



MODERN

MAGGIE COX

A Very Passionate Man

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Аннотация

Rowan Hawkins needs solitude and quiet. But her peace is shattered by unfriendly neighbor Evan Cameron. He's gorgeous, in pain, and the rudest man she's ever met! Evan just wants to recover his health and return to his business—alone. But his pretty, appealing and determined neighbor won't stay out of his life...or his thoughts. He's determined to resist his unwanted feelings for the young widow. But when Rowan learns a shocking secret, Evan finds himself offering comfort—and their reluctant need for one another flares out of control!

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Welcome to this month's collection of Harlequin Presents! You'll be swept off your feet by our gorgeous heroes and their seductive ways....

Sandra Marton's glamorous trilogy **THE BILLIONAIRES' BRIDES** continues this month with *The Greek Prince's Chosen Wife*. Prince Damian Aristedes is shocked when he discovers Ivy is pregnant with his baby—and now he's not going to let her go.... Next we have two sexy Italians to get your hearts pumping! In *Blackmailed into the Italian's Bed* by Miranda Lee, Gino Bortelli is back, and determined to have Jordan in his bed once again. In Kim Lawrence's *Claiming His Pregnant Wife*, Erin's marriage to Francesco quickly fell apart but she'll never be free of him—she's pregnant with his child! Meanwhile, in Carole Mortimer's *The Billionaire's Marriage Bargain*, Kenzie Masters is in a fix and needs the help of her estranged husband Dominick—but it will come at a price. In *The Brazilian Boss's Innocent Mistress* by Sarah Morgan, innocent Grace has to decide whether to settle her debts in Rafael Cordeiro's bed! And in *The Rich Man's Bride* by Catherine George, wealthy Ryder Wyndham is determined that career-minded Anna be his lady-of-the-manor bride! Finally, in *Bedded at His Convenience* by Margaret Mayo, Keisha believes

Hunter has a strictly business offer, but soon discovers he has other ideas....

Happy reading!

A Very Passionate Man

Maggie Cox



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All about the author...

Maggie Cox

MAGGIE COX loved to write almost as soon as she learned to read. Her favorite occupation was daydreaming and making up stories in her head, and this particular pastime has stayed with her through all the years of growing up, starting work, marrying and raising a family. No matter what was going on in her life, whether happiness, struggle or disappointment, she'd go to bed each night and lose herself in her imagination.

For many years she secretly filled exercise books and then her word processor with her writing, never showing anyone what she wrote. It wasn't until she met her second husband, the love of her life, that she was persuaded to start sharing those stories with a publisher. Maggie settled on Harlequin Books as she has loved reading romance novels since she was a teenager. After several rejections, the letters sent back from the publisher became more and more positive and encouraging, and in July 2002 she sold her first book.

The fact that she is being published is truly a dream come true. However, each book she writes is still a journey in courage and hope and a quest to learn and grow and be the best writer she can. Her advice to aspiring authors is "Don't give up at the first hurdle, or even the second, third or fourth, but keep on keeping on until

your dream is realized. Because if you are truly passionate about writing and learning the craft, as Paulo Coelho states in his book *The Alchemist*, ‘the Universe will conspire to help you’ make it a reality.”

To Kate

For your faith and trust in me and for giving me this wonderful chance.

Mere thanks are not enough.

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CHAPTER ONE

HE HAD no idea what drew him to the window just then. A sudden movement, perhaps, a glimpse of something white he'd caught out of the corner of his eye... If he'd wanted to dig deeper he would have said it was a feeling that drew him; a sense of something unexpected about to happen.

For some reason tension coiled in his stomach and made it hard to breathe. Evan put it down to the debilitating effects of burnout. Work had been the driving force in his life for too long and he was no longer able to kid himself that he could give himself up to its demands indefinitely—not unless he wanted an early death. That last bout of flu had damn near killed him. But what was he supposed to do now? He'd done what his doctor advised and taken a month off from his business to relax, walk on the beach, catch up on his reading...get his head on straight. As far as Evan was concerned, all were prospects that frankly held little appeal. Life for him equalled activity, and he'd always pushed his body to the maximum, whether in the gym or working ridiculous hours to promote his business. If only he had known that one day there would be a price to pay for such single-minded recklessness...

A sudden frisson of fear biting on his nerves, he clenched his jaw, green eyes narrowing at the sight that met his gaze through the window. Past the tumbledown, mildewed fence that

needed mending, a woman, white straw hat, white cotton dress down to her ankles, stood amongst the crestfallen weeds of the neighbouring garden looking as if she'd somehow wandered on to the scene from the pages of *House and Garden*. Secateurs in one hand, a wicker basket in the other, it seemed to Evan that she glanced disconsolately at the sight before her, as if she might have taken on more than she could handle. Not that he could blame her. The old, run-down cottage had been empty for at least three years, maybe more. It had had a 'For Sale' sign stuck outside for maybe the same length of time. He should have noticed it had gone, but then he rarely came down to the coast these days—his sister, Beth, used the house more than he did. The evidence of her presence was everywhere, from the feminine paraphernalia dotted round the bathroom to the box of kids' toys stacked in the living-room behind a chintz curtain.

For some reason, the appearance of the woman in white irked him. He'd wanted peace. OK, so maybe he wasn't sure that he could handle it, but peace was what he'd had in mind as he'd made the long drive down from London yesterday. Now that peace had been infringed upon by the presence of an unexpected and unwanted neighbour. Rubbing at his forehead, Evan sensed the tension gathering there like a building thunderstorm. As long as she didn't bother him, everything would still go as he planned. Maybe she hadn't bought the house at all—maybe she was 'staging' it for a potential buyer? Wasn't that how they referred to it these days? But the face partially shielded by the

big straw hat and the slender almost ethereal demeanour of the woman didn't immediately shout 'estate agent' to Evan. Angel, or ghost, but not estate agent.

Irrked by such a ludicrous flight of fancy, he drew away from the window before she caught him staring. He glanced at the pile of hardbacks on the coffee-table, and walked moodily past them into the kitchen to make himself a drink. When he'd had his refreshment he'd take a long walk on the beach to help ease out the kinks in his tired, aching muscles. Perhaps his dour mood would improve after that.

