



THE
SEQUEL TO
melting
ms
frost

playing
with
fire

kat black

Kat Black

Playing With Fire

Аннотация

The Sequel to MELTING MS FROST. The steamy story of Annabel Frost and Aidan Flynn continues ... Can you handle the heat? Before Aidan Flynn had swept into her life with the destructive force of a wildfire, Annabel Frost had thought she'd had all she needed from her life. A successful career, financial independence, emotional restraint. Things that were safe, secure, steady. Everything her childhood hadn't been. Aidan represented none of that. Reckless and risky he'd been the red hot flame that melted the icy layers of her long-frozen heart. Having run from him once, Annabel should have learnt to leave trouble well enough alone. But now Aidan is back, turning up the heat. And regardless of the danger of getting herself badly burned, Annabel can't seem to resist the temptation to play with this particular fire.

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PLAYING WITH FIRE
The Sequel to *Melting Ms Frost*
Kat Black

mischief 

Copyright

Mischief

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Dedication

This one is for my readers. Your support made this book possible. Thank you so much.

Chapter One

It was happening again.

Please, no. Not again.

A bubble of fear inflated in Annabel's chest, trapping the air in her lungs as it rose to clog her throat. She fought to release it, to cry out, but the dark shape looming over her shifted closer; a crushing vice tightened around her neck, squeezing off her voice, cutting off her very breath.

She didn't understand. How? How could this be happening?

Panic flared as she tried to get her bearings, to work out where she was. But dimness rendered her surroundings murky, indistinct. In the shadows, even the threat bearing down on her with such suffocating weight remained faceless. Terrifying.

No ... *no*. Horror-spiked memories of pain and helplessness flooded her mind, jolting her into action. She couldn't do this. Not again.

Never again.

Lashing out, she rained a storm of wild swings and strikes upon her attacker. But not once did she connect with solid form. Her fists seemed to pass through the nebulous shape as though her enemy was no more substantial than mist. She renewed her efforts, tried to pinpoint her aim, but black spots began to bloom around the edge of her vision and the watery blur of tears made it impossible to focus on what it was that she needed to fight.

Move, every atom of her being screamed. It was her only chance. She had to move, to get away. Scrabbling and heaving, she fought frantically to escape. But the weight held her pinned. So heavy. Far too heavy to allow her to struggle free.

Second by desperate second, her flailing efforts weakened as the strength leached from her body. Try as she might, she could find no energy in reserve. With her lungs ready to explode, the blackness tainting her vision thickened, threatening to extinguish the last of the light from her world ...

‘No!’

The force of her own defiant cry snapped her awake. In an instant, the fog of darkness was dispelled, the malevolent shades of her nightmare extinguished by the soft golden glow of the bedside lamp that revealed familiar surroundings to her darting, fear-widened eyes.

Muscles locked stiff with shock, she lay temporarily frozen in her bed, the sound of her gasping breaths amplified in the blanketing stillness of the night. Displaced, the bed covers tangled low around her calves, leaving the winter air to chill the sweat that filmed every inch of her skin and stuck her nightshirt to her damp chest.

It took only a moment to register each of these details, to process them and ground herself in reality. Just a dream. A bad dream. Not real.

The sudden wave of relief that broke over her brought a rush of weakness that turned every locked joint and tightly knotted

muscle to quivery jelly. She was OK, she assured herself as she exhaled a shaky breath'. Of course she was. Shaken, but safe. Because, despite her sleep being haunted by memories of the awful attack she'd suffered at the hands of her mother's ex-lover, in reality the man himself was no longer a waking threat.

Instinctively, protectively, her hand went to her right forearm, the sensitivity of the skin there a reminder that the limb had been cut free of its cast only earlier that day. She traced with her fingers the line of the newly knit bone. No, Tony Maplin couldn't hurt her any more. The drunken violence he'd unleashed upon both herself and her mother, coupled with a long list of outstanding court summonses and unpaid dues, had put him where he belonged – behind the bars of a prison cell.

Releasing another slow, unsteady breath, Annabel blinked at her alarm clock. Not even midnight. With a groan, she raised trembling hands and scrubbed them over her clammy face. It was going to be a long time until dawn.

Keen to rinse away the thick aftertaste of fear, she pushed herself to a sitting position, careful of her weakened arm. Reaching for the glass of water on the bedside table, she stalled as the sight of the photograph standing at the edge of the pool of lamplight brought a further rush of memories and powerful emotion.

While the frame itself was new – an elegant, unfamiliar replacement for the original, which had been broken at the same time as her arm – the image it held was one she was thoroughly

acquainted with. A perfect picture of her five-year-old self, held aloft in her father's arms, the two of them laughing in the summer sunshine in front of the inn that had been her childhood home. It was the most important record she had of that distant time. A frozen snapshot of love and laughter that she'd been forced to use as a weapon in the fight for her life. A glimpse of forgotten happiness that had smashed and splintered, leaving her believing it damaged and lost for ever.

Until today.

Until Aidan had walked back into her life and returned the precious gift of the past as well as offering the unnerving promise of a future.

Her barely slowed heartbeat threatened to skyrocket again as the name conjured a breathtaking image of dark masculine beauty, and raised a whole different set of fears that left her mouth suddenly dry.

Swinging to sit on the edge of her bed, she reached for the glass and took a mouthful of water. Chilled as she already was, the cold liquid caused a shudder to shoot from scalp to toe. She got to her feet and made for her wardrobe, aware that the turn of her thoughts towards a certain Irishman had done nothing to improve the weakness in her knees.

Aidan Flynn. Impossible, infuriating ... and apparently irresistible. The man who'd turned her nice orderly life on its head from the moment fate had put him behind the bar of Cluny's – the London restaurant she managed – until long after

circumstances had caused him to leave. A rule-breaker, a force of nature and a law unto himself, he'd blasted his way past the barriers of accepted professional codes of conduct and personal etiquette and got closer to Annabel than anyone had before ... until, ironically, the prospect of losing him had made her push him away.

Like the photo, she'd been convinced she'd lost Aidan from her life for ever. But after six weeks of silence he'd suddenly surfaced, showing up at her door, looking for answers.

'I want to know why you acted the way you did. Why you ran out without a word, without a reason,' he'd demanded with an uncharacteristic cool detachment, the lovely lilt of his accent clipped short, the look in his beautiful grey eyes – usually so expressive – shuttered and remote.

Shivering as she discarded her damp nightshirt and pulled on a replacement, Annabel pondered how, in the past, she would have welcomed such remoteness, would have encouraged exactly such emotional distance between herself and another human being.

But this time had been different, and even as she'd felt a rush of hope at his unexpected appearance, one look at his stern demeanour had crushed it, leaving her convinced he'd come for nothing more than to officially end things between them, face to face, after she'd been too cowardly to.

Feeling certain that she had nothing left to lose had somehow made it easier to open up, to reveal more vulnerability than she could ever remember doing with anyone else. 'I was scared,'

she'd admitted, because when she'd so abruptly run out on his generosity and kindness, she had done so out of fear. Since she had so little experience of close friendships, let alone relationships, the shocking strength of the feelings this intensely passionate man had awoken in her had her literally running scared.

And now, as she pulled on her robe, she was scared all over again. Scared because, rather than gloating over or disdaining her for admitting her cowardice, Aidan had done something far more devastating and dangerous to her emotional state. He'd shown compassion and understanding by restoring her most precious possession to her.

Annabel grabbed the faux-fur throw from the end of the bed and returned to the bedside table to gather up the photograph before making her way to the sitting room. Clutching the frame to her chest, she recalled how that ultimate act of kindness had caused that very spot to ache with a pain so overwhelming that she had turned away from him to hide the tears that threatened to overflow.

'Thank you,' she'd barely managed to rasp out. 'I don't deserve this.'

He'd touched her then, for the first time since his arrival. Fingers on her chin, he'd forced her to face him, to meet that crystalline gaze that left her tears and her pain nowhere to hide. 'If you had the chance to do that day differently, would you?'

Too choked at the thought of everything she'd thrown away,

she'd simply nodded, unable to find her voice. But instead of the final goodbye she'd been anticipating, she'd found herself wrapped in a strong pair of arms and given a second chance. The deal sealed with a kiss.

And what a kiss. Potent, ardent, yet tempered with such heart-rending tenderness that even the memory had Annabel's lips tingling.

She entered the sitting room and returned the frame to its usual place on her bookshelf before switching on a lamp and the television. Settling on the sofa, she draped the throw over herself and snuggled down to try to get comfortable.

Almost immediately, the lack of give in the cushions reminded her that, however bad her nights might currently seem, it was nothing compared to what was in store for her once the small, style-over-substance piece of furniture became her bed again when her mother was finally released from hospital. For six weeks Ellen had been in traction for the fractured neck she'd sustained during Tony Maplin's attack. Although it had never been mentioned, Annabel couldn't help but wonder if her mother's sleep was as terrorised by nightmare replays of that day as her own.

Feeling the heavy pull of exhaustion, she used the television remote to channel-hop, searching for some late-night show mindless enough to send her back into a doze before she had to get up for a busy day at Cluny's. But, unsurprisingly, neither the shopping channel nor sitcom reruns were up to the task of

distracting her from the force that was Aidan Flynn. Or the velvet-wrapped promises of a future together he'd made to her mere hours before.

Despite his unwavering positivity, she was doubtful that they'd be able to merge their individual paths to make any long term commitment between them work. How could it, when she'd discovered that ultimately his intention was to move back to Ireland, while she had her own career path mapped out in England?

It was a sign of just how far he'd snuck through her defences when, seated beside him on this very sofa, she'd chosen to risk having him short-term rather than not at all. 'Let's try it and see.'

'Oh, we'll try, Annabel. Don't you worry about that.' He'd flashed his wicked, slightly crooked trademark smile at her – the one that never failed to make her belly somersault. 'We'll try anything and everything to make this work.' Then he'd kissed her until she'd been left breathless, dizzy, so electrified by the prospect of what 'everything' might include that she'd been left stammering. 'L-like what?'

'All sorts,' he'd promised. 'To start with, we'll date.'

That had thrown her. 'Date?' She'd never really been a dater ... and surely they'd moved a bit beyond that stage already?

Her confusion must have been stamped on her features because he'd laughed and smoothed a thumb between her brows as though to rub away a frown. 'Yes, you know – dinner, dancing, shows.'

‘Oh, but –’

‘Starting tomorrow.’

‘Tomorrow?’ she’d parroted, still not really getting it. ‘I’m working.’

‘Tomorrow,’ he’d insisted, the light of laughter in his eyes sharpened to a determined glint. ‘I’ll pick you up from Cluny’s. Just for a quick nightcap.’

And then, apparently still being able to read the invisible undercurrents running through her as easily as he’d been able to do from the very start, he’d cupped her face, his expression softening again. ‘I know this is all going to be a first for you, and I want to do it right. We’ll feel our way through it together,’ he’d vowed, and lowered his head to brush his lips against hers again, that time a bare whisper of a touch, gone almost before it had begun, a warm, soft tease that had left her instinctively leaning in for more as he’d pulled back to add, ‘We’ll take it slow.’

Eyes still closed, she’d nodded, even as her body had screamed at her to jump him for the instant earth-shattering satisfaction it craved, remembering all too well the torture of Aidan Flynn’s idea of slow. But slow also meant she could keep control of the crazy emotions bubbling up from deeply hidden places inside her – the ones already threatening to drown her common sense. So when she’d finally opened her eyes and looked into his, it had been to agree.

