



H
O
S
P
I
T
A
L
I
T
Y

TOBY
LITT

"Pumped full of incident...
An absurd page-turner"
The Times



Hospital
by
Toby Litt

Copyright © Toby Litt, 2007
All rights reserved



Penguin Books Ltd

This is a limited extract from Hospital

To find out more please visit www.penguin.co.uk

19:59 hrs

Chukka-chukka-chukka-chukka.

Swooping out of the late evening sky, the Dauphin XTP3000 plunged down towards the hospital.

The boy felt his stomach get left behind in the air above: if only.

On the hospital roof, the H of the helipad glowed brightly in its circle of halogen.

Paramedic Bill “Zapper” Billson spoke into his helmet-mic: ‘He’s fading fast.’

The patient was bagged, and Billson was doing what he could to keep oxygen flowing to his brain – keep the brain alive.

‘I’ll be landed in another minute,’ replied chopper pilot Hank “Cowboy” Smith.

The boy wanted to open his eyes, to look out the window, but the pain from his stomach was too great.

‘He hasn’t got much longer than that,’ replied Zapper, his voice devoid of panic. He’d signed off on two arrests already this shift and had no intention of making it three in a row.

‘Trauma team’s there,’ said Cowboy, who could see the group of them standing by the door. Down-draught from the rotorblades pressed their green and yellow uniforms against their bodies.

A figure with two fluorescent orange paddles stood on the H and waved Cowboy in. He didn’t need help – he’d done this thousands of times. Easy on the old stickeroo.

The boy felt the chopper bounce slightly on the concrete.

As soon as they were down, before the rotors stopped, Trauma team swarmed onto the helipad.

‘Give us the weather report,’ said the authoritative voice of Sir Reginald Saint-Hellier.

‘Bloody pissing it,’ replied Zapper. He enjoyed their shorthand, from drizzle to thunderstorm.

‘Specifically.’

‘What we have here is an unidentified Caucasian male, mid thirties, found in the local park having lost consciousness and fallen to the ground – looks like he was out for a run.’

The boy lay there quietly, trying not to draw attention to himself. He knew the medical people had a more urgent patient to deal with.

Cowboy sat back in the cockpit, doing post-flight checks. He felt mildly curious about whether this one would live but wasn’t going to let it ruin his evening.

‘I think he’s going to arrest soon,’ Zapper said.

‘Why don’t you let us take it from here?’ said Sir Reginald.

‘My pleasure,’ said Zapper, then, more quietly, so only Sir Reginald could hear, ‘See you later, sir.’

The older man gave Zapper a wink then helped slide the unconscious body onto the waiting gurney.

The boy, too, could sense he was being lifted out of the helicopter. He tried one last time to open his eyes, failed. Where was his mother? He needed his mother.

Nurse Gemma Swallow took the man’s hand. As soon as they were away from the din of the rotor-blades, she began her questions. ‘Can you hear me?’ she asked. ‘What’s your name? Can you tell me your name? I am Nurse Swallow. My first name is

Gemma.’ She knew the man wasn’t going to answer, might never speak again. But this was the job Sir Reginald had given her when she joined Trauma team, was it only four weeks ago? ‘It helps, sometimes,’ he had said. ‘Patients need to be spoken to, even when they can’t hear. They’re human, we need to keep them as such by treating them that way. Also, it reminds the team that they aren’t just symptomology.’ And so Nurse Swallow continued, ‘You are at the hospital now. They brought you here in a helicopter. We’re going to look after you. We’re going to find out what’s wrong with you.’ Then she said again, but with variation, ‘You’re in Hospital.’

In through the doors – shoom – which part without being parted and along a short corridor with bright striplights scrolling overhead and round a tight corner with a slight jolt from uneven flooring and – bang – into the Emergency Medicine department, doors swinging shut swinging swinging shut behind them.

Nurse Swallow kept up – her stethoscope banging unnoticed against her breastbone, where she always had a few faint, saucer-shaped bruises.

The Trauma team wheeled the gurney up to the examining table and then gently, on a count of three, transferred the body from one to the other.

‘Alright,’ said Sir Reginald, and repeated Zapper’s exact words: Caucasian male, mid thirties. Then he added his gloss: ‘Glasgow Coma Scale 3. Pupils pinpoint. No motor responses, no response to pain, not much of anything. So, we have precious little time. I want him intubated asap. 100 per cent oxygen. I want saline. Type and cross-match 6 units packed cell CBC. Chem-7.’