Her train of thought suddenly lost, Rowan came to a standstill in the middle of the neglected little garden, staring down at the secateurs in her hand as if she couldn't quite fathom how they'd appeared there. She hated it when her thoughts were suddenly snatched away by this...this awful blankness. It was like wandering into a blinding mist after walking beneath a clear blue sky. Her fingers tightening round the smooth wooden handle of the pruning shears, she chewed down on her lip, willing herself to take charge, to be whole again—as she had been before Greg had died. But that girl had long gone, and the feeling of being apart from the rest of the world that had seized her that morning grew instead of lessened. Her heart galloped and her breath hitched, as if someone had sabotaged her oxygen supply. Instead of scrubby weeds, cheerful yellow dandelions and trailing bindweed, she saw her husband's face just before he'd left on his last assignment that hot August morning. Saw his plethora of camera gear hitched

across his shoulder as she'd seen it many times before, such an integral part of him. The equipment was almost a metaphor for Greg's personal philosophy that, no matter how heavy your load, you just got on with life because after all, wasn't it a bonus that we were here at all? And, with that wicked boy-scout grin that could crowd her chest with warmth, he'd walked out of her life and into an oncoming car as he crossed the road to join the rest of his crew in the television-news van.

Rowan swallowed hard, willing herself to move before she took root where she was standing—just like one of the scrubby weeds she'd been so intent on removing. She'd never get anything done around here if she kept sabotaging her efforts like this. It wasn't just the garden that needed tending. The house also needed work to make it more habitable, even if she was destined to enjoy its comfort alone since Greg wasn't around any more to share it with her. The neglected little cottage, just a short walk away from the beach down a winding country lane, had captured their imaginations as soon as they'd seen it. They'd started making plans for its improvement the very moment they'd jumped out of the car to examine it. It would be their mission to return it to its former glory, they had vowed. In no time at all it would be the quintessential English country cottage, roses round the door and all. Hardly unique, but then they hadn't been planning on winning any prizes for originality—just making a home together. After Greg had gone, it was the only place that Rowan could bear to be. Although it had been their dream, Greg

had never actually lived in the house with her and so she wasn't going to be constantly reminded of his presence. Everything he'd owned she'd passed on to family, friends or charity shops and now, free of any physical reminders of the man who had been her husband, Rowan hoped to make a new life. 'Hoped' being the operative word. As yet she didn't seem to be getting very far.

The straw hat came bowling towards him as Evan lengthened his stride past her house. Another fierce gust of wind lifted it high above the broken wooden gate that leaned drunkenly on one rusty hinge and as he automatically reached out to grab it, he felt his sweater catch on one of the pointed wooden slats. Cursing softly, he unhooked himself, then raised his gaze to the slender figure in white drifting gracefully down the concrete path towards him. Evan's first glimpse of the woman's face without the protective shield of the hat told him that she was pretty, but unremarkable. As she drew nearer and he saw the tinge of pink shading her cheeks and the deep shyness reflected in soft, sherry-brown eyes he elevated his opinion to 'almost beautiful,' but his intention of keeping contact brief and strictly to the point didn't change. No sense in sending out the message that the aliens were friendly when Evan was feeling anything but.

'Thank you. Lucky for me you were passing just at the right moment.'

She flashed him a smile to accompany the soft, velvet voice that stroked over his nerve-endings, and a stab of heat caught him unawares. His black brows drew together in a scowl.

‘Hardly the weather for straw hats, I would have thought.’ As Evan handed over the recalcitrant hat he saw her smile quickly disappear to be replaced by a new, guarded look. Good. She’d got the message, then. Impatient to continue his walk, he turned away until her soft voice unexpectedly lured him back.

‘Look around you.’ Glancing up towards a cloudless blue sky, she was shielding her eyes from the almost too-bright glare of the sun. ‘It’s spring and soon it will be summer. Doesn’t that make you want to acknowledge it in some way?’

Glancing at her long, pale arms in her white sleeveless dress, Evan angled his hard jaw disdainfully. ‘I’d put on some more clothes if I were you. You’ll catch your death out here in this cold wind.’

Ignoring possibly the most forbidding glower she’d ever seen, Rowan defiantly stuck out her hand towards him. ‘I’m Rowan Hawkins. I moved in a few weeks ago and I’m very pleased to meet you. I was wondering when I’d meet my neighbours. Have you been away on holiday?’

‘Look...what exactly do you want from me?’

Stunned, Rowan nervously licked her lips. ‘I beg your pardon?’

‘If you’re expecting me to be all cosy and neighbourly then I’d like to set the record straight right now. I’m not the cosy or neighbourly type, Miss Hawkins, so save that annoyingly sunny smile of yours for someone else who might appreciate it. Do I make myself clear?’

Saying no more, Evan proceeded down the road, his broad

shoulders squared against the fierce breeze that had gathered strength as they'd exchanged words, his hands dug deep into his jeans pockets. Watching him go, his long-legged stride carrying him purposefully away, Rowan felt her stomach sink like a stone. What an arrogant, unpleasant man! The hostility in those startling green eyes of his had genuinely shocked her. She wasn't used to eliciting such animosity in people and now, when she was feeling possibly at her most fragile, it was a double blow. That darkly handsome face of his certainly didn't invite a repeat introduction at a later date, and she would just have to console herself that she'd found out how unpleasant he was sooner rather than later. At least now she would be able to give him a wide berth when she saw him again. Trust her luck to live next door to a man who would make Genghis Khan seem like your average friendly neighbour!

Glancing down at the straw hat clenched tightly between her fingers, Rowan drew her softly shaped brows together in an anxious frown. Joking aside, how was she supposed to make a new start when even her closest neighbour didn't want to know her? With no heart to continue her pitiful attempt at gardening, she turned towards the house with a purposeful stride of her own—feeling not the slightest bit of remorse when she banged the front door noisily shut behind her.

The sound of Rowan Hawkins' broken gate swinging eerily back and forth on its solitary hinge damn near drove Evan to distraction that night. Unable to find sanctuary from his foul

mood in sleep, he pushed to his feet, dragged back the filmy gauze curtain from the window that overlooked the moonlit garden next door, then glared at the offending gate as though his gaze alone could make it burst into flames.

Trouble was, it wasn't just the gate. Even the slightest thing seemed to irritate him out of all proportion these days. Anyway, you'd think her husband or boyfriend would fix the damn thing for her. She certainly didn't strike him as the type of woman who'd be happy to get her hands dirty doing anything practical like DIY. And who the hell dressed in white to do gardening? The woman clearly didn't have the sense that she was born with. Annoyed that his pretty neighbour was occupying more of his thoughts than she ought to be, Evan stalked into the kitchen to make a drink. When he discovered he was out of coffee his frustrated curse punctuated the air. Tunnelling his fingers through black hair, that if left long would have a distinct wave in it, he shut his eyes for a moment in a bid to calm down, but failed miserably as a stray memory of his ex-wife infiltrated its way stealthily into his mind. If Rebecca hadn't stung him for most of his wealth in their divorce settlement, he wouldn't have spent the past two years working himself into the ground to build up his fitness business again. Two gruelling years when he had sacrificed damn near everything—his home, his friends, his social life—to claw back most of what he had lost. It was testament to his blind single-mindedness that he had succeeded. The business was doing even better than ever. With over twenty

fitness outlets all bearing the Evan Cameron name dotted round the country, he could afford to take things a little easier now. When he hadn't done any such thing, a three-week bout of influenza had made the decision to slow down for him. Slow down? Evan grimaced bitterly at the thought. Bring him to his knees, more like. In all his thirty-seven years he had never been so ill or so mentally and physically battle-scarred. To tell the truth, it had scared him rigid. How ironic that a man who promoted health and fitness had succumbed to illness all because of self-neglect.