‘Slow is good.’

Chapter Two

‘Hurry!’ Annabel gasped.

The only response Aidan was capable of giving was an urgent, animalistic growl of frustration deep in his throat as he buried his face in the crook of her neck. The smell, the feel, the taste of her had his blood fired and his senses reeling. If only she’d keep still, he could do as she asked. Hurry, as he so badly wanted to do.

But it appeared she was as far gone as he, caught in the grip of a frantic physical need that had them groping at each other like horny teenagers. Bodies rubbing and hands everywhere – sliding over smooth planes, moulding curves, fumbling in their haste to get past the barriers of clothing and revisit the pleasures of naked flesh their separation had denied them.

So much for taking things slow, Flynn. Despite wanting to do the noble thing, his good intentions were no match for the force of the attraction he felt for Annabel Frost. One second they’d been offering each other a tentative goodnight as she’d stepped over the threshold of her flat. The next he’d been inside too, his hands grasping the sides of her head as he’d pinned her tight between his body and the entrance-hall wall, lips fused, tongues sparring. All before her door had even had the chance to swing shut.

But it still wasn’t enough. Not nearly enough. Anticipation had been building all through their nightcap as he’d expected it

would. How could it not, when coffee had been their drink of choice and they'd found themselves in Chinos, the café where she'd first touched him, albeit by accident, all those months ago? During the six long weeks he'd had without her, that encounter, and every increasingly intimate one after, had replayed in his mind over and over and over, filling him with the constant dull ache of need and longing. And as if that hadn't been temptation aplenty, Annabel had ordered a slice of chocolate cake, reminding him of how much of a sweet tooth she had; every pleasure-driven flicker of her eyelids, every lick of her red lips and the icing-smearred spoon had shot straight to his groin.

'Hurry!' she urged again, the word a breathy spur right into his ear, robbing him of any last hope of reining things in. Raising his head, he smashed his lips over hers, plunging his tongue into her mouth to taste that chocolate sweetness as he wrestled with the buttons of her coat.

If he'd wanted to keep things slow, he shouldn't have let himself come to the door. With the sexual tension that had been thrumming through him since their reunion yesterday, he should have stuck to his original plan of staying in the taxi out in the street while she let herself through the security doors of the modern, multi-storey residential block, before continuing the journey across town to his own place.

But after they'd shared a semi-chaste kiss on the back seat his honourable resolve had been overridden by an altogether more primal surge of protectiveness. Watching her walk away brought

flashbacks of the last time he'd dropped her off – high and happy from the weekend they'd spent in Vienna – when she'd refused to let him see her to her door. The price she'd nearly paid for that ... He'd never forget the moment he'd caught a glimpse of Tony Maplin's face at her window as the taxi had pulled away, never forget the split-second timing of his intervention that had saved her from even worse injuries than she'd already sustained. The remembered horror of that day had gripped him as effectively as a choke-hold around the throat, making it impossible for him to stay sitting there while she went up alone.

Shit! He tore his mouth away from the kiss. 'The taxi.' He'd told the driver he'd be back in a few minutes.

'Send it away. Now,' Annabel ordered, even as her questing hands ran down his back to grasp his arse cheeks and pull him impossibly closer. It seemed whatever the circumstances that had led to his current loss of control, she wasn't complaining. 'Hurry,' she demanded again, this time grinding herself against the rock-hard ridge of his erection.

'Fuck,' he gasped harshly, head snapping back as hot needles of pleasure lanced through him. One look at Annabel's half-closed green eyes and half-open smudged red lips had him crushing their mouths together again as his hands tunnelled beneath her overcoat. Under it, she was dressed in her usual severe work attire – a black skirt suit so sharply tailored he was surprised not to feel his fingers sliced to bits. Her hair was pulled back in its trademark perfect twist, leaving her looking as

impeccably, formidably stunning as the first time he'd seen her in Cluny's dining room. She hadn't been at all happy that day, returning to work from a week's leave to find he'd been taken on as head barman without her consent. Yet even as he'd endured the full blast of her icy disdain, he'd known he'd do almost anything to muss up that perfection she wore as armour.

And that thought was all it took to have the caveman part of his brain stomping its big hairy feet to know why the hell she wasn't mussed right now. He retracted his hands from the recesses of her coat and raised them again to her head to hunt out and remove the clips that held her hair tightly tamed. Spearing his fingers into the long, heavy mass, he fanned them through to the ends.

Pulling back to watch the soft locks cascade over her shoulders, he realised he had a correction to make. Annabel wasn't as stunning as she'd been the first time he'd seen her. She was more so. The colour of her hair then had been a dyed ruby red, but she'd allowed it to return to its natural flaming riot of spun gold and copper and cinnamon – a sight that made him very happy indeed. He'd always had a thing for redheads, but most especially for this one.

Before he could lean in to claim her mouth again, Annabel used the small distance he'd put between them to push a hand against his chest. 'Taxi,' she panted. 'Now.'

He'd already forgotten. 'Wait right there.' He tore himself away, heaved the door open and raced for the stairs before his synapses could relay the urgent message to stop and turn around.

He was back in less than five minutes. And she was waiting for him. Watching through her little spyhole. Flinging the door open before he had to knock.

Then he was inside again, noticing she'd ditched the coat as, without a word, he pushed her back up against the wall and kissed her hard until neither of them had any breath left.

She pulled away first, sucking in air through lips his rough kiss had left red and swollen. Her hands were busy with the remaining buttons of his coat while his skimmed down over the tailored curves of her waist and hips.

'Off!' She wrenched the lapels back over his shoulders. He took his hands from her only long enough to help shake the coat from his arms and then he put them right back where they'd been.

'Your turn,' he ordered, bending to kiss her jawline while his fingers began gathering the fabric of her skirt, rucking it up. 'Lose the jacket.'

Annabel moaned and let her head drop back against the wall, surrendering to his mouth as it closed over the pulse banging below her ear.

Hands working urgently in the tight space between their torsos, she managed to wrestle her jacket off while he got her skirt bunched up around her hips. As he felt her palms clasp his shoulders, his own slid downwards over her newly exposed thighs. What his touch discovered there had him smiling against the tender skin of her neck.

Straightening, he looked down into her upturned face. 'Tights,

Ms Frost?’ he questioned with a whiff of disapproval, as he’d done once before – on the day he’d decided that the only way he’d ever get past his manager’s frosty defences was to risk something daring. ‘Really?’

Her eyelids snapped open at the words and, when she would have lifted her head, he wrapped a hand around her throat, setting the pad of his thumb against her chin to hold her where she was.

‘Remember what happened the last time I found you in tights?’ he asked, because he sure as hell did. He recalled every heart-pounding second of the scene that had started as a tease and had spun way out of control down in the wine cellar of Cluny’s, leaving Annabel standing in a ruined pair of tights and him wondering if he’d lost his job as well as his sanity.

Her throat moved against his palm as she swallowed. ‘How could I forget? You were so over the line I should have had you charged with indecent assault.’

He flashed a grin. ‘Indecent?’ He leaned close to bring his mouth to hers and licked slowly from one corner of her bottom lip to the other. ‘I doubt you have the first clue of just how indecent things would have become if I’d not called a halt to that little episode – if I’d carried on and done all the things I’d wanted to do to you.’

‘I would have stopped you,’ Annabel said, baited no doubt by his deliberately cocky tone.

Although the heat sparking in her eyes had little to do with anger.

‘Would you?’ he asked, unable to resist teasing her a little more. ‘So far as I remember, you didn’t look like you were up for stopping much of anything.’

She stiffened. ‘Of course I would have. I didn’t want it.’ She tried to escape his hold, but he tightened his grip at hip and throat and lowered his mouth to hers again. This time he captured her bottom lip between his teeth and sucked on it until her eyelids fluttered closed and he felt her annoyance start to melt back into desire.

He loosened his hold on her hip and ran his fingers along the leg seam of her briefs, tracing the inward line through the sheer barrier of the tights. Releasing her lip, he murmured, ‘Do you want it now?’

Her lashes parted to give him a flash of green as she sighed and murmured back, ‘Fuck yes.’

With that he hooked his fingers into the sheer fabric and with a sharp tug, tore through the tights.

Annabel jolted, her mouth and eyes rounding in shock. While he locked his gaze onto hers he ripped an opening large enough to allow him access, then his fingers were burrowing into her silky underwear, brushing against soft curls and into the slick, soft heat of heaven. He groaned deep and low in unison with Annabel – felt her push against him, forcing his touch to slide deeper into the welcoming wetness.

God Almighty. He wanted her naked and on her back now. Wanted her legs spread and his face buried hard between her

thighs. Wanted her mindless and arching against his mouth as he tasted every inch of her and drove her to come on his tongue.

Withdrawing his hand, he silenced her sudden aggrieved growl with a deep, demanding, open-mouthed kiss that conveyed the promise of the more intimate kiss to come. Enfolding her in his arms, he lifted her off her feet and made his way down the hall.

The feel of Annabel's legs wrapping around him, the plucking of her fingers at his clothes as he carried her towards her bedroom, only maddened his lust further. He heard her shoes hit the floor behind him as he turned into the darkened room and kept walking until he met the edge of the bed. Toppling forward, he released her at the last minute and caught himself on his arms as he lowered her to the mattress. Enjoying the feel of her smaller, curvier body cushioning his, he let his weight settle on her. She seemed to enjoy the sensation too, grasping his face as they continued to kiss, and tightening the legs still wrapped around him so she could grind her pelvis against his.

And suddenly, thoughts of getting her naked could wait. They both needed his mouth on her. Now.

He broke the kiss and levered himself back onto his feet, running his hands down over Annabel's breasts and ribs and stomach as he did so. When her legs fell from around his hips, he caught them behind the knee, pushed them wide and dropped to kneel between them.

He slid his palms up her inner thighs, hooked his fingers into the tear he'd already made in her tights and pulled to make it

larger. With the only illumination in the room the light filtering in from the hall, he turned his attention to the scrap of lacy silk underwear still keeping him from his goal. As it shredded like tissue paper in his fists, he hoped it wasn't her favourite pair.

'Hey—eee!' Annabel's yelp of outrage turned to a squeal of pleasure as his mouth found her. Under the fast, furious strike her whole body convulsed. Instinctively, her thighs tried to clamp shut but he pushed them apart, opening her to him, holding her there as he lost himself in the womanly taste of her.

A second later her fingers were tangling in his hair, her nails sharp against the top of his scalp as her hands balled into fists and pulled him closer. 'Yes!'

She wanted more? He was only too happy to oblige.

Using his thumbs to spread her wider, he homed in on her clitoris, working her with his tongue. Bit by bit he felt the tension ratchet tighter until her entire body was strung taut. As the tension snapped, allowing the first quivers of release to set her limbs trembling, he changed tactics and sucked, holding her fast as she bucked and shuddered against him – wringing throaty curses and every last pulse of pleasure from her until her hands fell away from his hair and she was nothing more than a twitching, gasping wreck.

He surged to his feet, dug into his hip pocket and wrenched out his wallet, fingers scrabbling to locate the condom there. Laid out before him like an erotic dream in the half-light, Annabel was limp, dazed, so beautifully fuckable in her state of dishabille

that he knew there was still no time to get naked. He needed to get inside her before he exploded in his own pants.