As the great man reeled off his requirements, Nurse Swallow kept self-consciously speaking calm and clear words into the man's ear. She stood to his right, holding his right hand. 'You're in the best place, now. We're going to do everything we can for you. The other voice you hear is Sir Reginald Saint-Hellier's. He's Consultant in Charge of Intensive Therapy. You're in very good hands. Can you tell me your name?' The body, of course, gave no reply.

Around Nurse Swallow, the Trauma team was moving smoothly into action. To her left, bending over the patient's held-open mouth, anaesthetist Sarah Felt slid a breathing tube down into the trachea. Patricia Parish, one of the most senior team-members, inserted a cannula into a vein in the left forearm, then attached the long plastic tube flowing out of a transparent saline bag. Other nurses moved swiftly in and out, bringing things, removing them.

Opposite her, standing back a little, Surgeon John Steele looked calmly on – it was not yet his time.

The boy, his eyes screwed tight with pain, could hear the doctors very near by, talking about the other patient, saying medical things. He was jealous, angry, wanting them to be discussing *him*, saving *his* life.

Most of all, he could hear the woman at his side, speaking sweetly into his ear, asking his name. He wanted to tell her what it was, but two things were stopping him: he couldn't speak and he couldn't remember.

Not being able to speak was the worst thing, for it meant he couldn't tell her what was wrong – the appletreeseed. He had swallowed an appleseed, by mistake, and it had started to grow.

With eyes still closed, the boy could sense that his

other senses, while not heightened, were easier to focus upon. Around him was a near-constant clatter: things banged into other things, but that's what they were designed to do; without damage. And then there were the beeps, a whole thick forest of electronic information. And also the smells, some acrid and eye-stinging, some balmlike and NutraSweet. The floor had been almost-corrosively washed, and the breathing-space above it wasn't soon going to forget; monitoring equipment was cooled as its work heated it up, giving the dual scent of circuitry; patients with open wounds were swabbed to disinfect – a grazed-knee smell, of mending and *that didn't hurt so much and be a little soldier* and *what would you like as a treat?*; air-conditioning took away certain viler smells, but their absence was haloed there quite clearly: vomit, shit, blood (a difficult scent to ignore once noticed); the sweat of those long on shift and the deodorants of those just arrived (the close-up voice smelt light, floral, scented but not perfumed).

The pain inside him increased. It was unbearable – as if something were actually going to break.

'And I'm now going to remove your clothes,' said Gemma Swallow.

She went across and fetched the angled scissors, then began to cut off the man's white cotton T-shirt.

Next came his gray tracksuit bottoms and black cotton underpants.

She left his socks and trainers on – a twisted ankle was the least of the man's problems.

Until Gemma was finished, the nurses worked around her; then, when she had carried the clothes away, they formed a tight circle around the body.

At her previous hospital, Gemma would have been

there among them. For a couple of quiet shifts, Sir Reginald had recognized this by allowing her to join in. However, mostly, she had been assigned to the lowly knee and shin areas, where life-threatening discoveries were almost unheard of.

The only things she had come across were previously unnoticed cuts, bumps, scrapes, grazes and bruises on the broken bodies of Road Traffic Accident victims. She was by now more than used to the variations involved with Man *vs* Truck and Child *vs* Motorbike.

So far, her most glamorous announcement, apart from the usual broken and shattered and pulped bones, had been of splinters of glass from a car window in the calves of a poor twelve-year-old girl who had been texting a friend while she crossed the road.

It made no difference – the delicate, broken little thing had died a few hours later, on the operating table of Mr John Steele. But Nurse Swallow knew he had done all he could, fought death every millimetre of the way, and she didn't blame him at all.

This evening, however, she was reduced to going through the man's pockets in search of any clue to his identity.

The left one contained a handkerchief, clean, wrapped around a set of keys; the right felt empty at first, but the fabric against Gemma's knuckle was unusually stiff.

Putting her hand in again, she encountered the soft edge of something – which, when she pulled it free, turned out to be the plastic-coated photograph of a girl. She was pretty.

Just then, Gemma heard an all-too-familiar sound: a harsh, unbroken wail from the ECG. Across the

bottom of the monitor, she knew without seeing, flatline in lime-green.

‘He’s crashed,’ said Sarah. ‘Why’s he crashed?’

‘Get the defibber,’ called Steele.

The tight circle broke open, and Gemma – still holding the girl’s photograph – got a proper look at the patient. They looked alike, girl and man; he must be her father.

