

Without Trace

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Published by Accent Press

Extract

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Prologue

THE MOTORWAY WAS DESERTED. A tarnished pewter ribbon streaking across countryside drained grey by the indistinct light of a watery moon. The bushes that marked the boundary between road and farmland moved slightly in the chill night breeze then, as headlights shot across the horizon, a figure moved forward, a darker shade amongst the shadows. It waited patiently at the side of the road, its white-gloved hands raised high as if in supplication. The solitary man behind the wheel of the small saloon car braked in response to the gesture, before slowing the car to a halt.

'I'm sorry to trouble you but my car went off the road about a mile back. Could you possibly give me a lift to the nearest town?' The voice that drifted in through the open car window was cultured, polite.

'Of course. Get in.' The driver made an effort to keep his reply casual, friendly, as though he were frequently flagged down by Pierrots on the motorway at four in the morning. He reached across to the passenger door and unlocked it. 'Have you been to a fancy dress party?'

'The costume.' The Pierrot's laugh was shallow, artificial. 'I forgot I was wearing it. My appearance must seem bizarre, to say the least.' The clown was detached, distant, as though the man or woman behind the mask of black and white grease paint was intoning well-rehearsed, yet scarcely understood, lines.

'Did you hurt yourself when your car left the road? Hit your head against the steering wheel perhaps?' The

driver looked the Pierrot over keenly with a professional eye.

'No, there's no injury. I am perfectly well, thank you.' The Pierrot stepped into the car and settled himself in the passenger seat. Even under the inadequate courtesy light, his costume appeared perfect. A consummate work of theatrical art and a very different affair to the rough ensembles hastily thrown together for the hospital balls, the driver observed.

The Pierrot's black skullcap and loose pyjama suit were of thick dull satin, the front of the hat and the high-necked jacket ornamented by a single row of large white silk pom-poms. The effect was one of expense, yet somehow it also suggested the wealth and luxury of another age. Crepe paper and cheap creased rayon lining would be more today's standard, even on the stage of the one ailing professional theatre the town could boast. The driver looked up from the costume to the heavily made-up face. Was the Pierrot a Pierrette? The height and build suggested a man, yet the voice was high-pitched, curiously feminine, as though it were an integral part of the disguise.

'I'm driving to the outskirts of town, will that suit you?' The driver asked, suddenly remembering why he was travelling on the motorway at such an ungodly hour.

'Yes. The outskirts will be fine. I'm sorry to put you to all this trouble.' The clown crossed his arms and slipped his hands into the wide sleeves of his suit like a pantomime Chinese.

The driver turned the ignition key and reached for the gear stick, but the car didn't move. A flash of cold steel darted upwards from the Pierrot's hands. The driver stared in disbelief at the blade. He watched, transfixed, as it moved slowly, inexorably towards him. He winced involuntarily as the sharp tip of the knife penetrated the soft skin of his throat just below his left ear. Then

realisation dawned. This was no dream. This was happening. Happening now.

His hands flew upwards in a desperate attempt to wrest the weapon from the Pierrot's hands, but the defence was too weak, too late. Before the driver's fingers touched the knife, they fell limply, landing with a dull thud on the leather-gloved steering wheel.

The Pierrot sat quietly for a moment watching the steady flow of blood pump out of the severed throat on to the dead man's chest. Finally, he withdrew his knife. It came easily. Wiping the blade clean between the gloved fingers of his left hand, he returned it to the sheath concealed beneath his sleeve.

He turned away from the rattling body, opened the car door and stepped on to the gravelled surface of the hard shoulder. Animal-like, he stood poised on tip-toe, his muscles stretched, his face upturned, sniffing the air as though he were searching for an alien scent. All was quiet, peaceful.

He walked around to the driver's side of the car and wrenched open the door. The body slumped sideways on to the road, landing awkwardly on its head. The Pierrot linked his arms around the torso of the dead man and dragged him backwards, pushing the lolling head down on to the blood-soaked chest as though he were a child trying to mend a broken toy.