Condom found, he tossed the wallet aside and attacked the fastenings of his jeans, relying on brute force rather than finesse to get the job done in record time.

‘Hurry,’ Annabel sighed from the bed, starting to reach for him.

With the taste of her fresh on his tongue and the scent of her in his nose driving him mad, if she touched him now, this was over. ‘Stay where you are,’ he ordered, desperation putting an almost comical squeak into his voice.

His erection sprang free as he shoved the denim and his boxers down his thighs. He had to grit his teeth and mentally recite the Periodic Table as he rolled the condom on. He was *so* hard, *so* ready, he almost couldn’t stand to touch himself for fear of losing it.

And then he was climbing onto the bed, settling himself between Annabel’s sprawled legs and guiding himself to her entrance. He kissed her as he pushed inside, swallowing her moans and feeding her some of his own.

‘God, yes. So good,’ he breathed against her open lips. Hot. Tight. She felt every bit as good as he remembered.

No. Better than that. Much, much better ...

Christ. His breath stalled. She felt *too* good. Keeping the pace of that first slide into her slick heat measured was all he could manage. As soon as he was all the way in, his control snapped.

‘Annabel,’ he gasped. He pulled back and drove into her again.

Her fierce ‘Yes!’ had him doing it again, and again. Each forward thrust picking up force, every withdrawal growing shorter, until his hips pumped like a piston.

With a string of half-coherent stutterings and her hands on his arse, urging him on, Annabel met his thrusts, arching up against him when he hit deep. The movement crushed her breasts hard against his chest, making him want to hold their soft weight. Shifting his palms to cup her, he discovered to his dissatisfaction that there were too many clothes in the way. Impatient, he found the hem of her shirt and in one move swept it all the way up to her chest. When he reached her bra, he simply hooked his thumbs under it and pushed that up as well.

Then her breasts were in his hands. Deliciously plump and warm – so soft against his palms, except for the hard points of her nipples.

He ducked his head and closed his mouth over one pale-pink tip as his fingers plucked and rolled its twin. With a ragged cry Annabel surged against him. He answered by sliding one hand under her hip to cradle the cheek of her bottom and tilt her pelvis up for greater penetration.

God, he was in paradise. The last time he’d had his hands on her bare, satiny skin like this, she’d been bruised and battered and he’d had to handle her with the utmost care. Before that, they’d barely had time to get to know each other carnally and he’d had to keep the force of his passions, the darker drives, under strict

control. Now she was whole, healed, those passions were stirring, demanding to be sated. He wanted to take her, all of her. Wanted to overwhelm and ruin her . . . in the best possible way. So that all her past experiences meant nothing. So that she wouldn't be able to contemplate any future ones that didn't feature him. Only him.

On that covetous thought, he came. Holy hell, how he came. The rip of pleasure was almost brutal, blurring his vision, choking his voice. Clutching Annabel so tight she wheezed, he locked himself as deep as he could go and erupted hotly until the energy began to drain from him like water down a plughole, leaving him on the verge of collapse.

Muscles quivering, he listed to one side, pulling Annabel with him, nowhere near ready to withdraw from the warm haven of her body. Rolling onto his back, he held her half draped over him and sucked in air.

A grin split wide as he blinked up at the ceiling. Smooth work, Flynn, he congratulated himself wryly. Very smooth. For a man who was wired towards the slower side of seduction, to the sensual games of erotic dominance, he'd certainly displayed some masterful control skills there.

He managed to raise his head off the mattress long enough to plant a kiss on the top of Annabel's hair. Oh, yeah – with his jeans bunched around his knees and his shoes still on, he'd really shown her who was boss, all right. No woman had ever robbed him of his usual self-possession the way she did. He'd have to work on that.

Not quite yet though. For the moment, he was very happy where he was. Which was lucky, as he doubted he currently had the ability to do much else beyond fall flat on his face.

Chapter Three

Annabel awoke screaming, her wide-open eyes taking only a fraction of a second to register that something was wrong.

No light.

Only darkness. Shadows.

God, where was it – where was the light to stop the spectres of her dream closing in, to keep the dark shapes from looming? She yelped as the shadows above her moved ... and then she screamed again when something touched her arm.

This time the nightmare was real.

She kicked and thrashed in terror and suddenly the shape recoiled.

‘*Jesus!* Annabel ...’

She rolled onto her hands and knees, scrambled to the far side of the bed and half fell to the floor, ready to run.

‘Annabel. It’s all right.’

That voice – soft, gentle – made her pause.

‘It’s me, *a mhuirnin*. Aidan.’

Aidan? The mad swirl of adrenalin and fear made it impossible to pin the word to a coherent thought.

The shadowy figure moved to the bedside. With a click, light flooded the room and Annabel’s knees nearly gave out with relief. Tall and lean, his black hair mussed around his handsome face, it was Aidan. Of course – he’d brought her home after work,

asked to stay the night after they'd jumped on each other like rampant rabbits.

Shaking, she reached for the bed and sat down heavily before she fell down. 'Why the hell did you turn off the lights?'

After a short pause, she heard him move around the bed behind her. 'You were sleeping,' he said. 'I didn't know they were supposed to be kept on.'

God, what must he think she sounded like? A scared child afraid of the dark. *Pathetic*. She leaned forward, rested her elbows on her knees and buried her face in her hands. 'It doesn't matter. It was just a bad dream.'

She sensed him coming to stop beside her. 'It was that all right,' he said softly. 'Get back under the covers now before you get cold.'

Raising her head from her hands, she noticed that goosebumps were already springing up on her arms and legs. She guessed running around stark naked in the middle of a February night in England would do that. Casting a glance at Aidan she found he was also naked, although he showed no signs of feeling the cold; not surprising when he always radiated such warmth.

She'd had her first real reminder of that warmth earlier, when he'd eventually pulled from her body, turned on her bedside light and undressed them both. After tucking her under the covers, he'd climbed in the opposite side of the bed and settled her against the bare skin of his chest, stroking her hair. She couldn't recall much more after that. The enveloping heat and soothing

caress must have carried her straight off to sleep.

Well, she didn't feel warm or sleepy now. And she really didn't like having someone in her private space, witnessing her humiliating loss of composure.

'Is there anything I can do?' Aidan advanced, hands reaching for her. 'Anything I can get you?'

Rather than be herded back into bed, she jumped to her feet instead. 'No, I'm fine,' she said. And she would be, as soon as she'd had some time alone to get her shit together. 'I, ah ... need the loo.'

She detoured around him to pick up her robe and, although he said nothing further, she could feel his gaze following her. Knowing how perceptive it was, how easily it could see beneath the surface, she kept her face averted, concentrating on tying her robe as she headed for the hallway. She didn't want to be read. Not now. 'Don't wait up.'

She locked herself in her tiny bathroom, sat on the toilet lid, let out a long breath and closed her eyes. She had no idea what the time was, but the grit of tiredness behind her lids told her that she hadn't been asleep all that long. The one thing she did know about her new nocturnal pattern was that, regardless of the hour, now she was awake – that was it. No more sleep tonight.

As though in protest, her body let out a huge yawn while she wondered what to do about the situation. If she was on her own she'd hunker down on the sofa and lose the rest of the night to bad TV. But what was she supposed to do with Aidan here? Insist

the light was kept on and then lie awkwardly awake beside him all night? Not that things would be that easy. Not with Aidan Flynn. He'd want to go all Spanish Inquisition on her and find out what was wrong.

But there was nothing wrong. She was fine. It wasn't like anybody had control over what they dreamed, was it?

She almost wished she'd refused his request to stay the night. When he'd asked, she'd been senseless enough from their mad-bunny sex to let the excitement of novelty outweigh her natural resistance. She'd never had a man share her bed for the night before, had never invited one back to her place. In the past she'd always gone to them, and now she remembered why she'd lived by that rule – so that she could simply leave whenever she wanted instead of finding herself locked in her own bathroom in the middle of the night. She wondered how long it would take Aidan to fall back to sleep.

Letting out a sigh, she figured she might as well make use of the facilities to pass some time. She relieved herself and gave her hands a good wash, trying out the comprehensive, NHS-approved technique she'd seen promoted on posters at the hospital. During the rigorous cleansing, she noticed that her nails were getting a bit long. After she'd dried, she gave them a trim and file, and, as she was putting the clippers back in the cabinet, decided she might as well brush her teeth while she was at it. Teeth clean and flossed, she closed the cabinet and caught sight of her tangled hair in the mirrored door. She combed it through

carefully, put it up in a loose twist and inspected the results in the mirror. Much better ... except for the mascara smudged under her eyes. As she fixed that up, she was aware of the skin on her hands beginning to pull unpleasantly tight from all the soap she'd used, so she moved on to applying hand cream. Once that was thoroughly rubbed in, she decided that enough was enough. She couldn't, *wouldn't* spend the night held hostage in her own bathroom.

She turned the lock and switched off the light before very slowly and very quietly opening the door. She hadn't a clue how much time she'd wasted, but hopefully enough that Aidan would have drifted off again. Putting her eye to the crack, she saw a soft glow spilling from the bedroom, indicating that the bedside lamp was still on. Trying to keep her breathing as quiet as possible, she strained to hear the smallest noise. After a long minute of silence, she decided it was safe to venture out.

Heading in the opposite direction from the bedroom, she crept along to the sitting room. Entering, she pushed the door carefully to behind her and used the ambient light coming in through the window to pick her way across the room to switch on a lamp. Mindful of making too much noise, she started looking for the remote before turning on the TV so she could mute the sound.

Could she find the damn thing in the half-light? Could she hell. It wasn't on the coffee table. Or the sofa. Nowhere on either of the armchairs. Or the TV stand.

Muttering to it to show itself, she conducted a quick search

of the bookcase. No luck there either. Straightening, she turned towards the sofa again, only to stop short at the sight of the door, now wide open and showing Aidan – very much awake and dressed in jeans and jersey – leaning against the jamb.

Arms crossed over his chest, he watched her. ‘How long have these nightmares been going on?’

Flustered, she deflected the question with one of her own. ‘What do you think you’re doing, sneaking around in the dark?’

Calmly, he unfolded one arm and reached to flick on the overhead light so that the room was suddenly as bright as day, leaving her squinting. ‘How long, Annabel?’ he persisted softly.

Shrugging, she muttered something non-committal and turned to continue her search for the remote, making it clear she didn’t want to talk about it.

From the corner of her eye she saw him straighten from the doorway and come into the room. ‘Are they always that bad?’

That bad? Mostly they were worse. ‘They’re just dreams,’ she sighed.

‘Dreams about the attack, that much was obvious from your shouts. I remember you had a couple when you came to stay with me from the hospital.’

Admitting defeat in her hunt for the remote, she flopped down on the sofa. If Aidan wasn’t going to take her hints, she’d have to state the obvious for him. ‘I don’t want to talk about it.’

He came to sit beside her, reached out and tucked a wisp of her hair behind her ear. She was relieved to see him nod. ‘As long

as you're talking to *someone*.'

Aware of something hard sticking into her behind, Annabel shifted. Reaching under the cushion she found the remote. Typical.

Aiming it at the TV, she was ready to hit the on button when Aidan said, 'Annabel?'

She glanced at him to find he was looking at her expectantly.

'Are you?' he prompted.

She blinked at him. 'Am I what?'