‘Tension pneumothorax,’ she said, almost before she had taken in the subtle signs: only the left side of the man’s chest was moving, and the veins in his neck were distended.

No-one had heard her, so she had to shout it. ‘Tension pneumothorax!’

By this point the paddles were almost charged, hovering in Sir Reginald’s hands just above the man’s body.

‘Really?’ Sir Reginald asked.

Gemma became aware that all eyes – most especially Steele’s – were upon her.

Then Sir Reginald looked down, and his vastly experienced eye took in the symptomology.

‘Well,’ asked Sarah Felt, as if deliberately to make things worse.

Time seemed almost to stand still, and Gemma felt at that moment as if her very fate hung in the balance.

Of course, of all those eyes upon her there was only one pair Gemma really cared about, one pair whose glance deeply affected her heart.

What a terrible humiliation it would be to be proven wrong in front of Steele! But she wasn’t doing this for him – if she’d had her way, she wouldn’t have needed to say anything at all.

‘Look, we should just zap him,’ said Steele. ‘He’s been under for –’

‘She’s right,’ said Sir Reginald. ‘I need a 14–16G intravenous cannula.’

The circle closed again, though not before Gemma had caught Steele’s eye – and been terrified by what she saw there.

Sir Reginald calmly performed the needle thoracotomy – a quiet hiss of air proving that Gemma had been completely right.

Almost immediately, the man’s heart spontaneously started up again; no need for the defib machine.

With the smooth, relaxed movements of a professional, Sir Reginald stepped away from the body. ‘You were wrong,’ he said to Steele, quite gently but with definite intent. ‘I think you owe Nurse Swallow an apology.’

She felt a deep deep anguish for the brilliant surgeon – that she had caused him to be humiliated, even in such a small way, and in front of the whole Trauma team! He was such a proud man, and by doing what she’d done she had wounded him.

‘Nurse Swallow,’ she heard him gruffly say, ‘I apologize for questioning your clinical judgement.’

Her throat felt far too tight to talk, but she managed to croak out, ‘That’s quite alright, Mr Steele.’ She was just about to add, ‘We all make mistakes,’ when she realized what a fatal thing it would be to say – fatal to her hopes. But more fatal than the humiliation she’d already inflicted? Perhaps not.

Looking anywhere but at Steele, Nurse Swallow caught the eye of Patricia Parish, who gave her a little wink. ‘Well done,’ it said.

*

For the next few seconds they worked in a rare pocket of silence, angel passing. Gemma could hear Steele's breathing, powerful, fast and just slightly ragged. He was annoyed – probably more with himself than with her.

Sir Reginald was Steele's mentor, and everyone knew how much Steele hated to do anything that diminished him in his eyes. Gemma was aware, though, that reacting badly to a situation like this would be far worse, in Sir Reginald's view, than admitting to a hasty mistake and taking the time to think about it afterwards.

Gemma gathered the man's clothes and placed them in a transparent plastic bag, with the photograph of the girl on top. This would accompany him wherever he went.

'Well,' said Sir Reginald, bringing the tense silence to a close, 'I suggest we get this brave soul down for a CT as soon as possible. As I don't think we've got anything particularly urgent coming in, Mr Steele, Nurse Swallow – I hope you two can take him. Everybody else, enjoy a few precious moments of leisure while you can. Splendid work, by the way, especially from Nurse Swallow.'

Embarrassed beyond belief, Gemma avoided Patricia's wicked eye as she helped to push the trolley with all its tubes and cables down the corridor. Steele was steering, and she dared not go in any direction other than the one he chose.

Almost before she knew it, so flustered was she, they were in the special high-speed lift travelling down through Hospital.

When she forced herself to look up from the patient, she was relieved to find that Steele was staring impatiently at the bright numbers counting

down above the door. Never had he seemed so magnificent to her as he did then, his square jaw tight with anger and wounded pride. Then, somehow, he sensed her eyes upon him. 'I shall have to watch out for you in future,' he said.

Of course, Gemma was mortified; she felt she must be blushing to her roots. How terribly he must hate me now, she thought. It was all she could do to keep from crying.

Gemma and Steele wheeled the unknown young man into the scanning unit, then he briefed the radiologist on what Sir Reginald wanted done. The full-body CT scan would take about ten minutes, after which it would be their job to take the patient to the Intensive Care Unit or perhaps, if things were as bad as Gemma feared they were, straight into theatre.

Gemma was readying herself for an awkward wait, in Steele's infuriated company, when he seemingly casually said, 'Shall we go and try and find a coffee while we've got time?'