Forcing himself to breathe more evenly, Evan opened a cupboard above the plain white counter in search of a malt drink. He should know better than to crave caffeine in the middle of the night, anyway. Five minutes later, his mood slightly improved and his drink made, he sought out the big, squashy sofa in the comfortably furnished living-room then reached for the remote and switched on the TV. As he strove to concentrate on yet another rerun of *The African Queen* unfolding before him, he tried to blot out the sound of Rowan Hawkins' rickety gate creaking noisily back and forth.

Rowan was attempting to replace the rusty hinges on the gate. Dressed in jeans and a skinny-rib red sweater, her glossy brown hair scooped back into a pony-tail, she tried in vain to unscrew the tightly embedded steel screw in the one remaining hinge. Trouble was, her hands were freezing. The sun was shining but the icy wind cut like a razor and she could barely get enough

leverage on the screwdriver to turn the thing at all. ‘Damn!’

Could anyone blame her if she felt like sitting there and crying like a baby? First she’d discovered she’d acquired a Neanderthal for a neighbour, and second she’d learned that ‘do it yourself’ was definitely not her natural province. She would just have to spend some of the small legacy Greg had left her after paying for the house on funding some urgently needed jobs that needed doing round the place. Like this gate. It should have been so simple. It looked simple, Rowan reflected, as her brow knit in frustration. But right now splitting the atom might be simpler.

‘Having trouble?’

Rowan glanced up in shock at the deep, masculine voice and heat rushed into her body as if she’d been dropped into a vat of hot water. Frosty eyes the colour of green ice stared back at her with disconcerting directness. Despite a helpless stirring of rage swirling deep in her belly, she couldn’t help but be compelled to study the tough male visage. He was without a doubt commandingly masculine yet at the same time beautiful, and Rowan was even more disturbed by him than she had been on their first encounter—when he’d grudgingly halted the escape of her wayward straw hat. But, all the same, she’d be damned if she would give him the satisfaction of thinking she was some kind of helpless little woman who didn’t know what she was doing.

‘I’m fine, thank you.’

Laying down the screwdriver, she rubbed her hands briskly together to get the circulation flowing back into her cramped

fingers, deliberately keeping her expression carefully blank.

‘That damn gate of yours kept me awake all night with its creaking.’ Folding his arms across a chest that was disconcertingly wide, with muscles like steel beneath his black sweater if the strongly corded sinews in his forearms were anything to go by, Rowan’s hostile neighbour presented her with yet another forbidding scowl.

‘Why do you think I’m trying to fix it? It kept me awake too.’ That and another awful nightmare about Greg walking out in front of that car...

‘So you know what you’re doing, then?’

She thought she saw just a hint of a smile touch those austere-looking lips of his, but then told herself she must be mistaken. Something told her that smiles from this man would be as unlikely as honeysuckle growing in the Arctic. Anyhow, she was too busy being incensed by that superior, condescending tone of his to care one way or the other.

‘Frankly, Mr Whatever-Your-Name-Is, it’s none of your business. Now, I’d really appreciate it if you’d just leave me alone and let me get on with it.’

‘Evan Cameron.’

‘What?’ Rowan blinked up at him.

‘My name. It’s Evan Cameron.’ But don’t get your hopes up. Just because I’ve told you my name it doesn’t mean we’re going to be friends. She heard the words echo through her head even though he hadn’t actually voiced them.

‘Fine. Good. I’ll know who you are if anyone knocks on my door by mistake, then.’ Her fingers curled around the screwdriver again and determinedly she trained all her concentration on trying to undo the obstinate screw.

‘Give it to me.’

‘What?’

The screwdriver was deftly removed from between her freezing-cold fingers before she even knew what was happening. Shocked by the contact of his larger, rougher hand brushing against hers, Rowan stood up to her full five feet five inches and glared at the black-haired whipcord-lean specimen of forbidding male towering over her.

‘Why don’t you get inside in the warm and I’ll see to this?’

If he’d meant to sound solicitous of her welfare all of a sudden, Rowan itched to tell him that he’d failed. Her creaking gate had annoyed him, that was all, and he was anxious to get it fixed so he wouldn’t have to endure another sleepless night because of it. Another woman might be grateful he was going to fix it at all and save her a job, but not Rowan. As far as she was concerned, if someone couldn’t offer help with a good heart then it wasn’t really help at all. She’d rather blunder on under her own steam and make a pig’s ear of the job than allow some hostile male with an overstated sense of his own machismo to take charge.

‘I didn’t ask for your help and neither do I require it, Mr Cameron. I’m sure you have better things to do than stand out here in the cold and fix my annoying gate on a Sunday morning.’

Holding out her hand, Rowan tried to ignore the thundering of her heart as her own soft brown eyes duelled with frosty green. ‘I’d like my screwdriver back, please.’

‘You got a man about the house, Ms Hawkins?’

‘That’s none of your business. And before you say anything else, don’t you dare stand there and condescend to treat me like some vacuous little female who doesn’t know one end of a power tool from another, because I—’

‘Do you?’ Evan’s lips twitched into a smile before he could help it.

Her shoulders stiffening in resentment, Rowan glared in disbelief. ‘Do I what?’

‘Know one end of a power tool from another?’

‘This is ridiculous! Give me my screwdriver and just go. Please go!’

‘Please yourself.’ Shrugging those broad shoulders of his as if he really didn’t give a damn, Evan returned the tool to her outstretched hand. He turned to walk away, then stopped and glanced back for a few disturbing seconds, his cool gaze sizing Rowan up as if he definitely found her wanting in the physical department. ‘Funny how the phrase “cutting off your nose to spite your face” springs to mind. Fix that gate, Ms Hawkins, or I’ll be knocking on your door in the middle of the night so that you can share my night-time torment.’

And with that he walked away, as if he were some arrogant lord of the manor and she a mere peasant trespassing on his land.

Giving vent to her fury, Rowan jammed the screwdriver back into the screw and nearly howled in pain when it slipped and almost took the skin off her thumb.