He let out a slow, audible breath. 'Are you talking about the dreams with your counsellor, or therapist, or whoever it is you've been seeing?'

She gave a short laugh. Therapist? Counsellor? What was he on about? Was he sleep-talking? 'I'm not seeing a counsellor.'

His brow furrowed as though that troubled him somehow. 'Maybe you should think about going again?'

'*Again?*' She felt her own brows join the party. 'I've never seen anyone like that in my life.'

Now he gave her an incredulous stare. 'You didn't take up the offer of Victim Support?'

'What?'

'What do you mean, "What?"?' Those pale-grey eyes continued to stare. 'The support service the police spoke about referring you to. At the hospital. After the attack.'

Oh, that. She recalled someone getting in contact after she'd agreed to follow it up as a means to get Aidan to stop harping on

it. To say the man could be single-minded about things was an understatement. ‘They did? I don’t really re—’

‘Don’t tell me you don’t remember. Because I do. Very clearly,’ he said stubbornly, proving her point about him not being able to leave things alone. ‘I was there with you.’

That was true. For all his annoying ways, he’d been the one by her bedside almost constantly, the one who’d taken her in and cared for her when she’d had nobody else. But did that give him the right to be as overbearing as hell now? ‘I didn’t follow it up because I don’t need that sort of help.’

He stared at her for a moment. ‘Are you sure about that?’

What was that supposed to mean? ‘Of course I am. That type of thing isn’t meant for someone like me.’ She was affronted by the mere suggestion.

‘Someone like you?’ he pursued, his expression a mixture of confusion and doggedness.

‘It’s for, you know ... *real* victims.’ She sprang up from the sofa, eager to get away from his irritating questions. ‘Do you want a coffee? I’m going to make one.’

Of course her escape attempt was thwarted. ‘Annabel, you *were* a real victim,’ Aidan insisted, right on her tail. ‘Of a serious physical assault.’

‘*Physical* being the operative word.’ She turned on the light as she entered her small galley kitchen. She went straight to the kettle and flicked the switch with one hand as she waved her injured arm in his direction. ‘And I’m having the treatment for

that that I need. I start physio next week.’

As she opened the cupboard in front of her to take out mugs, she heard him let out another breath. This one shorter, less patient than the one a minute ago.

What was his problem? If anyone had the right to be getting shirty with this midnight interrogation, surely it was her.

‘You know you’re dealing with issues here that run deeper than merely physical,’ he said. ‘Stop pretending otherwise.’

She put the mugs down on the worktop and closed the cupboard. ‘I’m not pretending anything. I’m getting on with my life just fine.’ She opened the cutlery drawer and took out a teaspoon before pushing it shut again. ‘That psychobabble stuff is for victim-y victims – people who can’t cope.’

‘Is that right? So tell me, Ms I-Don’t-Need-Help, have you always had to sleep with the lights on, or is that a recent thing?’

Oh – she froze as she picked up the jar of coffee – she didn’t like *that* tone at all.

She turned to face him. ‘I don’t know, Mr Stick-My-Nose-In-Where-It’s-Not-Wanted, do you always invite yourself to stay places and then go fiddling with things that aren’t yours?’

He looked at her with the strangest expression, as though he couldn’t quite make sense of what he was seeing. And then he shook his head. ‘I’ve never met anyone so intent on making life as hard as possible for themselves!’ he said, the exasperation in his tone stabbing into a raw nerve.

She slammed the coffee jar back down. ‘You know what?’ She

pointed the spoon in his face. ‘This is such shit. You don’t get to walk back into my life and judge me.’

His hand closed around hers and, with gentle but firm pressure, lowered it between them. ‘This isn’t judgement, Annabel,’ he said, his voice striving to convey patience that was at odds with the frustration in his gaze. ‘It’s concern.’

She knew that was probably supposed to make her feel better, but in reality it made things worse. It brought home how little experience she had of handling somebody else’s emotions. She was used to thinking and acting only for herself. That was why trying to get involved with him was a mistake. She didn’t have the first clue how to do relationships.

Both his gaze and his voice softened. ‘If we’re to make this work, you’re going to have to allow me to care about you, *a mhuirnín*.’

The Gaelic endearment rolled off his tongue like a verbal caress. Sweetheart, he’d told her it meant. But it was the rest of the sentence that thrilled and terrified her in equal measure. She had the feeling this man could turn her inside out if she let him, leaving exposed the hidden parts she’d been keeping safe and secure from harm since childhood. Parts that, if broken, couldn’t simply be reset and healed like her bones. While Tony Maplin wasn’t able to hurt her any more except in her dreams, she suspected that Aidan Flynn could inflict a different kind of suffering. Deeper and more damaging. How was she supposed to let him close and safeguard herself all at the same time?

Maybe she shouldn't even be trying. 'You're the one who insisted on barging back into my life,' she grumbled, pulling her hand from his. 'If you don't like what you've found, you know what you can do.'

'I didn't say I didn't like it. And I won't let you push me away. I've only just got you back. I'm not going anywhere.'

He sounded as sure and confident as ever, and that really grated because she knew it wasn't the truth. He *was* going somewhere; that's what had scared her off him in the first place. She called bullshit on the barefaced lie. 'That's not true, is it? You're going back to Ireland.'

* * *

The accusation – which, from the tone of Annabel's delivery, was undeniably what it was – caught Aidan by surprise. In the context of their current discussion, the reference to Ireland had been the last thing he'd expected.

They'd spoken a bit about his restoration of the Tulaí estate and distillery over coffee earlier in the evening. It had been a childhood dream of his to renovate the derelict manor house that sat perched on a cliff top overlooking the little coastal village of Carriglea in County Cork where he'd grown up. A dream that had been all but forgotten when the path to adulthood had led him to a successful financial career in the City of London. It hadn't been until he'd found himself back in his parents' house, on the long road to recovery from the stroke caused by the pressures of that high-flying career, that he'd started to think

on it again; started wondering whether the silly City money he'd made could be used to turn the dream into a reality. Rather than give in to the frustration and self-pity brought on by his painfully slow rehabilitation and restricted physical abilities, he'd begun pursuing the idea from his sickbed, giving himself something other than despair to aim for.

In the end, the process had turned out to be every bit as difficult as his recovery. With a longstanding family feud hanging over the property, the purchase negotiations had been drawn out and fragile, under constant threat of collapse. It wasn't until after his health had recovered and he'd returned to London and met Annabel that he'd learned of his success in acquiring the estate. She'd discovered his plans before he'd had a chance to tell her himself, and that had been the catalyst that had sent her running away from him.

Earlier this evening, he'd taken care to explain to her that the project was still largely in the planning stages, that it would be a couple of years before the house was up and running as an exclusive hotel and required him to be there full-time. The fact that she was throwing it up as an issue now told him a lot about the undercurrents swirling beneath her display of bravado.

It also gave him hope. Because, if the thought of him leaving bothered her that much, it meant *she* cared, too – even though she was currently doing her damndest to protect herself by pretending she didn't.

It took a herculean effort not to grin like a madman.

Not that he didn't have a sackful of his own concerns. He couldn't deny that the timing was truly awful. Even at her easiest, Annabel Frost was more trouble than he'd come across before in his life, and the scale of the commitment he was already having to put into making the hotel venture work was immense. Splitting his attention successfully between two such demanding, high-intensity tasks was going to be no mean feat. Especially when, for the sake of his continuing good health, he needed to keep his life as stress-free as possible, ease back up to his pre-stroke speed. How he was going to manage that when he was already screeching away from the starting line with his foot on the floor he had no idea, but he'd find a way. He'd have to. Because choosing one or the other wasn't an option; he wanted both things equally badly, and he intended doing whatever it took to ensure he got to have both ...

Starting right now with convincing the complex and complicated Ms Frost that despite her fears she wanted him every bit as badly. And, rather than waste a moment more getting nowhere with this current war of words, he could think of a much more satisfying way for them to express their feelings.

'Eventually,' he said, reaching out to remove the spoon from her fingers and setting it on the worktop before retaking her hand. 'But not tonight.'

He saw her eyes widen a fraction as they registered the new intent in his. Before she could even think about retreating, he used the hand he held to pull her to him and slid his other arm

around her waist.

She was resistant, raising her free hand between them to press her palm against his chest. 'I think you should go home.'

'I'm not leaving you like this.' And by that he meant he doubted he could physically force himself to do so. Not with her cries of her distress still ringing in his ears. The sounds she made in her sleep had been heart-wrenching, spine-chilling. 'Don't ask me to.'

'Why not?' she huffed. 'I've managed on my own for the past six weeks.'

It was a fair comment only because she had no idea how hard it had been for him to let her go when she'd run out on him. How hard he'd had to fight himself to let her have the time and space to calm down, in the hope she'd regret her actions, come to her senses.

But now all the regret lay with him. If he'd had any idea that her nights had been hijacked by such terrible dreams, had any inkling that she'd been too stubborn to get the assistance she needed to help her heal and move on, he'd have come after her like a shot.

God, the memory of what had happened that day was still enough to turn *his* bowels to liquid. He'd never forget the moment he stormed in to find Annabel on the floor, bloody and barely conscious, fighting for her life while Tony Maplin, in a drunken rage, straddled her, one hand clenched around her throat, the other clutching a gin bottle aloft ready to smash it down into her

face.

If Aidan had been haunted by that horrific scene replaying in his head countless times, gripped by the fear of what would have happened if he'd been even a split second later, how much worse must it be for her?

And she'd been trying to tough things out without any support? He would never have believed it, not even of the obstinate Ms Frost, but now that the knowledge sat like a sickening weight in his gut there was no way he was going to leave her to face her nightmares alone. Not tonight.

'Six weeks neither of us wants to go through again.' He ducked his head and pressed his lips gently to the hard line of her mouth. 'Forget the coffee and the TV and come back to bed. Seeing as we're both awake, I've got a better idea how we can pass the time.'

Chapter Four

Standing in the chilly afternoon shadows that stretched over the Soho pavement, Aidan watched through the glass pane of Cluny's front door as Tim, the assistant manager, came towards him. Chewing a mouthful of food and grinning, the fair-haired Australian threw the lock.

'G'day, mate!' he cried in his distinctive twang as he swung the door open. 'Good to see ya.'

'You, too,' Aidan said, stepping into the welcoming, aroma-infused warmth of the restaurant. With a classic décor of polished wood and shiny fittings, Cluny's was a successful, well-respected London establishment. It was also owned by his uncle, and it had been through that family connection that Aidan had found himself temporarily working there six months earlier. Bored by his long recovery from the stroke and eager to feel useful and self-sufficient again, he'd jumped at the chance to fill the shoes of the head barman who'd walked out without notice. Even though he'd been there a relatively short time before the breakup with Annabel had precipitated the end of his stand-in role, the timeless elegance of the European-style interior felt instantly familiar.

He dropped his overnight bag by the coat-rack and shook Tim's hand as a hail of greetings came from deeper inside. Seated around several tables that had been pushed together, an

assembled group of employees were tucking into their staff meal ahead of the upcoming evening service.

Following Tim across the room, Aidan spied Annabel seated at one end of the table, her expression a mask of stiff silence amid a sea of smiles as she stared back at him. He'd been fully expecting this unscheduled visit to catch her unawares, but he'd bet her surprise was no match for his own at seeing her sitting there. From what he'd learned from his time working for her, Ms Frost had never joined in with the daily staff meal. She'd preferred to keep a professional distance by eating alone in her office, and, with her fearsome reputation as an ice queen, the staff had been only too happy not to have her spoiling their appetites.