This was quite bizarre. She could only think that he sensed her embarrassment, and wanted to prolong it so as to teach her a lesson she wouldn't forget. She hardly dared look at his face, fearing she might find a sarcastic expression there. When she did catch his eye, it seemed unironic enough, though she had always, ever since she started at Hospital, found him the most inscrutable of its inhabitants.

'That would be, um, good,' she said, not quite sure what she had just agreed to.

'Good,' he said.

Waking up, the boy found his pain had almost all gone – for the moment, at least. The voices were quiet; the squeaky-feet, too.

Slowly, he opened his eyes and looked around him. The room he found himself in was, yes, completely empty of people.

There were pieces of equipment surrounding him, but not one of them was turned on. He recognized the green grid where his heartbeat would have been displayed. It disappointed him not to have a chance to see what it looked like.

Turning his head, he took in the other machines, gathered as if they and not trained doctors and nurses had been attending to him. It was only then that the boy noticed a pale white shape lying on his chest and legs, which turned out to *be* his chest and legs. Until he'd seen himself, it was as if he hadn't been there. But that wasn't the most important thing. Help, no! – he hadn't got any clothes on – help!

Although there was no-one to see, his hands jumped to cover his willy.

There was a twinge inside him, a quick reminder of the pain he'd felt in the helicopter.

He needed to get something to wear. It didn't matter if all the doctors and nurses had already seen him naked – he needed *clothes*.

The boy swung his legs off the table, still keeping his hands cupped between them.

A little jump was needed, off and backslide, before his feet touched the floor.

Where had they put his clothes? He looked around for any likely places, saw none.

He stepped out of the circle of machines, and immediately felt even more naked; they had given him a reason (illness) for being like that.

Running quickly on light feet, he reached a yellow screen-on-wheels. Part-hidden behind it, he made a more considered examination of the room – which

seemed to contain nothing he could put on to cover himself.

This was an emergency. No time to make a plan. So, the boy immediately skipped across to the nearest double doors and, on tiptoes, peered out through the porthole of reinforced glass.

He saw a short corridor leading up to a pair of identical swing doors – through which a woman immediately walked. A glance was enough to see that she was heading in his direction.

With only a few seconds to act, the boy sprinted back behind the yellow screen.

As the double doors banged open, he picked himself up onto a chair so that his feet, too, would be hidden.

‘Hello?’ asked the woman. The boy almost puked with fear: she knew he was there, she’d seen him. ‘Anyone?’ she asked. Then muttered to herself, ‘Good.’

There was a phone just the other side of the screen, and to this the woman went. The boy could sense her, centimetres away, breathing, being a grown-up woman; he could even smell her perfume – what if she smelled him? Smelled his fear? Smelled, somehow, his nakedness?

He kept his breath ultraquiet and listened to her fingers dialling the touch-tone, crunchy beeps coming out of the ear-piece.

Her perfume was strong, heavy. At other times, if he’d smelled it, he would have gone bleugh and coughed. Now it was a matter of life and death and horrible embarrassment that he kept absolutely totally silent.

‘Yes, it’s Patricia,’ the woman said. ‘We’re meeting at a quarter to. Yes, just as planned. Exactly as

planned. It's all set. Yes, all. Usual routine. Sorry. I know. But we don't want to mess this one up. *Someone* will be very angry if we do. See you.'

The phone went klick, and the boy heard her dial a second time. The conversation was almost identical, except she said, 'I know, it's so exciting, isn't it?' A third call brought the comment, 'You're not going to back out now, are you? You're the star of the show . . . Good girl. Good.' A fourth and final conversation added nothing new.

When she was finished, Patricia looked quickly around the room and then went back out the way she'd come in.

The boy blew air out from puffed cheeks, though he wasn't really out of breath. It was just a way of saying phew, close one.

He wasn't sure whether it would be worse to be caught naked by a woman or a man. A man, he thought, might be better – as long as he didn't laugh.

A quick check through the porthole showed the second room as empty, Patricia gone.

But, when he got in there, he found nothing to wear and – what was worse – nowhere to hide. Better be quick, he thought.

This porthole revealed a longer stretch of corridor with wooden doors off to left and right.

The boy thought for a moment about going back and trying the other way out of the first room. But that might be just as exposed as this. He changed his mind then changed it again.

A slight twinge in his stomach refocused him on the dangers. All those doctors and nurses could return at any moment.

He pushed through and raced along the corridor.