Panting with exertion, he laboriously heaved his burden off the road into the thick undergrowth of the tangled hedgerow. Soon, his movements were lost among the wind-whispers of the bushes. The moon disappeared behind a bank of cloud. On the eastern horizon a faint, lighter tinge to the sky heralded dawn, and the advent of a new day.

* * *

The light grew stronger, turning to silver, then gold, before the Pierrot emerged from the hedge. He waded stiffly through the overgrown weeds back up the bank to the parked car. His breath jerked spasmodically in quick short gasps, and his hands trembled as they clutched a bundle that he had made from the dead man's jacket. He set his burden gently on the passenger seat of the car, slamming the door shut before walking around the bonnet to the driver's side.

From nearby woods came the first tentative notes of morning birdsong. They mingled with the quiet purr of the engine as the car slid off the hard shoulder on to the empty motorway. Within minutes it was no more than an insignificant speck on the horizon.

The landscape behind remained unchanged except for a darkly wet slick of gore that slimed off the road into the undergrowth. The gleam of gold on the eastern horizon intensified, lightening the sky to a translucent shade of opal. Rain began to fall. Slight at first, it became a downpour as the morning progressed. A heavy cleansing rain that washed away the traces of blood and flesh, diluting the red stain to a mark that might have been caused by anything. Cars sped past in the traffic lanes. Intermittent at first, they became a steady trickle that roared into a torrent with the advent of the rush hour.

The travellers who glanced casually out of their car windows didn't wonder at the stain that marred the hard shoulder. But then they were the lucky ones. For them journey's end was not yet in sight.

Chapter One

THE TELEPHONE RANG SHRILLY, shattering the still atmosphere of the darkened bedroom. A tired hand groped its way out of the tangle of bedcover and duvet and fumbled in the direction of the side table. There was a melodic crash, closely followed by muttered curses.

'Dr Sherringham?'

'Which one?' Daisy mumbled sleepily.

'Dr Tim Sherringham.'

'Thank God for that.'

'I beg your pardon?'

'I'll get him,' Daisy snapped. It was bad enough to be woken from a deep and blissful sleep without having to cope with a humourless telephone operator. 'Tim.' Daisy poked the huddle of bedclothes beside her.

'No, not tonight. Please not tonight.' Tim buried his head beneath the pillow. 'They promised they wouldn't do it to me. Not tonight.'

Ignoring his protests, Daisy scrabbled beneath the bedclothes until she found his hand. Wrapping his fingers around the receiver she left the bed and stumbled into the bathroom, to the accompaniment of Tim's muffled pleas.

'Tell the hospital I'm ill. Dead. Not here. Anything. Daisy. Daisy!'

'Why oh why do I always do it?' Daisy asked herself. She was incredibly thirsty, dehydrated from the wine and vodka she had drunk earlier. She filled her tooth glass with water from the cold tap before studying her reflection in the mirror. Her long dark hair was dull, stiff with the setting lotion she only wore on what Tim sardonically

referred to as "state occasions". It would be hell to brush out in the morning she thought miserably, wondering just how many, or rather few, hours away her morning was.

She stood on tip-toe and peered at her eyes. They were bloodshot, and there were dark smudges underlining her lower lashes that had nothing to do with left-over mascara. She looked as exhausted as she felt. And she was operating at nine sharp. Assisting the hospital dragon – the one female consultant, who devoured housemen like most consultants devoured whisky.

'Damn!' She jerked the cord that switched off the bathroom light, and wandered back into the bedroom.

'I'll second that.' Tim was out of bed and pulling on the white evening shirt he had tossed on to the bedroom floor only an hour earlier.

'If you undid the buttons when you undressed you wouldn't have to do that.'

'Do what?' Tim enquired mechanically.

'Pull your shirt over your head.' Daisy looked across at her husband, curiously detached for a moment. They were married. Had been for nearly six months, and still she couldn't get used to the fact.

What was it Judy had once said about Tim? – he was too good to be true. Good-looking and good natured. Still the clean living all-American boy, even though he hadn't set foot in the States for nearly twenty years. He even looked like the archetypal movie star hero, six foot six inch frame, slim build, curling dark hair and devastatingly blue eyes...

'Stop looking at me like that.'

'Like what?' Daisy smiled.

'Like you want to get back into bed.'