Although he wouldn't go so far as to say the scene in front of him now painted a picture of perfect, cosy contentment, things had obviously started to change since she'd returned to work after the attack. Maybe, with both sides showing a bit more understanding and compassion for the other, Annabel's frosty outer layers were starting to thaw.

Approaching the table, Aidan said hello to old faces including sweet-natured Donna, the waitress, Jon, the junior barman, and Stu, who'd been taken on as Aidan's permanent replacement.

'How come you've been such a stranger?' Tim asked with a theatrical pout as he retook his seat and swiped a hunk of crusty bread around his bowl to collect the last of the thick dark sauce clinging to the sides. 'You haven't been in to see us once since

you left. Have you moved back to Ireland already and become Lord of the Pile, or do you just not love us any more?"

In his peripheral vision, Aidan could see Annabel still sitting as if frozen. From the moment they'd first met, she'd made it clear that one of her rules was never to mix her business and personal life. What's more, she'd particularly disapproved of workplace attachments. As a gambling man, he'd found the challenge of trying to make her break her own rules irresistibly attractive, of course, and had relished every moment of the campaign he'd undertaken to make it happen. Some of the tactics he'd employed had been far from fair, he'd be the first to admit, but, no matter how dirty he'd been prepared to play in private, he'd always respected her need for professional discretion. Was their relationship still her guilty little secret, he wondered, even though their circumstances had now changed?

'Lord of the Rubble Pile, maybe,' he said. 'And no, I haven't moved back yet, but I've not been in London much either. Getting this renovation project off the ground hasn't left me with much time for anything but filling out forms and jumping through planning hoops.'

'Then sit with us for a moment, *mon ami*,' Anton Dubois, Cluny's award-winning head chef, invited in his thick French accent. He reached to take the lid off a large casserole dish in the centre of the table with a flourish. 'Have some bourguignon and tell us all your news.'

Aidan shook his head in regret. 'As delicious as it looks and

smells, no, thanks. I'm actually on my way to catch a flight back to Cork now. I had to stop by to see Annabel about something.' They didn't need to know that the something was, in fact, nothing; that, rather than heading straight to the airport as he'd intended, he'd given in to a compulsion to come by for no other reason than to *see* her before taking off for Ireland.

Annabel all but leaped to her feet. 'Why don't you come through to the office?' she said, looking eager to hustle him out of there.

Leaving the rest of the staff to finish their meal, he followed as she took off towards the kitchens as fast as the narrow fit of her pencil skirt would allow. It had been a week since their reconciliation, and during those seven days they'd managed to meet a few times, though not nearly as often as he'd have liked. Trying to work a social life around the long shifts typical of the restaurant trade was bad enough, but with someone as driven as Annabel – who worked over and above what was expected in order to keep up with her own exacting standards – it was harder yet. Still, determined as he was to stick to his promise of dating her properly, he'd managed to pin her down one morning for an early brunch, taken her to a movie on her night off and, as a chance to grab some precious time together before he had to head back to Ireland today, he'd met her for a nightcap at the end of her shift last night.

What they hadn't managed to do at any point in the week was spend another entire night together. Following the nightmare

incident at her place, Annabel had thrown out all sorts of excuses as a way of ensuring they'd both ended up sleeping alone each night in their respective beds. It didn't take a genius to figure out that she was actively avoiding the situation for fear of risking a repeat performance.

Ahead of him, she pushed through the doors into the kitchens without breaking her stride. Once he was through, leaving the doors to swing to behind him, Aidan closed the distance between them and reached out to rest his hand at the small of her back as he fell into step beside her.

Annabel sprang away from the touch as though jabbed with a hot poker.

'Not here,' she muttered, casting a look back over her shoulder. 'What if someone sees?'

Well, there was his answer to the question of guilty secrets, then. He tried not to take it personally. 'Ashamed of me?' he teased.

'No.' Annabel cast him a flustered look. 'It's ... it doesn't feel comfortable.'

It was hard to keep remembering that even relatively casual gestures of affection were alien to her. While Annabel was no stranger to sexual encounters, she'd never been in a romantic relationship with a man. It felt good to know he'd get to be her first.

Her only, a growling echo emanated from the man-cave set in the deep recesses of his brain. He quickly blocked, in case any

further club-swinging, chest-beating thoughts tried to escape.

‘It doesn’t feel comfortable because you’re not used to it.’ Which was something he intended to rectify. Starting now. He caught her hand and tightened his grip when her automatic reaction was to pull away.

Finding that she was unable to wrench herself free, Annabel settled for picking up speed and towing him across the kitchen instead. ‘Maybe. But I don’t think this is the place for it. Not at work. Not in front of the staff.’

‘Why not? Why shouldn’t they know you’re a normal human being?’ Aidan asked as she rushed him with small, scissoring steps through the rear doorway into the hallway leading to the staff room and her office. ‘I have nothing to do with the place any more, so there’s no threat to your authority, no reason not to have a relationship outside your business life.’

Before she could continue to find points to argue, he decided to nip the issue in the bud. Using his superior strength he pulled her to a stop and swung her to face him. ‘The bottom line is, I like touching you, Annabel. I like it very much. So you’re going to have to find a way to get used to it.’

He meant to reinforce his words with appropriate action right there and then, but before he could gather her close she dodged out of his reach and employed some strength of her own to tug him from the hallway and into the office. She rounded on him then. ‘There’s a time and place for it – preferably private on both counts.’

Private? Now that they were in this room he had the perfect solution to that. ‘How about we go down into the cellar?’ He inclined his head towards the locked door set in the wall behind her desk. ‘Just you and me and your tights. You are wearing tights, I presume?’ When he went to close the distance between them, she stepped backwards. Keeping hold of her hand, he began stalking her retreat across the room. ‘We already know it’s private enough down there that I could do anything I wanted to you.’ Annabel gave ground to his advance until she was backed up against her desk, trapped. He kept moving until there was not so much as an inch of space separating them. Then he released her hand, grasped her by the upper arms and held her firm. ‘Would you like that?’

He saw her wet her lips and swallow before she answered. ‘No,’ she said, but the denial was rendered unconvincing by the sudden husky quality of her voice.

‘You sure?’ Noting the flush blossoming over her fair skin, the sudden shortness of her breath, he’d bet her mind was full of the same x-rated images as were currently filling his own. He felt a self-satisfied smile tug at his lips. ‘Maybe I’ll just carry you down there anyway. Kidnap you and keep you naked to use as my sex slave.’

That earned him a flash from her eyes. ‘That wouldn’t end well for you.’

He laughed. ‘I don’t doubt it. But it’s a risk I’d willingly take. Besides, I could make use of those tights to tie you up.’

‘I’d scream. People would hear.’

‘Not if I gagged you,’ he threatened. ‘Oh, yes, I’m liking this idea more and more. Gagged. Bound. Naked ...’ His words fell away in the face of the image they conjured in his mind. He wondered how long he’d be able to make himself last, taking her to the brink of pleasure again and again, until she was delirious with it. Begging him with those green eyes. *Good God*. Focusing his gaze on hers, he lost himself in the depths. ‘You’d have me totally at your mercy,’ he murmured.

She blinked at him. ‘I think you mean that the other way round.’

He shook his head slowly. She hadn’t the first inkling of the power she’d wield through such an act of submission. No idea of how completely she could bring him to his knees. Own him. ‘No. I meant exactly what I said.’

A clatter and a shout as something was dropped in the nearby kitchen broke the spell. Shaking off the sensual haze, Annabel slipped sideways from his hold and cleared her throat.

‘What did you want to see me about?’

He watched her hasty retreat to the other side of the desk. ‘Chicken,’ he ribbed with amusement, not the least deterred from his intention to have all that strong-willed woman freely submit to him one day. He pulled his phone from his hip pocket. ‘Can we take a look at the upcoming shift roster? I want to make a note of what days you have free.’

‘Why?’ she questioned, voice laced with enough suspicion to

suggest he'd asked her to divulge state secrets.

'So I can plan how best to split my time between here and Carriglea.' He rounded the desk himself as she lowered herself into her chair. If the Tulaí project seemed full-on now in the early planning stages, he could only imagine how much more demanding things would become once construction started. 'I'm going to be a busy boy. I need a schedule to work to.'

Annabel obviously approved of his sense of organisation, because without further ado she logged into the computer and called up the staff roster. Looking over her shoulder, he began plugging the relevant information into the diary app on his phone.

'Also, can you block yourself out for the second weekend in June? We've an invite to Monaco for Damien Harcourt's thirtieth birthday.' One of the lasting legacies from Aidan's time in the City was his friendship with the enigmatic entrepreneur. Once one of his major clients, Damien had turned out to share Aidan's passion for gambling and equalled his skill at the poker table. With a family fortune worth billions, he also inhabited a very different world from most mere mortals – a rarefied world of glamour and fame which Annabel had had a small taste of when they'd been his guests at a spectacular, star-studded New Year's Day ball in Vienna.

She looked up at him, her eyebrows raised. 'We?'

'Yes, we. As a couple.'

He watched her turn away and return her attention to the computer screen, leaving him to wonder what she thought about

others rating them officially as a pair. ‘And before you look for excuses to say you can’t go – that’s plenty of notice to work out cover here, *and* it’s all expenses paid by Damien. He sends his regards, by the way.’

‘But,’ she said, sounding cornered, ‘I don’t really know him.’

He couldn’t help liking it when ballsy Ms Frost showed her nerves. ‘All the more reason to come along. Because that’s generally how you do get to know people, Annabel, by spending time with them.’ Something she was obviously out of practice with. ‘Note it in the diary for now and think about it later.’

Once he had all her days off for the next couple of months logged onto his calendar, Aidan put the phone back in his pocket. ‘Done.’

Annabel turned to look him in the eye again. ‘You didn’t have to come in to do this, you know. You could have asked me about it any time. Or phoned.’

He grinned and nodded, delighted that she’d caught him out, seen the ruse for what it was. ‘I could have easily done that, yes.’

The frank confession made her smile, too. A rare, spontaneous smile that lit up her face and left him feeling ridiculously proud to know his actions had pleased her.

‘So.’ All too quickly, Annabel slid her mask of cool control back on. She logged out of the computer and rose to her feet. ‘Have you got everything you wanted?’

‘Not quite.’ He scooped her against him and kissed her. A long, slow melding of mouths. A kiss to carry him through until

his return to London the following week.

They were both a little breathy, a little dazed, by the time he pulled back.

Looking into her eyes as he stroked a thumb over her cheek, he asked, 'Would you do me one favour while I'm gone, *a mhuirín?*'

'Maybe,' she said, guarded even though her gaze was still a soft-focus green.

'Think about getting some help for the nightmares. A counsellor, or Victim Support or even your GP. Anything you choose.'

She instantly stiffened under his touch. A single blink and her gaze was once again clear and sharp. But instead of biting his head off she simply muttered, 'OK, I'll think about it,' without any fight at all.

As if he'd been born yesterday and couldn't recognise a bluff when he saw one. She'd literally keep to her word and 'think' about it, but nothing more. If she thought he'd let her get away with that, she had another thing coming.