Two hours later, her belly grumbling for lunch and her body stiff with cold, Rowan got up off her knees and had to admit defeat. Two hours...two hours, for God's sake! And that damn hinge still wouldn't budge. As she hurried back up the path towards the house, she glanced surreptitiously at her neighbour's windows. Satisfied that she wasn't being observed, she rushed inside and carefully shut the door behind her. Ten minutes later, phone directory in one hand and a steaming mug of hot chocolate in the other to warm her, Rowan sat herself down at the circular pine kitchen table with the telephone to see if she could locate a nearby odd-job man. She was still seething from Evan Cameron's parting remark—'night-time torment' indeed! She was just about to pick up the phone to punch out a number when the melodic sound of the doorbell trilled ominously through the house.

'You've got guts, I'll give you that.'

'Meaning?'

Bristling at the humour in Evan Cameron's previously glacial green eyes as his awesome physique dominated her doorway, Rowan didn't know how she resisted the urge to slap that smirk clean off his wretchedly handsome face.

'For two hours now I've watched you struggle with that hinge in the cold and wind, and, whatever I think of your misguided stubbornness to prove a point, I've got to respect the fact that

you didn't give up trying. Let me put you out of your misery and mend the gate for you, then I promise I won't bother you again.'

CHAPTER TWO

‘WHAT does it take to get through that thick skull of yours?’ Rowan heard herself demand. ‘I don’t want you to fix my gate. If I can’t fix it myself then I’d rather any other man in the world fixed it than you!’

The woman was even more stubborn than he’d thought. Evan knew he was mostly to blame for her current animosity towards him, but still he’d gone to her house with the best of intentions, and was it his fault if she refused to see that it made utter sense for him to fix her broken gate? She’d said she’d rather ‘any other man in the world’ fix it than him. Perhaps there wasn’t a husband or boyfriend around, then? There must be a good reason she was trying to repair the damn thing herself.

His green eyes narrowed with reluctant interest. In her floaty white dress of yesterday Rowan Hawkins had looked small and unbelievably slender. Today, in tight black jeans and a figure-hugging red sweater, Evan could see she had curves in plenty. His gaze was momentarily distracted by the angry rise and fall of her eye-catching breasts beneath her sweater and he cursed the inevitable reaction low in his groin. Despite his purely male response she really wasn’t his type at all. He liked his women taller and on the willowy side. He especially wasn’t attracted to women with that lost look in their pretty brown eyes, or women who thought it was an infringement of their human rights if a

man so much as held a door open for them—never mind offered to mend broken gates.

‘Fine.’

Only it wasn’t fine. Not really. There was still the little matter of the creaking gate potentially keeping him awake for a second night in a row. The wind coming in off the sea was still fierce, and even now the damn thing was squeaking for all it was worth. If it carried on any longer he’d be fit to be tied. ‘Perhaps you could get your husband to fix it, then?’

Evan knew by the sudden shadows that crept into her eyes that he’d said the wrong thing. He’d deliberately baited her just for the hell of it. Oh, why hadn’t he just left well enough alone and walked away? He was the one who’d told her he wasn’t the neighbourly sort and now he was annoying himself with his dogged persistence in trying to win a response from her.

‘I don’t have a husband.’

‘Not the end of the world.’ Shrugging, Evan dug his hands into his jeans pockets, wondering how he could tactfully withdraw from the pain that was all too evident in her soft brown gaze. ‘You’re probably better off without one. I can’t say the married state is one I’d recommend.’

‘Really? Your cold cynicism can’t win you many friends, Mr Cameron. For your information, my husband was killed in a road accident. I loved him with all my heart and miss him like you can’t begin to imagine, so how do you figure that I’m better off without him?’

Her voice breaking on a sob, Rowan retreated, stricken, behind the solid wooden door with its peeling white paint and the sound of it slamming reverberated through Evan's skull like cannon fire. For a long moment he simply didn't move. Of all the crass, tactless, supremely stupid things that had ever come out of his mouth, his last comment to Rowan was probably the worst. Now not only did he loathe his own apparent inability to be even the smallest bit sensitive to a woman who was clearly in pain, but he also detested the unhappy knack he'd acquired in the past two years of distancing himself emotionally from the rest of the human race. Since Rebecca had done her worst it had been Evan's safety valve, but now he despised himself for allowing it to become a habit.

He considered knocking on Rowan's door again to apologise, but realised that under the circumstances she'd probably just tell him to go to hell. Too late, he was there already... He clicked his tongue and backtracked down the path to stare down at the offending gate with a rueful shake of his head.

An hour later he had it mended, new hinges and all. The curtain at one of Rowan's front windows twitched slightly as Evan stood up, but he deliberately glanced away, stretching his arms high above his head to ease out the cramp in his muscles before gathering up his tools. He had no intention of waiting around for acknowledgement of what he'd done—not that he expected it. Instead, closing the gate smartly behind him with a satisfying click, he strode back down the path to his own house and headed

straight for the television remote in the living-room. He'd drown out the painful self-recrimination tumbling around in his head with the athletics meet that the BBC were broadcasting and hopefully forget about everything else but the pursuit of athletic excellence and competing with the best.

Her fingers embedded in dough, Rowan paused in her energetic kneading to stare out the window at her poor, bedraggled garden. The grass was almost bald in places and in others it grew wild and free, vying with the weeds for precedence. She'd have to lay some new turf if she wanted a lawn, but first she needed to tackle those weeds and cut the wild grass down to a more manageable length. On a positive note, there was plenty to delight the eye as well. Little clumps of sunny primula and bunches of bright yellow daffodils swayed in the breeze, and there were even a few dainty bluebells stating their presence amongst the green.

What had possessed Evan Cameron to fix her creaking gate after everything she'd said? For the umpteenth time that afternoon, Rowan's thoughts gravitated back to him. Had he felt guilty when she'd told him that her husband was dead? No. The man simply didn't seem capable of such a human emotion. Clearly he just hadn't been able to endure another night's broken sleep, that was all. He'd simply been looking after his own interests when he'd decided to assume the role of odd-job man. Well, OK...as long as he didn't expect her to be grateful. From now on she really would give him a wide berth and she certainly

wouldn't waste another one of her 'annoyingly sunny' smiles on him again, even if he begged her. Which, of course, he wouldn't. A man who looked like Evan Cameron would never have to beg a woman for anything—that was if they were prepared to overlook the unrelenting chill in those fascinating green eyes of his. What was his story, she wondered. What had put the strain around that austere mouth? The tiny grooves in that otherwise smooth, almost olive skin of his? And why would a man like him want to bury himself in the depths of the countryside like some kind of hermit?