'But I do. I really do.' She flung herself headlong on the dishevelled duvet.

'I get the distinct impression you couldn't give a damn whether I get in with you or not.'

'I would care,' Daisy answered. 'If I wasn't so very, very tired. Why do I always find your brother's parties so exhausting?'

'Because my brother is exhausting.' Tim ran his fingers through his hair and looked around the room. 'But exhausting or not, at this time in the morning I have to agree, big brother's got a point.'

'What point?' Daisy enquired sleepily.

'A point about having to get up in the middle of the night,' Tim snapped. 'It's downright uncivilised. Daisy, where are my pants?'

'Your trousers,' she corrected, 'are where you flung them, on my side of the bed.'

He shook the bedcover and his evening suit fell to the floor.

'Do you know what Richard said to me tonight?'

'No.' Daisy was drifting hazily in that pleasantly comfortable grey world that hovers between waking and sleeping.

'He said he has only left his bed in the small hours once in the last ten years. And that was the night Joanna's father had his heart attack...'

Daisy groped her way back to consciousness. 'He offered you a job again, didn't he?'

'He did, and from where I'm standing right now, it looks just the ticket,' he asserted defiantly.

'Taking rich men's blood pressure. Spending each and every day listening to imaginary ills, just because the patient's wealthy enough to foot the bill in that crassly decorated clinic your brother owns.'

'It's not at all like that, you little Marxist.'

'I know exactly what it's like,' she retorted heatedly. 'Do what you want with your life, but leave me out of it.'

You're not going to turn me into your dogsbody as Richard's done to Joanna. I have no intention of wasting my life hosting parties, and supervising meaningless research for a cosmetic company on the top floor of the clinic. I'm staying right where I am...'

'A houseman for ever?' Tim enquired mildly.

'No, not a houseman for ever!' she exclaimed.

'I love you when you're angry,' he whispered softly, taking the bitterness out of their argument. 'Your eyes blaze so beautifully.' Pressing her back against the pillows he kissed her. 'We'll talk tomorrow.' He glanced at his watch '... Today... oh blast it, another time, when we're not so tired.' He moved away from her.

'If we wait till then we'll never talk.' She smiled despite the anger that still scalded inside her.

'You never know, one day we may both be given the same day off.'

'Is that going to be the same day all geriatric consultants retire and we get promoted?' She knelt on the bed and locked her arms around his neck, pulling him back down next to her. 'Headache gone?' she asked. He nodded. 'Quite gone?'

'Yes.'

'In that case, as we have only just made up, must you go? Right now? Right this minute?'

'Right now, right this minute.' He disentangled himself from her arms. 'Yesterday I pleaded with Bassett. "Put Mrs Hawkins on the theatre list," I begged. "We can do a Caesarean this afternoon. A nice, quiet, calm operation." And what did the great man say? "No. Leave it until Monday." And now I have to get up,' he glanced at his watch, 'at three-forty in the morning after a night on the tiles and go and operate.'

'Are you sure you're in a fit state to drive?' Daisy crawled back under the bedclothes.

'I didn't indulge as much as you, darling. Besides, fit state or not, by the sound of it Hawkins junior won't wait any longer than it's going to take me to get to the hospital.' He wrapped the duvet around her relaxing form. 'Breakfast at eight in the canteen?'

'You take me to such nice places.'

'Don't I just.' He paused for a second in the open doorway. 'Love you.'

'Love you too.' The temptation to return to sleep was overwhelming. Daisy's eyelids drooped and she slid sweetly, effortlessly downwards, sensing rather than actually hearing Tim leave the room. Her final thoughts were of doctors and night calls.

Why hadn't they taken up farming or train driving? No. Train drivers had to work at night too, and so did farmers when their animals were sick. Their lives would be no different. Her mind drifted aimlessly, incoherently, for a few seconds, then there was only a dreamless sleep that obliterated everything. Even Tim's absence in the bed beside her.

The alarm woke Daisy. It was buzzing angrily on the floor beside the bed. She hadn't bothered to pick it up after she'd knocked it over during the night. Resisting the fatal temptation to bury herself under the duvet for an extra minute, she sat up, opened her eyes wide and threw back the bedclothes.