'You do that.' He grasped her lightly by the chin to ensure he had her attention. 'And just so you know, as well as working on the touching in public thing when I get back, we're going to be getting you a whole lot better acquainted with the use of the word "yes".' He shifted his fingers to cover her lips as they parted. 'Because I have to admit, all this denial and prevarication is becoming a bit predictable.'

Replacing his fingers with his lips, he pressed one last swift,

hard kiss to her gaping mouth.

‘Have a good week. See you next Monday,’ he said, and strode out of her office before she had time to stick him with a pencil.

Chapter Five

The following Sunday night, Annabel trudged up the stairs to her flat. Although a quiet dinner service at Cluny's meant it was only 10.30, she felt beyond shattered. With her mother now home from the hospital, she'd been relegated to sleeping on the sofa and, as she'd predicted, her already disturbed nights had got worse. Much worse. Her entire body ached to the point that she'd started to wonder whether it would be more comfortable to bed down on the floor.

Which was why she'd been glad when Aidan had phoned earlier to tell her he was back in London and invited her to spend the night at his place. For a moment she'd considered insisting that they stick to their original plan of meeting up tomorrow on her day off, even though she was sure she was too tired even to dream tonight. But if the idea of a warm, sexy Irishman hadn't been enough of an incentive to lure her into accepting his offer, the prospect of a night in his big comfy bed had proved irresistible.

All she had to do now was stay awake long enough to collect some clothes and grab a cab over to East London.

She turned her key in the lock and pushed open her front door. Over the noise of the TV coming from inside she was surprised to hear a familiar deep, Irish-accented voice. Sure enough, when she made her way to her sitting room she found Aidan, standing

with her mother by the bookcase, the two of them absorbed in conversation.

‘What’s going on?’ Annabel said.

The talking stopped abruptly as they turned towards her.

‘Oh, hello, darling. I didn’t hear you come in,’ Ellen said, reaching to return the photograph of Annabel and her father to its place on the shelf. Although her red hair and green eyes had begun to fade somewhat as she aged, it was obvious that mother and daughter shared the same genes. ‘I was just reminiscing. Probably boring poor Aidan to tears.’

Annabel turned her attention to Aidan and felt a flutter in her stomach. Looking sinfully gorgeous in his black bike leathers, he started across the room to greet her. Had it really only been a week since she’d last seen him? Strangely, it felt like years.

‘What are you doing here? I thought I was coming to you?’

‘And I thought it would be nice to come and pick you up.’

‘You didn’t need to do that.’ In fact she’d have preferred it if he hadn’t. God only knew what the two of them had been talking about. In his efforts to get Annabel to bare all to him, Aidan was a shameless snoop, and her mother had never learned how to exercise discretion in response to an enticing male smile.

‘If you want the truth, I couldn’t wait,’ Aidan said, enclosing her in the feel of soft leather and strong arms, and pressing a tender but brief kiss to her lips. As she looked up at him, the fluttering in her stomach morphed into a full-on swoop. Framed by the glossy tousle of his hair, every bit as inky-black as the

collar it skimmed, his stunning silvery-grey irises, ringed by a darker border of charcoal, looked even more striking than usual.

Especially as they were focused with such keen intensity on her.

‘Isn’t that considerate?’ she heard her mother say with a giggle. The words seemed to come from a great distance. ‘I’m so glad he came over. It’s been ages since I’ve seen him. We’ve been having such a lovely chat.’

Which was exactly what worried her. ‘How long have you been here?’

‘Not long.’ The way he smiled gave her the impression that he could sense her discomfort, which made her even more paranoid about what he’d been up to.

‘Well ... I’ll quickly grab some things and we can go.’

‘I took the chance of bringing the bike, if that’s all right.’ Aidan released her. ‘And some kit for you to wear.’ He picked up a canvas bag from the table where two helmets also sat. Recognising the bag from the night he’d shown up to collect her from Cluny’s on his bike, she took it, knowing it contained a set of women’s leathers Aidan kept as spares.

She hurried to the bedroom, changed and packed in record time, and returned to the sitting room to find her mother and Aidan once more deep in conversation.

‘The exercises are hard,’ Ellen was saying. ‘Especially as I feel so weak after being bedbound for so long. But David is such a patient, charming man that he could get me to do anything.’

An unexpectedly loud snort escaped Annabel. That had always been her mother's biggest problem. Since she'd found herself widowed, she'd let too many men charm her into doing anything for them. David, her physiotherapist, was merely the latest in a long line of infatuations. Annabel could only hope that Ellen's ability to judge character had improved since the attack. They didn't need any more disasters like Tony Maplin ruining their lives.

'I'm ready to go,' Annabel told Aidan.

He crossed the room but, instead of getting ready to leave, curled his arm around her shoulders and pulled her close. She hadn't forgotten the arrogant proclamations he'd made in her office before he'd jetted off to Ireland, and it would seem he was intent on keeping his word about getting her used to touching. She could pull away – show him she wouldn't be bossed about. But, truth be told, as tired as she was, all she really wanted to do at that moment was sink further into the feel of him, solid and strong and warm against her. It was a dangerous urge. Hadn't she learned that it was foolish to rely on somebody else to hold her up? That the only person she should trust not to let her fall was herself?

'We were discussing the importance of physio in aiding recovery, *a mhuirnín*. Your mother was saying that, even though it can be painful and unpleasant, it's a vital part of the healing process. I'm sure you'd agree with that?'

Annabel flexed the hand of the arm that had been broken,

feeling the returning strength her own set of physical therapy exercises was giving to the unused muscles. ‘Yes, of course.’

He smiled and nodded at her before turning back to her mother. ‘And you were saying much the same thing about the psychological aspect of your recovery, Ellen. That the counselling assistance you’ve been receiving has been every bit as important as treating the physical trauma.’

Her mother agreed with enthusiasm. ‘It’s been fabulous, really. So helpful. I couldn’t have coped without them visiting me in the hospital.’

Not liking the sudden over-precise way Aidan was speaking, nor where he seemed to be steering the conversation, Annabel tried to pull away.

The arm around her shoulders tightened, anchoring her to his side.

He turned to her. ‘Did you know your mother suffered terrible nightmares after the attack?’

Sensing an ambush coming, she stared straight ahead, refusing to look at him or answer beyond a vague ‘Oh?’

‘Yes, she was just telling me all about it.’

Oh. Across the room, she saw her mother nod again. ‘Absolutely dreadful they were. I hardly dared fall asleep.’

‘And now?’ Annabel heard Aidan direct the question at her mother although she could sense his attention remaining firmly focused on her.

‘Now ... none.’ Ellen gave a happy shrug. ‘Talking about it has

been so therapeutic, I sleep as well as I ever did.'

The arm around Annabel's shoulders squeezed. 'That's great news, isn't it?'

Crap. She was well and truly backed into a corner.

'Annabel?' Aidan's voice sounded again. 'Don't you think?'

She was aware of both him and her mother looking at her expectantly. What the hell was she supposed to say? 'Hmm, great. Can we go now?'

'Sure.' Aidan released her and went to kiss her mother on both cheeks. 'Lovely to see you, Ellen,' he said. 'I'm certain, now that Annabel is looking into getting help for her own nightmares, it won't be long before she's looking as glowing with health as you are.'

Damn him.

As Aidan moved away to gather the helmets from the table, Annabel watched her mother blink a few times before her features settled into an expression of surprised concern. 'Bel, darling?' she queried. 'Are you having trouble? I didn't realise ...'

Annabel sighed. She was never going to hear the end of this now. 'It's nothing, mum, I'm fine.' Which was more than was going to be said for Aidan Bloody Interfering Flynn once she got him alone.

She narrowed her gaze on him as he came up and passed her a helmet. She really hoped that was a hint of smugness she detected in the lopsided smile he gave her, because she was going to take immense pleasure in knocking it off his face.

‘Let’s go.’

* * *

A short time later they were divesting themselves of helmets, gloves, bags and jackets in the entrance hall of Aidan’s place. Set on the fourth floor of a converted warehouse, the apartment was an airy, loft-style affair with exposed brick and pipework and an abundance of large metal-framed windows dominating the walls of the open-plan living area. Befitting the building’s architecture, the place was furnished in solid, masculine style – lots of dark leather and chunky wood, accentuated by shiny industrial appliances and the latest tech toys. It looked exactly what it was – a very well-to-do bachelor’s pad.

Annabel had been surprised the first time Aidan had brought her here. Working out that her own ‘executive’ flat could fit into the space five times over, she’d wondered how someone on a barman’s salary could afford such slick city living. Given his relationship to Richard Landon, her boss and the owner of Cluny’s, she’d guessed at family money. But that had been before she’d learned how successful a career Aidan had had in the financial sector before the credit crisis had hit and he’d lost his job. And very nearly a whole lot more besides.

As soon as his hands were free, Aidan reached for her. ‘At last,’ he said through a wide smile, ‘I can kiss you hello properly.’

He thought she was going to let him off that easily? She sidestepped around him. ‘That was a low trick you pulled with my mother.’

‘What trick would that be?’

She wasn’t fooled for a minute by the look of bafflement that replaced the smile. ‘You know very well. Cornering me with that therapy nonsense.’

‘Did I corner you?’ Aidan frowned.

‘Yes, you can stop with the innocent act. You know I had no intention of following it up.’

The smile reappeared and a spark of mischief flashed in his gaze. ‘And you of all people should know I play dirty when I have to, Annabel,’ he admitted without a trace of shame.

Oh, yes. She knew that about him. She also knew he was quite a contradiction. At times capable of being one of the most unscrupulous yet highly honourable men she’d ever come across. That was his charm – a dangerous charisma that she’d been wary of right from the start. And with good reason. She’d watched charmers in action all her life. Watched them trick her mother. Smiling to her face while stealing whatever they could from behind her back. Her money, her love, her dignity. Annabel had promised never to make the same mistakes; she’d sworn never to trust anyone, never to let anyone close enough to hurt her the way she’d watched her mother get hurt.

And yet, here she was, risking getting way too close to the biggest charmer of all. Never mind playing dirty – she was playing with fire.

Aidan’s expression sobered. ‘In all seriousness, I believe it’s something you should do,’ he said. ‘I know better than most the

importance of healing properly after a trauma. Without all the rehab I had after the stroke – and I’m talking a veritable army of therapists – I doubt I’d be half the man I am, annoying the hell out of you tonight.’

Having quizzed him over their recent brunch about the stroke and his recovery, she knew that ‘army’ was barely an exaggeration. Aidan had been left as helpless as a newborn baby, essentially having to learn to talk and walk all over again.

‘I’m not saying it was easy or enjoyable, but it was necessary.’ Pausing, Aidan sighed softly. ‘Now we can go ahead and start an argument about my underhand tactics if that’s what you want, *a mhuirnín*,’ he said. ‘But we’re both tired and I’ve missed you. I’d much prefer to take you in my arms and take you to bed.’

And that was another concern. Annabel glanced towards his bedroom door with a mixture of longing and apprehension. Getting comfortable sounded delicious, but she didn’t want to make a nightmare-induced spectacle of herself in front of him again.

As usual, Aidan seemed able to read her thoughts perfectly. He stepped close and wrapped his arms around her. ‘You’ve nothing to worry about, I’ve been devising a clever plan to keep the dreams at bay tonight.’

Annabel looked up at him. ‘Oh, yes? What plan would that be?’

‘One that starts with a kiss,’ he murmured, and followed up with a soft, warm practical demonstration. Pulling back, he

looked into her eyes. ‘Before moving on to stripping you naked and laying you out across my sheets.’