Senses heightened, the boy noticed everything around him: the cleanish white floor reflecting the long striplights back up at themselves. Ceiling tiles over his head with randomly repeating stippling on them, some with punched-out corners revealing a cardboard-like undertexture. On the walls were noticeboards in blue felt covered with pinned-up sheets of photocopied paper.

Feeling nakeder than before, the boy reached the next set of doors – and saw through the porthole a stocky bald man coming towards him, only a few paces away. Unable to do anything else, the boy stepped to one side and waited, praying.

The bald man bashed confidently through, letting the doors swing shut behind him.

Standing to the left, the boy was completely exposed to the man's back as he walked on. The grey hair above the man's ears curled upwards, like horns.

Steele and Gemma were just starting off down the corridor when who should step out of the lift but Sarah Felt – and not just any old lift, but the superfast emergency lift. It was highly irregular for her to be using this. Almost exclusively reserved for life-or-death cases, the emergency lift was sacrosanct.

Sarah smiled at Steele, ignoring Gemma completely. 'Ah,' she said, 'I'm glad I caught you. Sir Reginald would like a word with all the senior members of the team.'

Gemma was just thinking she might say something about the lift when, astonishingly, Steele said it for her: 'Why didn't you just bleep me? And what the hell were you doing clogging up the emergency lift?'

Sarah Felt was quite unfazed. ‘There was nothing on – I checked. Things are very quiet at the moment.’

Not in Gemma’s heart they weren’t. But even in the midst of her confusion, she examined her rival anew. Sarah Felt was twenty-six, willowy, with long blond hair which hung far down her shoulders when loosed from the tight paper cap that held it captive most of the working day, or night. A natural athlete, the brilliant young anaesthetist was a competition-level snowboarder – always jetting off to Klosters or wherever to pick up gold and silver medals. Steele, too, was into winter sports, though Gemma had learned from Patricia that cross-country skiing was more his thing. In despair, she remembered that ice-skating at her local rink was the closest she’d ever come to winter sports – and even then, she’d spent most of the time on her very wet btm!

Gemma noted that Sarah had not answered his question about why she had come in person, when a message to his bleep would have got him back twice as fast. She just stood there, maddeningly confident, arms crossed, smile on her pretty face.

‘I’m sorry, but, you know –’ said Steele, and Gemma realized he was speaking to her.

‘One of the other nurses will come down to assist you with that patient,’ said Sarah, interrupting him. Then why, thought Gemma, hadn’t that replacement come down with the original message?

‘Duty calls,’ said Steele to Gemma.

‘Come *on*,’ said Sarah, and dragged him off.

Gemma was left to watch them heading towards the non-emergency lifts, and to wonder to herself what exactly had just happened.

After a moment’s thought, she could find no other explanation than that Sarah had wanted to send her

a warning; the *get your filthy claws off him* message could hardly be any clearer.

The bald man with the funny horns of grey hair strode swiftly down the corridor. It was obvious to the boy, even in his terror, that this was a confident and important personage. He wore hospital-working clothes, yellow and green.

As the distance between them grew, the threat of discovery seemed to increase – and it would somehow be worse, the boy felt, to be spotted from further away. The man, even from the other end of the corridor, would be able to see him there, hiding, naked. Perhaps there would be a small chance of outrunning him; that depended on how fit the man was and what was on the other side of these swing doors.

The broad back of the man seemed sensitive, as if it had already seen the boy and was just deciding whether it could be bothered to inform on him.

But no –

At a door on the right, the man stopped, turned and, without knocking, entered.

That was it. Safe, for the moment. Although the man could have gone to fetch something and be coming straight back out, now.

The boy peeked through the porthole – should he go on? He needed to make a decision quickly.

Two women came into view, then three men, and soon the corridor seemed to be full of grown-ups – and all of them were walking in his direction.

No decision needed now, he sprinted back towards where he'd started from – only slowing when he reached the door the man had gone through. The boy didn't stop running, but went on the very tips of

his toes; lightly, rapidly. He looked at the door and the name on it was Sir Reginald Saint-Hellier. Then he sped up again, slap-slap-slap went his bare feet, and he listened through the footfalls for the first laugh of a man or shriek of a woman.

Ten metres to the door, five, three, one – and he was gone from sight.

A look through the porthole showed him an empty corridor. Perhaps the men and women hadn't been coming this way, after all; perhaps they'd headed off into another corridor.

