



*Charlotte Hawkes*

*The Surgeon's One-Night*

B A B Y



MILLS & BOON  
MEDICAL

**Charlotte Hawkes**

**The Surgeon's One-Night Baby**

A desire they can't resist...

## **A consequence they'll cherish forever**

Still reeling from her failed marriage, Archana Coates is ready to rediscover the vibrant, fun-loving woman she once was. So an unexpected encounter with her childhood crush, playboy surgeon Kaspar Athari, leads to temptation she can't resist... Then Archie arrives in LA—pregnant! And when she and Kaspar discover their baby is at risk, Archie will do anything it takes to fight for her new little family.

Born and raised on the Wirral Peninsula in England, **CHARLOTTE HAWKES** is mum to two intrepid boys who love her to play building block games with them and who object loudly to the amount of time she spends on the computer. When she isn't writing—or building with blocks—she is company director for a small Anglo/French construction company. Charlotte loves to hear from readers, and you can contact her at her website: [charlotte-hawkes.com](http://charlotte-hawkes.com).

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The Surgeon's One-Night Baby

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To Monty & Bart.

You make me laugh louder and love deeper.

xxx

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[CHAPTER ONE](#)

WITH MOUNTING HORROR, Archie stared out of the open aeroplane doors and three thousand five hundred feet down to the ground below her. As the penultimate static line jumper prepared to take his step out of the back of the plane, terror pinned her to the hard deck of the aircraft.

‘You’re up next, Archie.’ Her instructor’s words were more seen than heard as he yelled over the roar of the engines and the rushing wind.

‘I can’t. I can’t do it,’ she muttered desperately, but the sound

was whipped away, unheard. Thankfully.

Throughout her entire life, those had been the only words her beloved air force father had ever flatly refused to hear... *I can't*. She glanced down at her colourful 'Make Cancer Jump' skydiving suit and felt a hot prickle in her eyes.

Guilt and regret; they had made terrible companions these last five years.

*Whatever had happened to the bold, fun-loving, spirited Archana Coates of old? Even of six years ago? Back then she and her father would have jumped out of that door without a second thought. Now here she was, glued to the deck, unable to even inch her way forward.*

She didn't dare look over her shoulder. She was the last of her group of static line jumpers but there was still half a planeload of tandem skydivers all ready to ascend to their required altitude of ten thousand feet. They were just waiting for her to go.

*He was waiting for her to go.*

*Kaspar Athari.*

She'd tried to ignore him from the moment she'd spotted him that morning across the vast chasm of the training hangar. Just as she'd ignored the way something had kicked in her chest, and if she hadn't already known it had died the same day her father had—almost five years ago to the day—she might have been fooled into believing it was her heart.

Kaspar. The boy who had burst into her family's life when she'd been six and he'd been almost eight, and had turned things

upside down in the best way possible. For the seven years he hadn't just been her brother Robbie's best friend. He'd also been like a second brother to her, spending every school holiday from their boarding schools—thanks to Kaspar's money and her own father's career in the air force—with her family.

Or at least...mostly like a second brother. Even now, even here, she could feel the hot flush creep into her cheeks at the memory of childish crush she'd had on him that last year. She'd been thirteen and it had been the first year she'd been acutely aware that Kaspar wasn't a brother *at all*.

The same year his narcissist Hollywood royalty mother had finally tired of her latest husband and dragged herself and her son back to the States in the hope of kick-starting both their careers. But, though having once been one of the most heartbreaker child actors in Hollywood, thanks to a combination of his stunning blonde British mother and his striking, dark-haired Persian father, somewhere along the line Kaspar had turned his back on the industry.

Now he was a top surgeon who risked his life in former war zones and on the battlefield. Saving civilians and soldiers alike. Winning awards and medals at every turn, none of which he appeared to care a jot about. With the press hanging on his every choice.

'The Surgeon Prince of Persia', the press had dubbed him, as much for his bone-melting good looks as for his surgical skill.

And even though she'd devoured every last article, had known

he split his time between the US and the UK, had seen the Christmas card and US Army antique he'd sent her avid collector father every year without fail, she'd never seen Kaspar again in person. Until now.