The heated promise in his gaze held her trapped, unable to blink. ‘And then?’

“And then” involves me thinking up new and creative ways to keep you distracted from your own thoughts for a very, very long time.’ He lowered his head again and this time let his lips linger against hers. ‘So long that by the time I’m finished with you, you’ll be passed out cold.’

He kissed her a third time, the press firmer. His tongue playing along the seam of her lips in a velvety caress that had her opening to him. The arms holding her tightened, pulling her flush up against his body as he deepened the kiss, claiming her mouth with yearning hunger.

And Annabel was lost. She couldn’t fight the desire he roused in her, even if she wanted to. She raised her hands and sank them into the cool, silky strands of his hair. Worn slightly too long and slightly too tousled, the style hid the fine six-inch line of scar tissue that curved down over his scalp a little behind his ear. Her fingers found it now, that permanent mark of the lifesaving operation he’d had following the stroke she’d learned he’d suffered only a few years back.

With his body pressed against hers, so warm, so vital, so straight and strong, it was hard to imagine that he’d been so ill, paralysed and helpless, his muscles wasting as he lay confined to a bed. The only physical evidence that remained of such a

traumatic event was the scar and the slightly lopsided smile that had never righted itself.

That he was here today as he was proved that Aidan Flynn was a fighter. A self-professed dirty one at times, but nevertheless a fighter who was offering to help battle her nightmares with her.

With all that on offer, quite frankly, the argument could wait until morning.

‘Take me to bed, then,’ she murmured against his lips.

He did. And it wasn’t until a long, long time later that they found out whether his plan worked.

Annabel managed a solid four hours of exhausted sleep before the terror of another nightmare woke them both.

Chapter Six

Good luck.

Annabel read the text message that came through from Aidan. Even though he was busy in Ireland he apparently could still find time to remember, almost to the very minute, her appointment today.

His thoughtfulness made something warm and cosy unfurl within her chest; a sensation that felt much scarier than it sounded, especially as it seemed to be happening more and more often, and there was no way for her to control or protect herself from it.

Thanks, she sent in reply before switching the phone to silent and sliding it back into the bag sitting on her lap. Claspng her hands together atop the leather, she aimed her gaze at the framed print of a generic pastel landscape on the wall opposite. This wasn't the time or place to let thoughts of Aidan Flynn unsettle her nerves.

Because, much to her own surprise, this was the second time in as many weeks she'd found herself waiting in the carefully decorated blandness of her local Victim Support offices. Following the sneaky ambush Aidan had sprung on the night he'd come to pick her up from her flat, she'd known that neither he nor her mother would give up on the subject of getting the help they thought she needed for her nightmares. She'd

figured the easiest way to get them off her back, or to stop them going behind it and setting up something themselves, was to agree to make an appointment.

By taking the initiative, at least she got to stay in charge and make the choices that seemed right for herself. And, after weighing up various options, she'd decided that the Victim Support service sounded most suited to her needs, not least because the terminology they used sounded so normal. There was no counselling this, or therapist that, no sessions, nothing to imply that she was in any way mentally weak or unstable. There were just nice, straightforward-sounding visits with volunteers.

Aidan had insisted on delivering her here for her first visit, which she found pretty hypocritical of him considering the way he went on about *her* supposed issues with trust. But again, for the sake of getting this whole unnecessary exercise over and done with as quickly and easily as possible, she'd decided to go along with it, even though it had meant cutting off any chance she'd had of ducking out. She'd figured she'd only need to get through an hour, after all, to satisfy everyone's concern. After that she'd insist that one session was enough and she could regain control of her life. And not a moment too soon. It seemed she was doing a lot of giving in to other people's demands, all of a sudden.

In the event, giving into this particular demand had turned out nowhere near as bad as she'd feared. She'd been introduced to Susan, a friendly, practical woman of around her own age whose fashion sense ran to smart urban without a string of hippy beads

or pair of woven hemp sandals in sight. Thankfully, there'd been none of the touchy-feely New Age jargon she'd been dreading either.

Nevertheless, walking into the meeting room she'd been as uncomfortable as she'd ever been. No doubt sensing Annabel's initial reticence from her stiff, monosyllabic answers, Susan had allowed her time to unbend by turning the spotlight on herself. Filling what would otherwise have been a series of awkward silences with a little of her own background, she'd explained that she was also a survivor of an assault, who'd been inspired to become a volunteer after the help she'd received from the service.

Annabel had been surprised enough by Susan's candid manner to forget about her own self-consciousness long enough to start talking. And once she'd started, it turned out she had quite a bit to say. Verbalising the events of the attack hadn't caused anywhere near as much upset or panic as she'd envisaged. In fact, taking the time to inspect the half-hazy memories in order to lay them out in sequence actually helped her view them more calmly, feel more in control. That's why, when her hour had ended before she'd known it and Susan had asked whether she'd like to make another appointment, she'd agreed to come back.

It had all been surprisingly easy. As was her budding 'go slow' relationship with Aidan, despite all his overbearing tendencies. A part of her at least was beginning to recognise that he did things because he cared, and an even smaller part was beginning to learn to grudgingly accept that. Used as she was to being alone,

it wasn't always easy, but, with Aidan's unique brand of ruthless patience, she felt she might eventually get there.

Between her work commitments and Aidan's numerous trips to Ireland, they'd found the opportunity to squeeze in a few more dates over the past couple of weeks. They'd ticked the boxes marked 'dinner' and 'show' and had even been ice-skating. And the week after next, to coincide with her scheduled double day off work and Aidan's return from his latest trip to Ireland, they were graduating to a night away.

'Annabel?' At the sound of her name she looked up to see Susan making her way across the waiting room with a warm smile. 'Lovely to see you again. Would you like to come through?'

Noting the short, printed skirt teamed with a great-fitting cashmere sweater and knee-high black suede boots, all of which reaffirmed her first impression of young, fashionable, *normal*, Annabel felt the nervousness she'd been trying to ignore suddenly ease. She stood and shook the proffered hand. She could do this.

* * *

A fortnight later, Annabel and Aidan set out from London in weather that, for a late March morning, was glorious. An early spring sun shone down from a cloudless, powder-blue sky, lending an unseasonable warmth to the air.

With the heat of that sun on her shoulders, and the wind tugging at the ends of her braided hair, Annabel felt lighter, happier than she could remember being in ... well, in far too long.

It wasn't only the bright weather lifting her spirits, she knew.

It was also the bike that surged powerfully beneath her, the sense of freedom and excitement the sleek black and chrome Triumph Thunderbird inspired as it sped her away from her everyday life.

And, yes, being wrapped around the fine, leather-clad figure of Aidan Flynn definitely didn't hurt. Closing her eyes against the outer-city scenery streaming by, she tightened her hold around his waist and nestled closer against his back, resting her helmeted head between the blades of his broad shoulders. With the world shut out, it was easy to feel every movement he made – each breath inflating his chest, every shift of weight pulling the flat planes of his stomach taut as he navigated skilfully through the mid-morning traffic with a natural confidence that left her feeling relaxed, trusting. Not only was Aidan Flynn irresistibly sex-on-a-stick lickable, he was starting to feel ... safe.

He was also a man of his word. Keeping to his promise of dating her properly, he'd arranged a night away in a luxury country-house spa hotel somewhere near the city of Bath. In honour of the occasion – a first for her – she'd bought a new dress and swimsuit, which were currently stowed with the rest of her gear in one of the bike's panniers.

Joining the M4 motorway, they left London behind at speed. They stopped after about an hour for coffee and refuelled before resuming their journey on more scenic A and B roads.

It had been a while since she'd been outside the capital, and more than twenty years since she'd ventured so far to the South West. As much as she enjoyed the journey and sightseeing, she

was so looking forward to being wined and dined and pampered that she found herself counting down the miles on the road signs they passed.

When they reached a major roundabout and continued past the first exit signposted to Bath, she guessed they were drawing near to their destination. However, when they merged onto a fast-moving A road heading north, and sped along it towards Gloucester, a new alertness started to seep into her carefree mood.

Where exactly were they headed? Thinking back on their discussions, she realised she had no idea of the specifics beyond Aidan's vague mention of Bath and his more animated description of the innovative biodynamic kitchen garden the hotel used to supply the in-house restaurant, from which he hoped to garner some ideas for incorporating a similar scheme into his Tulaí venture.

But, whizzing along in the fast lane with the throttle open, she noted they were heading well away from Bath and showing no signs of slowing down. She felt a twinge of unease as the road signs on their new route began to feature names she recognised from a long time ago, names like Malmesbury and Stroud that told her they were heading north, towards the heart of the Cotswolds.

Surely, with the entire South of England countryside to choose from, he couldn't have happened to choose the one area she never wanted to see again as long as she lived? An area filled with too

many heartbreaking memories. What were the chances of that?

The slightly sick feeling of apprehension rising in her stomach told her she couldn't take the risk of waiting to see. She needed to find out exactly where they were headed. But with little traffic to slow them down on the long stretches of country road, Aidan seemed lost in the pleasure of putting the bike through its paces, keeping their speed high enough to make communicating difficult.

Realising the danger of distracting him too suddenly, she tried to get his attention by squeezing him around his waist. After a couple of attempts, she felt their speed drop a little, felt Aidan shift as one of his gloved hands covered hers and squeezed back. Relief had barely begun to register before he leaned forward to grip the handlebars again and, with a renewed kick of power, the bike surged forward once more.

What? No. He'd misunderstood and now they were going even faster than before. She tried squeezing him a few more times, but the action was obviously failing to convey her urgency as they kept motoring along regardless. As the name Tetbury began to appear with increasing regularity her alertness grew into apprehension – that was a place that really was too close to the past for comfort.

Cautiously, she loosened one of her arms and tried to get Aidan's attention by tapping him on the ribs.

Thank God that seemed to work. She felt the power throttle back and the bike begin to slow. Aidan's hand covered hers

again, giving a brief pat of acknowledgement. Ahead, she saw a crossroad junction and realised they were slowing their approach. Good, that would give her the opportunity to tell him to pull over, turn around. And not a moment too soon, she realised with a lurch of panic. With the signs ahead pointing left to Wootton-under-Edge and right to Tetbury, Annabel suddenly realised precisely where they were.

As they rolled to a slow speed, she began to loosen her hold around Aidan's waist, prepared to flip up her visor to shout at him, or take the opportunity to dismount if necessary. But she found herself stopped by a sudden firm grip encasing her wrists, trapping them in place. Before she could even think to pull herself free, the grip was gone and the bike jumped forward again, throwing her off balance and leaving her instinctively to grab on tight.

Her heart leaped into her throat as she realised they were turning right. No. This couldn't be happening. Panic took hold, desperate, helpless panic, as though she were racing head-on towards a cliff edge with no way to stop, no way to turn, no way to get off.

She fought the rising sense of light-headedness that had little to do with the sudden twists and turns of the narrow country lane as it wound through hedgerow-fringed fields and into the dappled shade of a small wood. Even before they rounded the final turn that would take them out of the trees, she knew what she'd find. The small roadside sign announcing that they were entering the

village of Marton Chilbury, and just beyond that ...

She thought about closing her eyes as they rode past, figuring that, if she didn't look, she could pretend it wasn't there. Yet when they rounded the bend, she found her eyes drawn to the exact spot she wanted to avoid. There, on the lefthand side of the road, where it had stood for hundreds of years, was an old thatched coaching inn. The place she'd once called home. The White Harte.