Tim's maroon velvet bow tie lay on her dressing table next to a glittering bundle of her costume jewellery. Why was it too much effort to put things away at night? She stepped over her black taffeta evening dress on the way to the bathroom. Next time she'd find the energy. She really would. The sparkle and glamour of the evening inevitably looked cheap and tawdry in the cold light of morning. Like a hangover it tainted the beginning of the new day.

Turning the shower to tepid she braced her muscles for the sensation of cool water. Her body as well as her mind was still numbed by sleep. If her life could consist only of evenings and nights, the world would be perfect. She'd glide through beautifully quiet private times with Tim. But perhaps even perfection would grow tedious. They'd stir themselves now and again to do the odd afternoon of work. Just one or two a week, preceded by long lazy mornings spent drinking coffee and reading the newspapers. Like Sundays in the old days, before patients, responsibilities and duty rosters had taken whole chunks out of their lives. But dreams were dreams – and reality was this ghastly never-ending effort. Shivering, she switched the shower off and reached for the towel to dry herself.

Twenty minutes after leaving her bed she locked the apartment, took the lift to the ground floor and walked out of the building. Jangling her car keys impatiently, she searched the ranks of parked cars for her Fiat but saw only Tim's Mercedes.

'Blast him!' she cursed crossly. He knew she hated driving his car. Besides, no self-respecting registrar should drive a Mercedes. The very idea was ridiculous. If his brother had to give them a car instead of teaspoons for a wedding present, he should have given them an anonymous little runabout, not this top of the range, gross gleaming status symbol that she loathed driving and was petrified of scratching.

She wrenched open the door and tossed her bag into the back, before climbing into the driving seat. At least there shouldn't be too much traffic on the road at this time in the morning. Another hour and it would be chaos. She jerked the seat forward, smiling at the thought of Tim folding his long body into her Fiat. He invariably forgot to

adjust the seat. The last time he'd done it, he'd twisted his knee.

Consoled by the memory of Tim's discomfort she turned on the ignition and crashed the gears. Muttering to herself she tried again, and succeeded. Slowly, carefully, she inched her way out of the parking bay on to the drive.

Once she reached the motorway Daisy forgot about the car and drove automatically. As Tim so often commented, "the Merc was built for motorways". She sat back in the driving seat and relaxed. She knew it was childish of her to resent Richard for buying them the car. Tim owed his brother a great deal. His education, the apartment that had been a wedding present along with the car, and Richard would have given them a great deal more if Tim hadn't put a stop to it. When it came to money Richard was generous to a fault. But his generosity did nothing to assuage her inferiority complex.

She had struggled into medicine the hard way, via comprehensive school and a comfortable, if shabby, middle-class home. Not even the glamour of the formal annual college balls, had prepared her for Tim's introduction to the Sherringham lifestyle.

First there was Richard's Georgian mansion which Tim still treated as home. She could never bring herself to breeze through its grand double doors and laugh and joke with the butler as Tim did. But she had never managed to shake off her first impression that everything in the Sherringham household, from the luxuriously tasteful I down to the elaborately staged dinner parties, belonged, not in life, but in one of the glossy magazines.

Richard and his wife Joanna existed in a splendid and perfect world that allowed nothing distasteful – nothing obnoxious – nothing real – to intrude. Their daily life would provide the perfect backdrop to a glossy Hollywood

film. But Daisy couldn't help feeling that she would be happier watching from the stalls, an ice-cream and packet of popcorn in hand, rather than moving on to the set as one of the players.

She couldn't even blame her sense of isolation and unreality on Richard and Joanna. Neither of them had ever as much as hinted that she was different from any of the other titled, wealthy and famous people who walked through their mansion's doors. Ignoring her socialist ideals and chain-store clothes, they had welcomed her to the family with open, if slightly chilly, arms. And she had soon realised their lack of warmth was not restricted to her. They kept themselves detached and slightly distant from everyone. Except Tim. No one could be indifferent to Tim. But then Tim was no longer part of Richard's world. He had broken away. Or had he?