Then Sir Reginald came out of his office and turned in the boy's direction. He might easily have seen the top of the black-haired head, peering out of the circle of metal and through the reinforced glass. But he was distracted by the sheaf of papers he was flicking through.

The boy ran. No point trying to hide behind the screen again. If the room were to fill up with people, they'd soon find him there. His best chance was out the door at the far end – he took it.

It was a storeroom, full of exciting equipment. Some of the machines looked to the boy like those which had recently been gathered around him. These must be their back-ups and replacements. The shelves were stacked neatly with row upon row of multicoloured cardboard boxes: drugs, needles, tape, scalpels.

The boy had stopped running but he kept a swift pace. There was no guarantee this room was unoccupied – but somehow it felt like it was; the silence was that of *empty* not of *keeping quiet*.

Soon, he came to the far end – a door, a fire door. It was the only way out; there had been no other exit visible, to left or right. Neither had the boy seen any

clothes, though even a doctor's white coat would have done – covering him probably down to his knees; a little too obvious, perhaps: not a good disguise for moving unsuspectingly around Hospital.

At the far end of the storeroom, Sir Reginald entered with Patricia. They did not come any further; just stopped there and spoke to one another in sharp whispers. The boy, who had immediately ducked back behind a shelf and crouched into a ball – the boy couldn't hear a word they were saying. But they were physically there, and that meant he couldn't get out *that* way.

The storeroom was colder than the corridors; it might even have been slightly refrigerated. The boy did his best not to shiver. He was tough, and cold didn't affect him in the way it did other, softer people.

The psst-psst conversation ended, and the two dangerous doctors went back out of the storeroom. As the doors closed behind them, the boy could hear a hubbub of activity which told him, for certain, that he had no choice but to use the fire door.

This was a big risk. The words ran yellow on black across the aluminium push-bar: IN EMERGENCY ONLY. An alarm might go off, and the boy had no idea what was behind the door; maybe he would find himself outside, on a fire-escape high off the ground, naked; or maybe, naked, he would stumble into a room full of nurses drinking coffee and reading gossip magazines or whatever they did on their breaks. It didn't matter – he had to take the chance; if he didn't, he'd just get caught where he was.

The first downward pull didn't budge the bar. A second try, and it took all the boy's jumping-staying weight (not much) to crack the resistance and open the door.

As feared, an alarm bell began to ring immediately, very violently. The boy felt almost as if its clapper were banging against his heart.

Slightly dazed, Gemma went in quest of the nearest coffee machine. Fulfilling her promise to the radiologist of one black, two sugars at least gave her something to do.

This floor of Hospital – the 8th – was still largely terra incognita to her. The H-shape of the hospital building, and the fact that all four corridors leading off from the central stem seemed to mirror one another, made it a particularly perplexing place to try to find your way around.

As she went, Gemma thought about Steele. What chance did she stand? He was a respected surgeon, of five years' standing in Trauma – devilishly handsome. She, a lowly nurse who had started on the job only a month ago. Gemma wasn't without *some* confidence in her looks: delicately freckled skin, strawberry-blond bob. But Steele seemed to have come from a different universe, as far as sexual magnetism went.

There had been a little scene between them, early on – before she'd even begun her first day's work. She remembered arriving at Hospital and feeling, right away, quite overwhelmed. The sight of the towering building had been a little too much for her – so much had happened in her first placement, so many small mishaps and miracles, tragedies and triumphs. And here she was again, starting at the bottom. The thought of it had drawn from her a solitary sob.

Almost immediately, she had looked round to see if anyone had noticed – and someone had.

Steele was just that moment striding past her, having parked his silver sports car in his specially reserved spot.

As it was her first day, Gemma hadn't yet been issued with a uniform.

Steele stopped and addressed her. 'Are you visiting someone?' he asked, his voice full of genuine concern.

'No,' she had replied. 'I'm starting work here today.'

'Oh,' he said. 'Which bit?'

'Trauma,' she said.

There was a definite pause as he looked her up and down. She had taken him in already, at a shy glance: dark curly hair, tall, energetic, muscular but not beefed up – his most remarkable feature were his dreamy eggshell-blue eyes.

He started to say something but just as he did his bleep went off loudly. Gemma caught only a few of his words, '... couple of weeks ...' Then, before she could reply, Steele had turned away from her and was dashing in through the ambulance bay.

A couple of weeks. I give you a couple of weeks – that's what she immediately became convinced he had said.

Even now, it was only with deep shame that she could think of her weakness in letting her feelings out so freely, and within sight of Reception!