'Think about something else, why don't you?' Incensed with herself for spending too much time dwelling on the man, Rowan pounded the innocent dough with more force than was strictly necessary. But there was great satisfaction in having an unexpected outlet for the rage that had been boiling inside her since Evan Cameron's offensive remarks that morning. If the man were hanging off the edge of a cliff she wouldn't raise one finger to help him. No. She'd just smile sweetly and wave goodbye. As far as Rowan was concerned, he could plummet into oblivion and good riddance!

Half an hour later, a steak and kidney pie simmering in the oven and the washing-up done and put away, Rowan returned to her living-room to sort through some old photographs. She'd been putting off the task since she moved into the cottage a month ago, but now there was no reason—except maybe fear—for her not doing it. She'd already decided there were too

many pictures for her to keep, and anyway, why did she want reminders of what Greg had looked like? His beloved features were imprinted on her heart for always. Looking at photographs of happier times would only bring her pain, and it wasn't as if she had children to keep them for. A pulse throbbed in her temple at the thought.

Settling the two old-fashioned biscuit tins side by side on the dark wood table, Rowan carefully prised off the lid of one of them, then, taking a deep, shuddering breath to steel herself, picked up a handful of photographs and studied them. Now, there was a man who had known how to smile. First picture she'd handled and there was Greg, grinning cheerfully into her camera, for once happy to be in front of the lens instead of behind it. It had been taken on a stolen day out at the seaside, and the pair of them had behaved like a couple of carefree children. Eating huge ice creams as they strolled along the promenade, having fun at the small fairground, then eating fish and chips for their tea as they sat on the sand and watched the tide come in, they'd honestly believed they had a wonderful future in prospect.

Her throat tightening with a now familiar ache, Rowan stroked the glossy picture, her heart swelling with love and pride at the man she had loved and lost. Greg had had a nice face. Not handsome or good-looking, but a good face that people had been instantly drawn to. His sunny, benevolent nature hadn't disappointed either. At his funeral there had been friends and colleagues in plenty along with family to mourn his untimely

passing.

Rowan's mind drifted along on a sea of remembrance. She could hardly believe that almost seven months had gone by since the accident. After spending the first three months after Greg's death in a kind of numbed existence, where she'd got up, washed, dressed, ate breakfast and gone to work, it had slowly dawned on her that she should sell the house in Battersea. Instead, she would take up residence in their 'nest egg'—the dream cottage that they had bought in wild and beautiful Pembrokeshire. All of a sudden she had known a desperate desire to escape the noisy, gridlocked city and take refuge in some peace and quiet.

Now that she was here, she couldn't help wondering if she had bitten off more than she could chew. So much needed to be done, and Rowan was a city girl who had lived in London all her life. Working as a production assistant for a busy, up-and-coming television company, she hadn't had time to develop an interest in 'do it yourself' and neither, bless him, had Greg. He had either been away for long periods on assignments all over the world or at the studio doing important research for his next job. Sighing as she glanced around at the dilapidated shelves that needed painting and repositioning, the wooden floor that needed sanding down and varnishing before she could adorn it with the beautiful rugs Greg had brought back from his travels, Rowan knew she would seriously have to get down to learning how to do some of these jobs herself. If she was going to take a whole year out of work as she'd planned, then she couldn't afford to pay

workmen to do all the jobs that needed doing round the house to make it habitable.

Already she felt that she'd failed in some way because Evan Cameron had had to come to her rescue and fix her damn creaky gate. Well, she'd show him! That was the last time he was going to treat her like some dull-witted, pathetic female who didn't have a clue how to do anything more complicated than paint her toenails! Suddenly realising that sorting through her photographs wasn't the task that most needed doing after all, Rowan dropped the pictures back into their tin and jammed the lid down hard. As the delicious aroma of cooking meat pie started to pervade the house, she jumped up and disappeared into her bedroom to rummage through her bookshelves for the two second-hand books she had purchased a week ago on home decorating and 'Do It Yourself for the Enthusiastic Beginner'.

His black hair sleek from his shower and a striped bath towel secured around his toned-hard middle, Evan took his time crossing the room to get to the ringing telephone. Only two people—as far as he was aware—knew his whereabouts. Right now, the mood he was in, he didn't relish speaking to either of them.

'Yes?' He deliberately didn't announce his name or number, and he most definitely didn't put out a vibe that came anywhere close to friendly.

'Evan, is that you?' rejoined a familiar female voice.

'Beth,' he sighed, and wondered how soon he could bring the

call to an end without being rude. Five years younger than her big brother, his sister still acted like a mother hen around him. ‘How are the kids?’

‘Luke and Alex are fine. It’s not them I’m concerned about, as well you know.’

‘And from that do I deduce that I’m the focus of all your loving concern?’

‘It’s not a joke, Evan. A couple of months ago you nearly died of the flu! It’s only natural that I want to keep in touch to make sure everything’s all right. Are you eating OK? I know you’re big on all that nutritional stuff for fitness, but are you getting enough fresh fruit and veg? You know there’s that handy little greengrocers in the village, don’t you? Their stuff is pretty good, and they even stock things like nuts and seeds.’

‘Thanks for the tip.’

‘Don’t be sarcastic.’

‘I’m not.’ Warily sinking down into a nearby armchair, Evan leaned back against the flattened cushions and stared blankly at the hand that he’d rested against his thigh. It was shaking. Ever so slightly, but shaking just the same. He hadn’t told Beth that he’d had the shakes for several months now. They had started even before he’d been struck down with flu. A common symptom of severe stress, his doctor had explained. Flexing his fingers, Evan tried to convince himself he wasn’t concerned. The doctor had advised rest and that was what he was doing. No lifting weights, no strenuous exercise and definitely no jogging. Swimming and

walking were, however, recommended. Thank God for that or else he'd go completely crazy.

'Evan?' Shrill with worry, Beth's voice jerked him back to the present.

'It's OK. I'm still here.'

'You don't sound very happy, that's all.'

'Don't read too much into it. Nobody's loved me yet for my great sense of humour.'

'I feel like I ought to come down for a visit, make sure you're looking after yourself. Maybe I could stay for a couple of days without the kids? I could ask Paul's mum to have them.'

Evan sat up straight. 'No offence, Beth, but I really don't want any visitors—nor do I need looking after. All I need is some time to get my head together. I'll maybe ring you in a few days and let you know how I'm doing, OK?' It was an effort to keep the strain out of his voice but he hoped he managed it. The last thing he needed right now was for his baby sister to descend on him and take it upon herself to look after him. Besides, he wasn't feeling up to conversation with anyone. Not yet. His last attempt with Rowan Hawkins next door had failed miserably and he was in no hurry to repeat the experience any time soon.

'Well, if you're sure you're all right?'

'I'm fine, Beth. Really.'