Doubts stole from the recesses of her mind. Tim always listened to Richard. Even when he mocked the NHS hospital she and Tim worked in, and brought up the subject of the lack of funds that told in the outdated equipment and long waiting lists; their endless hours of duty; the constant fight against time that meant they had virtually no private life. Each and every caustic observation Richard made terrified her.

The last thing she wanted was to be sucked into the Sherringham whirlpool and transformed into a beautician's ideal of the perfect woman: immaculately styled hair, nails painted with varnish that never had the opportunity to chip, her best features heightened and transformed by layers of expertly applied make-up. Programmed to make the correct response for each and every social occasion; her career subjugated to Tim's. Just as Joanna's as a psychiatrist had been subjugated and curtailed to bolster Richard's ambitions.

"But it's not the quantity of our private life that's important, dear brother. It's the quality."

Tim's laughter intruded into her thoughts. He'd said that the first time she'd heard Richard try to pressurise him into working at the Holbourne and Sherringham Clinic. But then Tim hadn't said it last night. Or if he had, she hadn't been around to hear him.

'Damn Joanna and her parties,' she muttered feelingly. Her sister-in-law must be getting to her. She could have sworn she could smell her astringent perfume.

Jerking herself sharply back into the present, she blew her horn when a red Porsche cut dangerously close in front of her.

'Idiot,' she mouthed at the driver. Give a middle-aged man a sports car and he had to live up to the image, even if it meant killing himself and everyone else on the road.

Her anger died with her brief flare of temper. When she was with Tim, she was sure of him, his love for her, the life they had chosen to lead. She was a fool to allow one of Richard and Joanna's meaningless parties to upset her. She had to bury her doubts. Be positive. Count the pluses in her life with Tim, not worry about the minuses that might, or might not, be lurking around the corner. Besides, what could she do if Tim did change his mind about taking the directorship in the Holbourne and Sherringham clinic that Richard had offered him?

She focused on the last weekend she and Tim had shared. Had it been a month, or two months, ago? They had taken their boat down the coast and anchored in a deserted cove for a couple of days – and nights. There had been no telephones, no beepers, no Richard. Nothing except what they themselves had made of the brief holiday. Tim was right; it was not the quantity of time they spent together. It was the quality.

She took the slip road off the motorway, drove to the hospital and left the Mercedes in one of the wide bays marked REGISTRARS ONLY. Tim may have driven her Fiat to work, but he could take the status symbol home. She lifted her bag off the back seat, locked the car door and breezed through the main entrance towards the lifts.

'Nice morning, Dr Sherringham.'

'Beautiful, John,' she smiled at the porter, pressed the lift button and wondered if Tim was waiting for her. Hospital nights had a nasty habit of extending into days, particularly on the maternity ward.

'Lazy people take lifts, active, health-conscious ones take the stairs.'

'You can be healthy enough for both of us this morning, Judy.' Daisy yawned as she walked into the lift.

'I never said I was one of the active breed.' Judy joined her. 'Merely commenting on their ways. Are you going to the canteen?'

'I am.'

'You look terrible,' Judy said cheerfully. She pushed the button for the tenth floor. 'Was the surgeons' barbecue that wild?'

'Not the barbecue, Tim's brother's dinner party.'

'The eminent Dr Sherringham as opposed to the two plebeian ones.'

Daisy braced herself for the shudder that all the hospital lifts gave when they reached their floor. 'Where are you this morning?'

'Antenatal clinic.' Judy stepped out of the lift and pushed the canteen door open. 'You?'

'Theatre.'

'Not with...'

'Her Mightiness,' Daisy pre-empted grimly, picking a none too clean tray from the stand. She looked around the room. The place was half empty, and there was no sign of Tim. 'Can I buy you a coffee?' she asked Judy.

'You could, but I'd prefer orange juice. That at least is covered by the Trade Descriptions Act. Where's Tim? He should be here soothing your fevered brow with the day you have looming.'

'He had an emergency call last night, the Hawkins baby.'

'Poor Tim. Was it a very early call?' Judy commiserated.

'Fourish, but when you've only been in bed an hour it seems earlier.'

'Don't I know it.' Judy picked up two plates of toast from the warming tray. 'Can I tempt you?'