Yet, simultaneously, she felt a little glow of pride. A couple of weeks? She'd lasted twice that already.

But the scene in the carpark had only been a prelude. It was when, a couple of hours later, after going through all the office-visiting and form-filling of a new job – it was when she walked into Trauma for the first time and caught sight of Steele standing looking at the whiteboard that she realized what deep

trouble she was in, both professionally and emotionally. He was gorgeous *and* efficient, a surgical whizz *and* the most handsome man she'd ever seen – and she was going to be working in close proximity to him, day and night.

When he'd gleaned what he needed to know, Steele turned round and spotted her, standing by the door.

'Aha,' he said, so everyone could hear. 'I believe this is our new nurse. And her name is . . . ?'

Gemma realized she was meant to fill the gap.

'Swallow,' she had said, as confidently as she could. 'Gemma,' she added.

'Welcome to Trauma,' Steele announced. 'May your stay here be a long and happy one.'

The others standing around – consultants, anaesthetists and nurses – seconded this, a little embarrassed.

Only Gemma caught the irony – how could it be long and happy and only last a couple of weeks?

From then on, she was very wary of Steele – doing her best never to draw unnecessary attention to herself. As his name might suggest, he had a clean, sharp edge to him; Gemma didn't want to get cut.

She had settled in, so she thought, pretty well. Sir Reginald said he was content with her work, and that was what mattered most.

After his sarcastic comments of the first afternoon, Steele had seemed to ignore her completely. It wasn't even clear he remembered the carpark incident – which made it both better and worse.

Two weeks passed, at the end of which she was still securely there, but he gave no acknowledgement, even grudging, that she had crossed any Rubicon – a Rubicon *he* had set up for her.

Gemma was furious and entranced.

Yet what did she have about her to make her stand out from the crowd? Other nurses had confided to her their own attraction towards Mr John Steele; he had quite a little fan club, and he was crushingly aware of it. There was a running flirtation between him and at least three other Trauma nurses. And yet, from all she gathered, and she gathered a great deal, Gemma had never yet heard of it going any further than flirtation.

Her time in her previous job had taught Nurse Swallow that the best place to pick up on all the gossip was with the smokers – here at Hospital, they shivered just round the corner from the ambulance bay. Gemma was impatient – if only she had been prepared to give it a couple of months, see what information came her way in the usual course of things. But she was young and just a little reckless – allowing her wayward heart to lead her where it would. Steele was single *now*, in that all accounts agreed: at least, he wasn't *actually* married. If she waited too long, another woman might come along and snap him up for herself. Strangely, it wasn't the nurses with whom Mr John Steele flirted that worried her as her main competition. Her chief rival, so it seemed to Gemma, was Sarah Felt.

There was no flirtation between the anaesthetist and Steele, or not on the obvious bubbly level as with the other nurses – all of them except her! No flirtation, but a definite intimacy and, what was perhaps even more dangerous, a sense of teamwork and camaraderie and mutual professional admiration. Steele flirted with the nurses but it was Sarah Felt that he would make a point of thanking, after a particularly taxing case. Toleration was what he radi-

ated towards the others, toleration and *occasionally* good-humoured liking; but Sarah Felt he *admired*; he thought quite obviously that she was *his* kind of anaesthetist. (And most anaesthetists were men.)

From what Gemma had observed, Sarah Felt did what Steele asked, most of the time. She employed his favourite sedatives and in doses amicably agreed between them. But, now and again, she would suggest an alternative course of action. ‘Don’t you think we might be a bit heavy-handed if we use blah-di-blah – the side effects are more extreme, and recent research has shown that recovery times are 15 to 20 per cent longer.’ And to Gemma’s dismay, Steele, without exception, followed Sarah Felt’s advice.

The tender-hearted young nurse stopped and looked around her. This corridor seemed to go on for ever. She was lost, again.

Behind the fire door was a staircase leading both up and down. The number 24 was stencilled in glossy black paint on the whitewashed wall.

The boy let the door shut behind him and then, quick as he could, began to make his way downwards.

Each stair was a light gray-green colour, and edged with ridgy metal. He could feel the harsh texture on the balls of his feet.

The naked boy felt horribly exposed: better get out of this place as soon as I can, he thought.

On the 23rd floor, the fire door looked impossible to get through – no handle, probably a push-bar on the other side. The boy tried it anyway, fearing that at any moment the sound of pursuing feet would stop being only imaginary. And it moved, the door, and it opened – into what proved to be another store-room, this one with the lights off, very dark.