'Well, you know where I am if you need me. By the way, I hope you've told them at work that you're not to be disturbed?'

Evan recalled his last conversation with Mike, his second

in command. ‘Don’t hesitate to call me if you’re unsure about something or if anything important comes up.’ Mike had given him a cursory nod in reply, which told Evan that the man was ever so slightly offended that Evan clearly didn’t trust him enough to take charge. Which wasn’t true at all. It was just that Evan couldn’t help but feel redundant when he wasn’t allowed to be in control. If his three-week battle with flu hadn’t left him with chronic fatigue and muscle ache, he’d probably be back at work now—even against doctor’s orders.

‘Mike won’t call me unless he really has to.’ He pushed to his feet, impatient to bring the call to an end.

‘I suppose I’ll just have to trust that you won’t do anything foolish, then, like working out or undertaking a twenty-mile hike or something stupid like that.’

‘No chance.’ The thought that he couldn’t physically do either of those things right now was like a spear through his heart. It emasculated him somehow...made him feel less like a man, when previously he’d been so awesomely fit. Suddenly shivering with the cold, Evan was anxious for Beth to be gone so he could dress.

‘See you, then.’

‘Bye, sis. Give the boys a hug for me.’

Rowan knew it was a stupid thing to do but, knowing she was driving into town for groceries and hardware supplies, she couldn’t help but believe it was rude not to ask her neighbour if he needed anything. She hadn’t seen him around for a few

days, but his car—a brand-spanking-new Land Rover—was still parked outside. In her hands she carried a peace offering: a plastic container filled with newly baked fruit scones. Well, she reasoned, she couldn't eat them all herself, could she? And everyone knew that scones didn't freeze well.

Lifting the heavy brass knocker, Rowan rapped smartly on his door before she lost her nerve, all the while her heartbeat thudding like the knell of doom inside her chest. Hearing footsteps approach, she steeled herself as Evan opened the door. There was a startled shift in his unsettling green eyes as he silently regarded her and Rowan stood mesmerised, unable to think of even one thing to say. Dressed in faded blue jeans with a rip in one knee and a black T-shirt, Evan Cameron's hard, fit body elevated the ordinary, everyday clothing to something else entirely...something almost illicit, leaning heavily towards the dangerously sexual. For long, worrying seconds Rowan was completely transfixed by the sight of those bulging, taut biceps, with their straining sinews that his scant clothing drew immediate attention to. Something in the pit of her stomach sizzled like coals on a barbecue and sucked all the moisture from her mouth.

'I—I thought you might like some of these.' She pressed the plastic container into his hands, then quickly retreated. 'Scones. I just made them.'

Evan silently contemplated the box he'd unwittingly accepted, then raised his gaze to pin Rowan to the spot. Her cheeks were arrestingly rosy and her pretty brown eyes shy and uncertain. For

the life of him Evan didn't have a clue why she would want to present him with the results of her baking—not after their last encounter.

‘Thanks.’

Was that all he was going to say? Rowan knew a moment of sheer blind panic. What on earth had possessed her to approach the man again? It should have been obvious to a blind woman that he clearly didn't want anything to do with her.

‘You're welcome.’ Her slim shoulders shrugged beneath her green waxed jacket. ‘I'm going into town to do some shopping. I wondered if you needed anything?’

‘I only repaired your gate, Ms Hawkins—not rescued you from drowning.’

She felt heat rush to her cheeks in a hot flood. He was smiling, damn him! Looking at her like the epitome of the Big Bad Wolf, with his slightly dishevelled black hair and even blacker brows. No man had ever gazed upon her in such a...licentious manner before. What on earth was she supposed to do now?

‘I'm quite aware of that. I know you're not interested in being “neighbourly,” as you put it, but I hadn't seen you around for a couple of days and thought you might be unwell or something. In which case you might—you might need me to...’ Her words dwindled to silence as Evan continued to study her as if she was suddenly the most interesting woman on the planet. Helplessly, her gaze gravitated back to his biceps. Oh, why couldn't the man take pity and go and put on a sweater?

‘There’s nothing I need right now.’ His voice was almost akin to a honeyed growl and Rowan nearly tripped over her own feet in her haste to engineer some distance between them. ‘But thanks for thinking of me...and for these.’ He held up the box and gave it a little shake.

‘Anyway.’ Hitching the strap of her black leather bag more securely onto her shoulder, Rowan pushed back a mutinous strand of hair that had flicked across her face. ‘I’d better go. Lots to do.’

‘Don’t let me keep you,’ Evan said behind her as she scurried back down the path. Was it her fevered imagination or had he laced the innocent-sounding comment with a taunt?

Inside, Evan leant back against the door and prised the lid off the plastic box. The mouthwatering aroma of still-warm baking drifted tantalisingly beneath his nose.

‘Hmm.’ Smiling to himself, he closed the lid. ‘You do know how to tempt a man, pretty little Rowan. I wonder what other delights you’re capable of surprising a man with...apart from your cooking, that is?’

Alarmed to find himself pleasantly aroused, Evan strode irritably into the kitchen, promising himself that from now on he’d give the arresting little widow zero encouragement when it came to getting over-friendly. He didn’t want anyone invading his self-imposed isolation, and right now he had no use for a woman who was nursing a hurt he couldn’t begin to imagine how to alleviate. But as he flipped open the plastic container and helped

himself to a warm, melting scone, Evan's fertile imagination made a liar of that last statement. Unbidden, the thought of Rowan warming his bed and helping to tangle his sheets with that sweet, curvy body of hers stole into his mind like forbidden fruit...all the more exciting because under the circumstances the very idea was totally outrageous.

CHAPTER THREE

HER shopping done, Rowan didn't rush to get back home. Instead she found a welcoming little bistro tucked away in a cobblestoned side-street and treated herself to fresh salmon cakes with a lemon butter sauce and a glass of wine. Satisfied after her meal, she paid her bill and stepped out into the surprisingly mild spring evening. By the time she got into her car and drove out of the town, back onto the country roads, she was feeling pleasantly tired and looking forward to a peaceful evening curled up on the couch with her soft cashmere throw and a book. In the boot of her car were her grocery shopping and two big carrier-bags full of handy items for sprucing up the cottage. The next day she planned to get cracking on her home improvements, telling herself she'd start by removing all the pine shelves in the living-room and giving them a cheerful coat of paint.

When she pulled up in front of the cottage, it was all she could do to unlock the boot and unload her shopping, she was so tired. But as she busied herself standing the bags side by side on the road, the sound of footsteps approaching made her spin round in alarm. Attired in dark jeans and a black polo-necked sweater, Evan Cameron drew up beside Rowan and blew into his hands. The ensuing steam from his breath curled up into the night. The scent of the sea was all around him and he had clearly been walking on the beach. Beads of perspiration stood out on his

lightly grooved brow but his imperious green gaze was decidedly cool when Rowan automatically smiled her surprise.