'Errghh.'

'I take it that means "no thank you dear friend"?' Judy grabbed Daisy's arm. 'Watch out. Here comes pain personified.'

Daisy snatched her coffee and marched briskly to a table at the far end of the canteen.

Judy followed at a smart pace. 'He's heading this way.'

'Isn't he always,' Daisy muttered through clenched teeth. 'The man's in love with you.'

'Or you,' Judy countered.

'Can't be me, I'm a married lady.'

'Since when has a little thing like Tim stopped a first class menace like Eric Hedley from pestering a woman?'

A shadow fell over their table. 'Can I join you, girls?'

'We're not girls, we're doctors,' Judy said flatly. 'And since you're already half-way into that chair, your question is superfluous.'

'Where's the blue-eyed boy this morning?' Eric enquired snidely.

'Whose blue-eyed boy?' Daisy demanded, knowing perfectly well that Eric was referring to Tim.

'Whose blue-eyed boy do you think? Tim, of course, every consultant's dream registrar.'

'Jealousy doesn't become you, Eric,' Judy purred sarcastically. 'We all know how you angled for Tim's post, but fortunately for humankind the best man was appointed.'

'I wouldn't be too sure of that if I were you,' Eric retorted swiftly. 'I've just left the labour ward. Mrs Hawkins's waters broke at seven-thirty this morning, and already the baby's distressed.'

Daisy stared at Eric blankly. 'But Tim's...'

'Tim's nowhere to be found,' Eric interrupted. 'They've been paging him for -' he looked pointedly at his watch. 'Thirty-five minutes, and although our esteemed registrar is on call, he's not responding.'

'That's ridiculous,' Daisy protested. 'Tim left the apartment early this morning.'

Eric raised a querying eyebrow. 'Well, wherever he is, it's not here. I've been on call all night. Six emergencies and no help. They're calling Bassett out now, and, if I was a consultant, I wouldn't be the least bit pleased to be dragged out of bed this early in the morning on clinic day just because my registrar was too bloody idle to respond to an emergency call.'

'Then it's just as well you'll never be a consultant,' Judy snapped protectively.

'Tim left before four this morning,' Daisy asserted forcefully. 'He should have reached here around four-thirty.'

'That's very clever of him, considering he wasn't even called out until seven-thirty,' Eric sneered. 'Let me

guess,' he looked Daisy in the eye. 'Can our golden boy possibly be cheating on his wife? But whether he is or he isn't, I'm sure there's nothing amiss that big brother can't solve. What it is to have the power of the medical mafia behind you.'

A complacent expression of smug self-satisfaction spread across Eric's plump, spotty face. He reminded Daisy of a gross, over-fed, neutered cat. She reached for her coffee cup. Holding it by the handle she tossed the contents full into Eric's face. He screamed, but Daisy didn't wait to find out whether the noise was born of pain or shock. She pushed her chair back. It crashed to the floor. Oblivious to the disturbance she'd created, she ran headlong out of the canteen.

'If that was anything other than hospital coffee, you'd be on your way to the burns unit,' Judy quipped before chasing after Daisy. She caught up with her on the staircase. 'Where are you going?' she asked.

'Maternity.' Daisy didn't break step.

Judy laid a restraining hand on her arm. 'If Tim's really in trouble he's not going to want you around to see it.'

'If Tim's there and able to handle whatever's happening he won't even know I'm close. But if he needs me...'

'I'll go with you.' Judy quickened her pace.

'No...' Daisy turned towards her.

'Go on, will you,' Judy ordered, 'or we'll both be late for our shifts.'

'No, Dr Sherringham, Dr Tim Sherringham hasn't been here today. No, we didn't call him out before seven-thirty. No, there was no answer from your home number, - I appreciate there must be a mistake, but I have a ward to

run. If you'll excuse me.' The sister turned to her drugs trolley.

'The Hawkins baby?' Daisy asked the sister's back.

'The foetus is no longer viable.'

Calm, reasoned words of logic articulated in the standard bedside manner. But Daisy wasn't in the mood for calm reasoned logic. She clenched her fists impotently, straining them against the pockets of her white coat.