The boy stepped through and let the fire door close itself behind him. For the first time since waking up, he felt just a little safer.

Was it worth the risk of turning the lights on? Probably not. There was a low green glow from the FIRE EXIT sign behind him; by this, he saw a layout identical to the floor above. At the very far end were two round portholes, monster-eyes full of dim yellow light. The boy set off towards them, passing more shelves, more little boxes of supplies; too dark to read the labels.

He was about halfway when he began to hear the sound coming from behind the door. It was a long low moaning groaning keening weeping – maybe humans were making it, but animals, too, could quite easily have been the terrible cause: slaughterhouse-bound cattle who hadn't yet started to panic but knew something was very wrong.

The boy almost turned back; a big part of him didn't want to find out what kind of illness made men and women sound like that. But where there were people, there were clothes; embarrassment overcame terror, and he carried on.

By the time Gemma handed it over, the coffee was lukewarm.

'I'm really sorry,' she said.

Bunty Hardwick, the radiologist, couldn't hide her annoyance; she put the paper cup to one side without taking a sip.

'We're used to it by now,' she said.

Dressed in a crisp white labcoat, she was a pony-tailed young woman with green tired-rings beneath her eyes. But the light from her screen wasn't exactly flattering.

Gemma, wanting diversion, looked through the large thick-glass window to where the final quarter of the man's body was disappearing slowly into the huge metal doughnut of the scanner; head and torso already done.

'Was Steele called away?' asked Bunty Hardwick, resurrecting the dead conversation. 'I thought he went off with you.'

Gemma had forgotten that Sarah had only spoken to them once they were out in the corridor. 'Oh,' she said, 'he had to go and see Sir Reginald.'

'What a *shame*,' said Bunty. 'He always adds a certain something to my day – if you know what I mean.'

Not *another* one, thought Gemma.

Bunty took a tiny sip of coffee, then winced. She was waiting for Gemma to reply, so that they could get into a bit of girly gossip about who they fancied, among the doctors and surgeons. 'Well . . .' Gemma said, with no idea how she was going to continue.

But just then, Sarah Felt herself swept in through the door.

'Finished?' she asked Bunty, without a word of preamble.

'Another . . .' the radiologist checked her screen ' . . . two minutes.' She didn't react to Sarah's abruptness.

Sarah then turned to Gemma and said, 'This is my punishment – for using the lift, I mean. Steele told Sir Reginald as soon as we got up there, the dirty whistle-blower. So while they discuss important issues of the day, I'm down here lugging trolleys around like a bloody porter.'

Gemma was too astonished to speak. When they had gone off together, of course she'd assumed Sarah

was being proprietorial over Steele because there really *was* something going on between them. Sarah had certainly done her best to give that impression. For a moment, Gemma was delighted: Steele had been perfectly right to report Sarah for using the lift. What if a patient – this patient? – had gone into arrest whilst she'd been occupying it? But then Gemma realized that Sarah's jealousy and Steele's response were exactly the sort of behaviour long-term, and slightly embittered, lovers get up to in a work environment – animosity being the cover they use for their secret affair. They were an item, Gemma concluded. (It was the best explanation.) This was a depressing thought – and more than depressing, disheartening.

They sat there in silence, both impatient for Bunty to finish her work. But it was really the scanner which was taking the time, as it had to – mapping inside-out the brain and body of the man.

'Almost done,' Bunty said, sensing the tension in the room but not yet guessing its explanation. At least, thought Gemma, the radiologist hadn't tried to mention Steele again.

The CT machine reached the end of its cycle. With a slight sigh, Bunty stood up and went through into the scanning room. The patient was regurgitated by the doughnut, a sight that always fascinated Gemma. Sarah was sitting on a nearby chair, examining her perfectly manicured nails.

With the machine's assistance, Bunty placed the young man back on the trolley. 'Can you give me a hand?' she called. Both Gemma and Sarah automatically moved to help, but it was Gemma who – standing to begin with – got there first.

Bunty spoke: 'Tell Sir Reginald the results are in

the computer now, whenever he wants to look at them. But it's a subarachnoid haemorrhage, definitely – just as he thought.'

Bunty had picked the clipboard off the end of the trolley and was writing the usual reference codes on the form.

'We're going straight to theatre,' said Sarah.

'Oh, then give my love to Mr Steele,' Bunty said, showing that she'd finally worked out what was going on between the two other women.

In silence, they wheeled the patient out into the corridor.