‘Oh. It’s you. It’s a lovely evening for a walk, isn’t it?’

His gaze flicked over her figure in her waxed jacket and long black skirt and boots. Her soft brown hair was loose, blowing around her face in the breeze, her cheeks pink like two rosy apples. There was something wholesome about her that pricked at Evan’s conscience, something that made his frustration with himself and the current limitations of his body hard to bear. He’d undertaken a simple half-hour walk to the beach and back and his heart was racing as if he’d run a marathon. His irritation tightened like a noose around his neck as he studied Rowan.

‘What are you trying to do, Ms Hawkins? Change my mind about you? I told you I wasn’t interested in being neighbourly yet you seem to persist in the idea that you can somehow win me over. First it’s with your baking—and next?’ His insolent stare left Rowan in no doubt as to his meaning. Her body went hot and cold all at once. If she could have disappeared inside her coat right then and hidden, she would have.

‘I don’t know what you’re talking about, Mr Cameron. Do you think I’m so desperate I would do anything to cultivate a friendship with you? I may be a widow but I’d rather spend fifty years locked up in a windowless cell than spend any more time than I could help in your hateful company!’

He laughed, and the cold, harsh sound splintered through the air like ice cracking on a frozen lake. Rowan winced.

‘Good.’ Evan nodded his dark head as if he had her measure. ‘It’s good to know you’re not as meek as you appear. Believe me, Rowan, you really would be better off being locked up in a windowless cell than spending time in my company. If you don’t believe me, try having a conversation about it with my ex-wife. She’ll put you right.’

Stunned by his bitter response, Rowan felt her own reply stall in her throat. Her smile long gone, her liquid brown eyes were round with hurt as they regarded him.

‘I’m sorry if you feel I’ve been a nuisance. Please be assured I won’t be bothering you again. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I have to get my shopping inside.’

She heard him curse beneath his breath, but she couldn’t tell if it was directed at her or at himself. Either way, he didn’t hang around for her to find out. When Rowan straightened from lifting her bags, he was already opening the gate to his own cottage and sprinting up the path. Seconds later the sound of his door slamming echoed through the night like a retort from a rifle.

Rowan couldn’t get to sleep. Shaky and angry since Evan’s verbal attack on her attempt at friendliness earlier, she now lay awake with the lamp turned on, her book opened unread by her side and her eyes gritty with fatigue because sleep eluded her. What was it about her that the man disliked so much? He’d mentioned an ex-wife. Was it Rowan’s misfortune to remind him of her in some way? Had their parting been so acrimonious that he still harboured a grudge against the woman?

Her thoughts ran on and on, finding no resolution from her endless speculation about the cold, autocratic man who lived next door—how could it, when her day had been completely spoiled by her confrontation with him? Drawing her knees up to her chest, she folded her arms around them with a sigh. If only Greg were here. He'd know just what to say to comfort her. He'd probably pull her head down onto his chest, stroke her hair and tell her she shouldn't waste another moment's anxiety on Evan Cameron because clearly the man was an ignorant peasant and it was his loss if he didn't want to be neighbourly. He'd follow up this statement with some witty observation about the man's character that would make Rowan laugh. Oh, how she missed Greg's laughter. He'd always had a natural ability to see the brighter side of life even when things appeared dire. She had envied him that. She had always been the serious one, the one urging caution, when Greg merely threw caution to the wind and laughed in its face. He should be here with her now, talking over the improvements they were going to make on the house together. Instead...instead...

Rowan pushed off the bed and swept her hand through her hair, wishing she could sweep away the dark thoughts racing through her mind as easily. Pacing up and down across the thick patterned carpet that she would replace just as soon as she could afford to, she swallowed down the painful ache in her throat and refused to let the tears that were threatening come. OK, so she was a widow—she wasn't the first woman in the world

who had suffered the loss of a husband and, dear God, she wouldn't be the last. If all those other women could survive the hurt and desolation, then so could Rowan. She'd come this far without falling to pieces, hadn't she? And what exactly had Evan Cameron meant when he'd said it was good she wasn't as meek as she appeared? The mere thought of the man made her feel about as meek as a rampaging rhinoceros! She had a good mind to knock on his door right now and verbally rip his arrogant head off—then he might really discover what 'night-time torment' meant!

But, of course, she would do no such thing. He'd probably coolly brush her off with that disdainful look that came so naturally, or, worse, phone the police and tell them he had a mad woman living next door and could they please come and lock her up in a cell for the night so he could get some sleep? Frustration and anger eating her up, Rowan grabbed her robe and headed straight for the kitchen. Switching on the lights, then opening the fridge, she carefully extracted the fruit pie she'd made earlier when she'd baked her batch of scones. Carrying it to the small pine table set in an alcove, she cut herself a generous wedge and bit into it with tears streaming hotly from her eyes and sliding helplessly into her mouth.

Staring at the two small but stinging cuts he'd inadvertently made at the edge of his jaw with his razor, Evan winced as he pressed his fingers to them to momentarily staunch the thick ooze of blood. He hadn't had the shakes this morning, thank God, but his concentration was shot to hell anyway. He'd been evil to the

pretty little widow next door and he wasn't proud of the fact. If Beth had borne witness to his boorishness she would probably have been ashamed to call herself his sister. Damn it, he was ashamed of his outlandish behaviour himself! Venting his spleen on Rowan just because he wasn't the man he'd used to be was unforgivable. Her hurt brown eyes had stared back at him as if he were a careless motorist who'd just run over her puppy.

Meeting his sombre reflection in the bathroom mirror, Evan let loose a ripe curse. With the cuts on his jaw oozing blood and his black brows drawn together giving him a decidedly forbidding expression, all he needed was a black eye-patch and some dark stubble round his chin and he'd resemble Blackbeard the Pirate. If he were in Rowan's shoes, he'd give himself a very wide berth indeed.

But just the same, he wasn't going to apologise. Hadn't Evan already told her in more ways than one that he wasn't going to encourage her acquaintance? Was the woman a glutton for punishment, giving him those shy, girlish smiles of hers that would likely melt a heart of stone? Except his heart, of course. As he moved back into his bedroom to raid his wardrobe for clothes, he mused that it wasn't his fault she was a widow and she was lonely. Any other man would probably want to take advantage of such a situation, but Evan knew better than to buy a whole load of trouble he could very well live without. It had taken two gruelling, hardworking years to get Rebecca out of his system and he was in no hurry to get involved with another woman—no

matter how attractive or appealing.

