a very special way, and she’ll always be with you because she’s part of you.’

The little hand in his squeezed comfortingly. ‘Do you still miss her, Daddy?’

‘Yes,’ he said quietly, his voice rough with emotion. ‘Yes, Toots, I still miss her sometimes. I loved her very much.’

There was a thoughtful silence for a moment, then Alice said, ‘Daddy, do you think you’ll ever find another mummy for me? I think I’d like to have a mummy.’

Inexplicably he thought of Judith, and banished the thought as idle fantasy. He hardly knew the woman!

‘Maybe, one day,’ he replied.

‘Then you wouldn’t have to be so lonely any more.’

He bent and hugged her. ‘I’m not lonely, Toots. I’ve got you and Martin to keep me company.’

Her little arms snaked around his neck and hugged him tight, and a wet and very welcome kiss landed somewhere between his eye and his ear. ‘Love you, Daddy,’ she whispered.

His throat almost closed up with emotion. ‘Love you, too, Toots,’ he whispered back, his voice strangled.

He kissed her again, tucked her up for the second time and turned down the light, leaving her door open a fraction so she didn’t feel cut off.

Then he went back downstairs to the kitchen and made himself a cup of coffee while he got his mind back into order. Was he lonely? He’d assured Toots he wasn’t, but of course he was—lonely for the company of a woman, a partner, a companion to share life’s ups and downs. Still, as he’d told Toots, he had his children and so he was never really alone.

He could hear the television in the snug, which meant Martin was in there. He’d hardly seen him all week. Perhaps they’d have a game of chess. Humming softly, he ambled down the hall into the cosy room overlooking the garden, stretched out in the big comfy armchair and looked across at his son. ‘OK?’ he said with a smile.

‘Mmm,’ he replied, staring fixedly at the screen. He was sprawled on the sofa and hadn’t even looked up as his father entered the room. Hugh flicked a glance at the apparently riveting television and saw some ghastly game show in progress.

Sighing inwardly, he girded his loins for confrontation and asked, ‘Done your homework?’

Martin made an irritated clicking sound with his tongue. ‘Dad, it’s Friday.’

‘Yes, and I’m sick of having every Sunday evening ruined by your homework because you’ve left it to the last minute.’

‘I’ll do it tomorrow.’

‘Before or after you play squash with Colin or go to rugby club or any of the other distractions you’ll find?’

‘Before—for God’s sake, Dad, what is this?’

‘Watch your language, Martin—and what it is is me caring about you and your education.’

The boy gave a disgruntled sigh and turned his attention back to the set. His mouth was set in a mutinous line, but Hugh was too tired to deal with him tonight. He picked up the television remote control and changed channels.

‘Hey! I was watching that!’

‘“Was” being the operative word. Even if you’re not doing your homework you are not watching mindless buffoons being cheered on by an audience of performing seals! You’ll be brain-damaged by all these ghastly game shows.’

Martin sighed abruptly. ‘Hardly—and talking of which, does Judith working for you mean we’re going to have that spaz here all the time?’

Hugh froze, then very slowly pressed the off button on the remote. ‘Spaz?’ he said with deadly quiet.

Martin laughed awkwardly. Oh, come on, Dad, you know what I mean.’

‘Yes, I do—unfortunately. I never imagined I would hear you say it, though.’

Martin squirmed, but he didn’t back down. ‘Dad, he’s a spastic.’

‘He has a condition known as cerebral palsy, which has affected the motor control part of his brain—’

‘He’s brain damaged.’

‘Yes, he is—but please don’t make the mistake of imagining he’s stupid.’

‘He speaks so slowly—it drives me mad,’ Martin imitated so accurately that Hugh winced.

‘It could have been you, son—or me, or your little sister. Especially your little sister, with the problems attending her birth. Just remember, until whatever happened went wrong Edward was all set to be a normal, healthy baby and grow up into a normal, healthy adult. He still is healthy, but because his muscles don’t work quite as his brain would like to tell them to his body is in a weakened state. That in itself brings problems. Just imagine how you’d feel trapped inside an unco-operative body like Edward is.’

‘Gross.’ Martin shuddered eloquently. ‘Does he go to that special school—you know, the one that has the minibuses full of raspberry ripples?’

Hugh bit his tongue and refused to comment on the reference to cripples. ‘No,’ he said grimly, hanging onto his temper with difficulty, ‘he goes to the school you’d be at if you weren’t so disgustingly privileged and spoilt. Perhaps I should send you there after all. You might learn some manners and some human kindness.’

He stopped abruptly, jamming his hands through his hair and propping his elbows on his knees. His disappointment reflected in his voice, he added, ‘It grieves me to say it, Martin, but there are times when I’m glad your mother isn’t here any more so she doesn’t have to see how badly I’ve failed in the way I’ve brought you up.’ He looked up and speared his son with that searching cobalt stare. ‘Where did I go wrong, Marty? Too hard? Too soft? Because as sure as hell I’ve done something wrong.’

Martin had the grace to blush and look uncomfortable. ‘Ah, come on, Dad, don’t get heavy with me. He’s really hard work, you know?’

‘He isn’t. He’s a good kid, struggling against enormous odds to cope in a world that just isn’t geared up for anything but perfection. Normal, healthy girls get anorexia because the advertising industry tells them over and over again that the body beautiful is supposed to be scraggily thin and undernourished. Men have hair transplants and women dye their hair and have plastic surgery at huge expense because we can’t cope with the natural consequences of ageing. Kids are committing suicide because they feel hopelessly inadequate because the world makes such huge demands on them. And you think it’s too much trouble to talk to a very clever boy just because you have to wait a moment for his answers.’

‘Dad, he’s a dweeb—’

‘And you’re a disappointment to me, Martin.’

The boy shot out of the settee and glowered mutinously down at Hugh. ‘I’m so sorry,’ he said sarcastically, and flounced out of the room, banging the door shut so hard the frame shook.

‘Martin!’

There was a pregnant pause, then the door opened again a crack.

‘Slam that door once more and you’re grounded for a month. Now go and do your homework, please.’

‘Yes, sir,’ Martin growled sarcastically. The door shut with a little less force, and Hugh closed his eyes and dropped his head back against the chair.

Where *had* he gone wrong? Had Martin always been like this? He didn’t know. He’d been too busy working to notice. Had it been too much to expect that just knowing his father worked with disabled children would give Martin the same compassion and understanding?

Clearly.

Oh, damn. Hugh got up and rummaged in his CD collection, found something soothing and put it on. The lights were low, the music was soft and he found his thoughts turning yet again to Judith.

How difficult was it, bringing up a disabled child in this unforgiving world—never mind alone? He couldn’t even manage a healthy, normal teenager. How Judith coped with Edward was a mystery. She must have to deal with all his frustration and disappointment, and probably her own guilt at her part in his disablement if it was due to a birth injury. Even if she hadn’t been to blame, she would still blame herself. Parents always did, at least until they worked through that.

He wondered when she had found out there was something wrong. Had she known straight away? Unlikely, he thought, with that fairly low level of disability. Often CP was undiagnosed for months or even years. Had she had the support of her parents? A partner? Who was Edward’s father? Did they see him?

So many questions—and none of the answers really any of his business. Only those relevant to his treatment of the child could possibly be considered justified, and yet he found the others clamoured at him.

Those questions and others—like how she would feel in his arms, and if her lips were really as soft as they looked, and if her body was as lush as it appeared or if the fullness of her breasts was just an illusion created by clever underwear.

He didn’t think so. She didn’t have the money for clever underwear. So, real, then. Full and soft and womanly.

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