A cry of disbelief escaped her when she registered that Aidan was slowing the bike and pulling into the entrance of the carpark. She realised she'd been holding her breath for too long when her vision blurred and a rush of dizziness assaulted her, making her feel like she was going to throw up, or pass out. Or quite possibly both.

She tried to fill her lungs but within the close confines of her helmet she couldn't seem to find enough air. What had happened to all the oxygen? She began to gasp, but that only made the dry, tight feeling in her chest grow worse.

She couldn't breathe. She needed to get the helmet off or she was going to suffocate.

Barely waiting for the bike to stop, she jumped off, stumbling in her haste and nearly ending up flat on her face. Her knees felt too weak to hold her up so she let herself drop to them as she fought to pull the helmet off.

Her sense of panic increased as she realised it was stuck. Holding it tightly between her hands she tugged harder. It was

only then she remembered the chinstrap. She tilted her head back, finding herself blinded by the sun shining on her visor, the rasping sound of her sobbing gasps filling the confined space as her gloved fingers, numb and clumsy, scrabbled to release the strap.

Then a shadow fell over her. Her hands were firmly grasped and lowered from their futile fumbling. An instant later the chinstrap was released and Annabel ripped off the helmet and sucked in huge sobbing gulps of air.

‘Take it easy, *a mhuirín*. You’re going to hyperventilate.’

Aidan’s gentle, reasonable tone should have calmed her, but instead it infuriated her. Take it easy? He wasn’t the one who’d nearly suffocated, whose fingers and toes had gone numb and tingly through lack of oxygen. She dragged in another lungful and another and another.

‘Come on now. You’ll only make it worse.’ This time, his soothing murmur was accompanied by a stabilising hand that slid around her nape and exerted steady pressure downwards, pushing her head toward her knees. ‘Breathe.’

Couldn’t he tell that was what she was trying to do? Anger erupted through the panic. This was his fault anyway.

She pushed back against the pressure of the hand until she could glare at him where he crouched in front of her, his own helmet nowhere in sight. ‘Why the fuck did you ignore me? I wanted you to pull over miles ago,’ she bit out between gasps. ‘We need to turn around and go back. I can’t be here.’

He reached for her again. ‘Calm down –’

‘Don’t you dare!’ she shouted over him. ‘Don’t you dare tell me to calm down. We need to leave. Now.’ Staggering back to her feet, she grasped the helmet between her hands as she mustered every ounce of the courage she’d need to make herself put it back on, even though it was the last thing she wanted to do. ‘You’ve no idea what you’ve done here.’

Aidan also straightened. ‘I do know, Annabel. I know what this place is to you.’

Something icy-cold shot up the back of her neck, and her gaze flew up to his face. ‘What?’

‘I know this is where the photograph of you and your father was taken.’ Those grey eyes of his seemed even more intense than usual, focused unwaveringly on her. ‘The place you grew up. I brought you here for a reason.’

Annabel gaped at him for a frozen moment then the shock cracked open and she went for him, shoving the helmet at his chest with enough force to push him back half a step. ‘You bastard. How dare you?’ She shoved again, but this time he was braced and ready and simply rocked on the spot. ‘What the hell do you think you’re playing at?’

‘I’m not playing,’ he said, raising his hands to block the third shove aimed at his chest so that they both held the helmet gripped between them. ‘This is too important for it to be a game.’

‘Oh, please! Everything’s a game to you.’ Including her. This was why she needed to protect herself against him. He had no

boundaries when it came to bulldozing his way into every corner of her being, exposing every part of her.

‘Not this. Believe me.’

‘Believe you?’ she stared at him with wide-eyed incredulity. ‘When all you do is pull dirty tricks?’

‘I’m not trying to trick you. I’m trying to help you.’

No. Any fool could see that he was trying to control and manipulate her. And she wasn’t a fool. ‘You want to help me?’ she snapped, tugging the helmet free from his grasp. ‘Great. The most helpful thing you can do is take me back to London.’

Spinning away, she spotted the bike standing nearby and stomped towards it. Pulling her helmet on, she found herself having trouble with the blasted chinstrap again. She needed to slow down a bit and concentrate, but honestly, she couldn’t believe the audacity of the man. To think he thought it acceptable to interfere ...

Aidan was suddenly in front of her again, his fingers joining hers under her chin. But this time they seemed intent on hindering her efforts rather than helping. She pushed them away, and ducked to avoid his hands as they reached out to remove the helmet from her head. She wasn’t quite quick enough to stop his next move, which flipped her visor up.

‘We’re not going anywhere,’ he announced through the opening. ‘Not until we’ve sorted this.’

She stared at him. ‘I am not staying here! I can’t. You seriously thought trying to force me into coming here for the night was a

good idea?’

‘We’re not staying here. It’s only a lunch stop, Annabel.’

That was supposed to make it any better? ‘Then let’s find somewhere else for lunch.’

Aidan started to shake his head.

‘Fine. I’ll call a cab.’ She removed the helmet and tossed it to him, then unzipped a pocket in the leather jacket and got out her phone. No bloody signal. Feeling Aidan’s gaze upon her every move, she shoved the useless device back in her pocket. ‘Or I’ll walk.’

As she strode off across the carpark towards the road, she was aware of him falling in beside her, his long legs making it easy for him to keep up, though he made no move to touch her or stop her.

‘Your reaction says that you do need to be here, Annabel. You need to face this.’

‘Don’t “shrink” me,’ she snapped, not turning, not breaking stride. ‘You’re trying to fix me. If I’m not good enough for you, you know what –’

‘You’re perfect for me,’ he interrupted. ‘The small part of you that you’re prepared to share, at any rate. So no, I’m not trying to fix you, I’m trying to get to know more about you. Understand you.’

‘And you think dragging me to a place I haven’t been in twenty years and raking over a past that has nothing to do with you is the best way to understand me?’ She gave him a look that matched

the sarcasm in her tone. At the end of the driveway she turned and continued marching along the road in the direction from which they'd just come.

'I think it's a relevant place to start, at least,' Aidan persevered, still keeping step with her. 'What's here that you can't bear to face? Does it bring back such bad memories?'

Only the devastating memory of losing the only place in her life where she'd felt safe and happy and loved for who she was. 'No.'

'Then think about that for a moment. If that's the case your reaction makes no sense. From what I can tell, things from your past still haunt you. You won't be able to move on until you face whatever ghosts you carry. You can't do that if you keep running from them.'

'You don't know what you're talking about. And even if you did, you certainly don't get to make those sorts of decisions for me.'

'Annabel, please. Trust—'

Sensing what was coming she swung on him. 'If you *dare* say, "Trust me," I will slap you!'

His black brows shot up at the threat, but his tone remained mild, perhaps a little amused, as he said, 'I was going to say, "Trust yourself," actually.' Then the humour melted away to be replaced by sincerity. 'That's the only thing that really matters here,' he said, the lyrical tones of his Irish accent softening to an alluring lilt. 'Believe in yourself. You know you can do this.'

She stood there, breathing heavily, aware that he was trying to play her with charm – even more aware and perturbed to discover that there was a part of her that wanted to fall for it. Unsettled, she blurted somewhat petulantly, ‘Maybe I don’t *want* to do it.’

Pulling off a glove, Aidan took a step closer. He placed his bare fingertips on the side of her neck, resting them lightly over the spot where she could feel the racing gallop of her pulse.

‘There’s no “maybe” about it,’ he murmured with a crooked smile. ‘It’s perfectly obvious that you don’t want to.’

‘Then we’re in agreement for once. Let’s go.’ She turned and started walking again but Aidan caught her hand and pulled her off the road onto the wooded verge.

‘I’ll make a deal with you. If you can give one valid reason why you don’t want to do this, we’ll leave.’

Was irrational fear a valid reason? she wondered. Too bad if it was. She’d never admitted that kind of weakness to anyone before, and she wasn’t going to start now. Nor was there much point in trying to make something up, given Aidan’s uncanny ability to see through her deceptions. He was as astute as he was infuriating.

She tried to pull her hand free, but he only tightened his grip. ‘Come on, Annabel,’ he challenged. ‘What are you really afraid of?’

Since he’d come into her life? Too much, it seemed. She was afraid of him. Of herself. Of the past, the future. Afraid of her own bloody shadow. ‘Nothing. Everything. I don’t know!’ she

shouted, exasperated.

He looked at her for a long moment – calm, cool, collected. ‘And that’s why I really think you should do it. Come on.’ He stepped back onto the road, and, using the hand he’d effortlessly kept hold of, towed her back towards the inn.

Chapter Seven

Aidan watched Annabel's every move carefully as, back in the carpark, he secured the bike and collected their helmets. After the way he'd shocked her, she'd be justified in bolting.

When she refused point-blank to set a foot through the front door of the old timber-framed building, he led her around the side, following the signs to the beer garden.

Even getting her onto the grounds was more than he'd really dared hope for. He'd known pulling something like this would be a huge gamble, but it was one he'd decided had to be worth the risk. Because while on the surface Annabel Frost appeared to be thawing, he couldn't shake the feeling that surface-deep was as far as it went; that she was going through what she thought were the right motions, but without the emotional depth to back them up. He'd begun to realise that if he wanted to get deeper, and he did, he'd need to start pushing.

As they rounded the building and came to the long stretch of green lawn behind, he left her to decide where to sit. Of the dozen or so wooden picnic tables spaced out on the grass, only a few were unoccupied and she chose the one furthest away from the building, where the lawn sloped away to meet a tiny stream. She sat on the bench with her back to the building, almost vibrating with tension.

Leaving the helmets and his gloves while he went to get drinks

and menus, Aidan hoped he'd called this right. As far as he could make out, the pain of losing her father and this place when she was so young and vulnerable had become the defining influence on her life. She was so used to protecting herself that it was proving hard to get her to open up. Maybe showing her that she had nothing left to fear here would help unlock her emotions, let them flourish.

Approaching the rear entrance of the inn, he couldn't help throwing a glance over his shoulder to check Annabel was still where he'd left her. He ducked through the door. Inside, the décor was typical of the evolved style of the English country inn – the dark traditional interior giving way to the modern rustic look favoured by the weekend gastropub crowds. The low ceilings and time-worn flagstone floor remained, but other ancient features such as the original exposed beams had been stripped and limed, the plasterwork and wood panelling painted in light chalky colours.

He headed to the bar and ordered two orange juices from a skinny young man uniformed in white shirt and black trousers. As he handed over a banknote in payment he asked for a couple of lunch menus.

'That's all right, Josh, I'll see to it,' said an extraordinarily pretty blonde woman dressed in matching white and black who stepped up beside her colleague. She turned big cornflower-blue eyes on Aidan and sent him a radiant smile. 'I can bring those to you if you like. Where are you sitting?'

‘We’re outside.’ He smiled back. ‘I don’t mind taking them myself.’

‘It’s no problem.’ The radiance shone brighter. ‘Go and enjoy your drinks and I’ll follow you out in a minute.’

Aidan rejoined Annabel, who muttered, ‘There’d better be vodka in this,’ as she grabbed the glass of orange juice. Coming from someone who didn’t drink alcohol, the comment was telling.

He unzipped his jacket and removed it before settling himself on the bench opposite her and raising his glass. ‘Here’s to you, and to courage.’

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