Yanking on his jeans, then pulling another black sweater down over his head, Evan made his way out to the kitchen in search of some breakfast. For some inexplicable reason he was extraordinarily hungry this morning, and that surprised him. His previously healthy appetite had dwindled to a quarter of what he normally ate since he'd had that damned flu. Opening the fridge, he withdrew a box of eggs, a packet of bacon and a punnet of tomatoes that he'd bought the previous weekend but which were still within their sell-by date. Then, rifling through overhead cupboards, he retrieved a family-sized frying-pan and set it with down with satisfaction on the cooker.

The smell of paint had given Rowan a headache. To counteract the effect, she'd carried the three pine shelves outside and propped them up against the faded wrought-iron bench that sat in the front garden. With her hair in a loose topknot, and suitably attired in old blue corduroys and a chunky-knit sweater of Greg's that she couldn't bring herself to give away, Rowan momentarily savoured the fresh country breeze that rustled by before carefully applying another coat of bright lilac paint to one of the shelves. Accidentally her gaze fell on Evan's smart blue Land Rover, parked outside the pretty whitewashed cottage where he lived, and she quickly withdrew it back to her painting before he spied her looking. Unless he'd walked down to the beach or the village he must still be in the house, she surmised. In which case, the lower the profile she kept—the better. The last thing in the world

she needed right now was a repeat performance of last night's horrible confrontation.

She'd been painting for almost an hour when she heard the door of the neighbouring cottage slam. As she automatically glanced across, Rowan's surprised, slightly panicked gaze locked with Evan's. When she looked away again, her pulse skittering like a nervous colt, she told herself to pay the man no attention and get back to what she was doing without giving him a second thought. Easier said than done when his footsteps seemed intent on heading her way...

'I'll come straight to the point.'

Rowan's gaze travelled from his black-booted feet all the way up those long, straight legs of his in dark blue denim, past the wide shoulders in his black sweater, finally arriving at the ominously serious expression currently fixed on his face. For the first time it wasn't his remarkable green eyes that instantly demanded her attention but the sexy little dimple in the centre of his well-defined jaw instead. Instantly, she rebuked herself for noticing such a thing.

'You'll come straight to the point about what?' she asked, affecting indifference. When he didn't reply immediately, she placed her dripping paintbrush carefully across the paint tin and waited for him to continue. He shifted from one lean hip to the other. 'I owe you an apology.'

'You do?' One slender brown eyebrow shot skywards and she couldn't help the sarcasm that dripped into her tone. In a million

years if someone had told her that the arrogant Evan Cameron would march up her path and tell her he owed her an apology she would have called them deluded.

‘It’s not your fault that I prefer my own company most of the time.’

‘This is an apology?’ Rocking back on her heels, Rowan stoically fought back the urge to grin. The man looked so uncomfortable it was painful. Clearly he didn’t find it easy to say those two relatively simple words ‘I’m sorry’. She suddenly felt desperately sad for his friends.

Spearing his fingers through the thick mane of dark hair that touched his collar, Evan shook his head. ‘You’re going to milk this for all its worth aren’t you?’ His voice was cold.

Deciding to put the poor man out of his misery, Rowan wiped her hands down her thighs in the corduroy trousers then rose carefully to her feet.

‘Forget it. I don’t need you to apologise. I understand perfectly why you behave the way you do. You value your privacy above all else. You wanted to be alone, and because my cottage has been empty for so long you naturally assumed it would stay empty. My presence has taken you by surprise. You don’t really want me here. I can understand that too. I probably moved here for the same reasons—to be alone, to hear myself think. But unlike you, Mr Cameron, however much I like my own company I don’t see any harm in passing the time of day with my fellow human beings. Sometimes it has positive benefits. Just a smile from

another person can totally lift my mood. I'm not asking you to move in with me or be my mentor—I didn't even ask you to mend my broken gate. I'm simply exchanging hello's or good morning's, nice, normal greetings that don't require anything other than a smile or a similar greeting in return. Nothing too challenging in that, wouldn't you agree?

Her little speech took him aback, and not just because there was a lot of truth in it. It was the passion in that usually soft, velvet voice that caught Evan by surprise. Suddenly he saw her in a different light. Clearly when this woman loved she did it wholeheartedly and without reservation. For some reason Evan experienced a shaft of pure envy of the man Rowan Hawkins had loved and lost. His gaze swept across her face, saw the rebellious glint reflected in those pretty brown eyes with their curling dark lashes, the man's sweater at least three sizes too big that swamped her slender frame and knew without doubt it had belonged to her husband. When she was alone in her bed at night, did she ache for him still?

Rowan wondered at the sudden surge of heat that shaded Evan's lean, hard jaw. Had she gone too far in speaking her mind the way she had? Had she made things worse instead of better? Expelling an impatient breath, she stared down forlornly at the tin of paint. A couple of drips from the brush had splashed onto the concrete path, creating two lilac splotches that resembled buttons. Raising her eyes to Evan's, she folded her arms defensively across her chest.

‘If you’ve nothing else to say then I really must get on. I wanted to get these shelves done before this afternoon because the forecast said rain.’

‘I’m sorry I was rude to you. I have my reasons for being the way I am but I should never have taken it out on you. Will you accept my apology?’

He looked desolate, Rowan realised in shock. Like a man who had lost everything with no possibility of ever getting it back. Knowing how that felt, she could more than sympathise.

‘Of course.’ She replied without hesitation and, as if to underline the words, accompanied them with a smile. A puzzled frown creased Evan’s handsome brow.

‘Just like that?’

‘Why not?’

‘You find it so easy to forgive?’

‘What’s the point in harbouring grudges against people? It only eats you up inside and kills all the joy. Why would I want that for myself?’

‘Why indeed?’ He found himself smiling back at her, oddly pleased when her shy brown eyes slid away as if she couldn’t handle his new-found pleasure in her company. ‘I’d better let you get on.’

He went to turn away, planning to lengthen his time spent walking on the beach by an extra twenty minutes. Why not? He was suddenly feeling more optimistic than he had in weeks.

‘I was going to offer you a cup of tea,’ Rowan said quickly,

‘unless, of course, you think that’s taking things a bit too far?’

Noting the suddenly humorous glint in her eyes, Evan found himself warming to the woman more than he believed was sensible. ‘A cup of tea would be great—can it wait until I get back from the beach?’

‘Sure.’ Her heartbeat galloping, Rowan couldn’t deny the swift surge of pleasure that invaded her insides at his smiling acceptance. Suddenly, even the prospect of rain that afternoon couldn’t dampen her spirits. It’s only a cup of tea, she told herself as she watched him stride back down her path onto the road. But it couldn’t hurt to offer him a slice of home-made apple pie to go with it, could it?

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