'Is there anything else?' The sister turned and asked pointedly.

'No. Nothing. Thank you.' Daisy stepped aside, allowing the sister to rattle her trolley down the corridor.

'I heard Tim ask for Mrs Hawkins to be put on the theatre list yesterday,' Judy said sharply. 'No one can blame him for this.'

'The baby's still dead,' Daisy said dully.

'And we're doctors. We take the losses along with the gains. Wasn't that what they taught us in medical school?' Judy reminded her. 'There's nothing we can do here, and it's half eight already.' She steered Daisy towards the main corridor. 'If you don't get to the theatre and scrub up right now there's going to be two Dr Sherringtons on the carpet.'

'Something must have happened to Tim. He'd never ignore a call.' Daisy scanned the corridor feverishly. 'He could be hurt or...'

'Go to theatre. I'll organise a search of the hospital. The minute he turns up I'll get word to you.'

'Promise?' Daisy turned her dark, anguished eyes to Judy.

'I promise.' Judy caught Daisy's hand and pressed her fingers reassuringly. 'He's probably picked up on another call. You know Tim. Doctor first, husband second. I thought you knew that when you married him.'

'You really think that's what's happened?' Daisy clutched at the hope Judy offered.

'I'm certain,' Judy assured her.

'And you'll get word to me as soon as you know where he is?'

'I will. Now go before the fireworks start.'

Miss Palmer-Smith was on form. By nine-fifteen Daisy felt as though she, and the other housemen, were personally responsible for every deficiency in the theatre and the hospital. Routine hernia followed routine appendectomy with her either mishearing, or misinterpreting, every command and question Miss Palmer-Smith tossed her way. It didn't make things any easier when a chance remark reminded her that Miss Palmer-Smith was a personal friend of Richard's.

Minutes before the final patient on the morning's list was due to be wheeled in, Alan Cummins, Tim's counterpart in paediatrics, peered through the porthole. He stayed just long enough to catch Daisy's attention and mouth, 'Tim's in the hospital,' before disappearing. Daisy had felt incompetent before Alan's arrival, now she felt positively idiotic. She dropped an instrument, backed into a nurse, and caught her hip awkwardly on a trolley in the space of less than five minutes.

'Are there any emergencies at the end of this list?' The consultant watched Daisy begin to tie the final stitches.

'No, Miss Palmer-Smith,' Daisy murmured from behind her mask.

'Perhaps it's just as well, Dr Sherringham,' the consultant observed dryly. She snapped off her gloves. 'Finish up here.'

'Yes, Miss Palmer-Smith. Thank you,' Daisy replied automatically, not knowing why she was being thankful. Gratitude for the end of the morning perhaps?

Miss Palmer-Smith swept out of the theatre and Daisy forced herself to concentrate on the patient on the table. A few minutes more and she'd see Tim. What on earth had happened to make him behave so stupidly? Had there been a crash on the motorway? Had Tim stayed with the injured driver?

If that was the case, why hadn't she seen him on the way in? This was the only General Hospital for miles, so why hadn't he booked in here? Unless he had taken whoever it was to Richard's clinic. Of course – the clinic. It was closer to town...

'How long do you want before I start bringing her round?' The anaesthetist asked. Daisy glanced at Mike Edmunds. His slight figure was half hidden by the array of tubes and bottles surrounding the patient's head.

'One minute more and I'll be through.' The tension had lifted. Miss Palmer-Smith was a first-class surgeon, but the atmosphere she generated was anything but conducive to work. Daisy knotted the final threads into the patient's abdomen.

'Very neat,' Mike complimented. 'Do you darn Tim's socks as well?'

'Sometimes,' Daisy replied absent-mindedly.

'By the way, I'm sorry about Tim's trouble. If there's anything I can do...'

'Thank you.' Touched by the sincerity in Mike's voice, Daisy weakened in relief. Soon, very soon, she'd be with Tim. Would he be waiting for her in the surgeons' changing room? She cut the final cord with a flourish.

'I'll stay in post-op,' Mike tilted the patient's head back. 'Go and get yourself a coffee.'

'Thanks. I'll remember you for this.'

'I expect you to,' he called after her.