Not that he'd even recognised her after all these years.

*'Archie. Are you ready?'*

Snapping her gaze back up to her instructor, who was still smiling encouragingly, she shook her head, half-incredulous that, even now, even here, Kaspar Athari had managed to consume her thoughts so easily. Especially when she hadn't thought of him very much at all over the intervening years.

*Yeah,* a voice inside her scoffed. *Right.*

But right now wasn't the time to go there. This skydive wasn't about him. It wasn't about anyone. Just herself. Just the fact that she'd spent the last five years, ever since her beloved father's death, ricocheting from one disaster to another, and today that all stopped. It was time. She just needed to make that leap. Literally.

Edging forward she somehow, miraculously, managed to summon the strength to push herself off her seat onto the metal floor, closer to the open hatch, and peer nervously down again.

The wind ripped at her, as though it could pull in even more different directions.

'I ca...' She began to mutter the refusal again but this time something stopped her from completing it.

It was time to regain her dignity. The life she'd somehow put on hold for the past five years since her father's death. In fact,

almost five years to the day since her fearlessness had seeped out of her like a punctured rubber dinghy in the middle of a wide, empty ocean.

‘I can do this,’ she told herself fiercely. Out loud. Safe in the knowledge that no one could hear her over the roar.

She wanted to make the jump. She *needed* to make it. Five years of mistakes and disappointments had to end today. From her marriage, which had been doomed from the start, to the baby daughter she had lost at eighteen weeks. Even the baby that her ex-husband and his new wife would bring into the world barely a month or so. It was time to stop being a victim. To erase this weak, pathetic shadow of a person that she’d somehow become and rediscover the fierce, happy woman she’d once been.

Sitting on the cold, metal floor, paralysed with fear, wasn’t part of the plan. And she hated herself for it. She reached out her arms and tried to shuffle across the floor on her bottom, but despite her best efforts her body refused to comply.

‘I *have* to do this,’ she choked out, desperately willing herself to move.

She was letting people down. She was letting herself down. She felt exposed, vulnerable, worthless.

Her head snapped around at the movement in her peripheral vision to see Kaspar edging his way through the plane. As if he knew exactly what was going on. As if the last fifteen years were falling away and they were once again the teenagers they’d been when she’d last seen him. As if he was still every inch the

superhero he'd always been to her, even when she'd been nothing more than the annoying kid sister.

She should be more shocked. Shouldn't she?

He couldn't be coming to her aid. He wasn't that boy any more.

So what was hammering in her chest harder than the vibration of the aircraft engines? Had he recognised her after all?

'Everything okay?' he yelled. Concerned but with no trace of recognition.

Archie stared helplessly, attempting to shake off the irrational hurt that needled her. Why *would* he recognise her? It had been fifteen years and she'd liked to think she no longer looked *quite* like the gangly kid she'd been when he'd last seen her. It wasn't even as though her name would mean much to him, even if he could hear it over the roar of the engines. Archie was a name she'd only settled on in her later teens, and she doubted he'd ever even realised her name was Archana. Like her family, he'd only ever called her 'Little Ant', in reference to the ant farm she'd had as a kid, and the way she'd been so proud of her undaunted, determined little pet colony.

He moved closer, his mouth nearer to her ear so that she imagined she could even feel his breath.

'You want to jump?'

'I *have* to jump, but...' she choked out quietly, not sure whether he could read her lips.

He nodded curtly in response, before turning to her instructor.

'She can come with me. I was doing a tandem jump but my

guy didn't even make it onto the plane.'

So Kaspar was an instructor here? Of course he was. What did the press call him? *Playboy...surgeon...adrenalin junkie.*

Articles waxed lyrical about his trekking in the Amazon, skiing down avalanche-prone mountains, or diving off hundred-foot-high cliffs into sparkling tropical waters. Being a skydiving instructor on his weekends off would be a cake walk to someone like Kaspar.

'You need to change harness.'

'Sorry?'

She didn't mean to flinch as his hand brushed her shoulder. It was instinctive. Consuming.

Now that her instructor had closed the door for the plane to ascend another six thousand feet or so, it was possible to hear each other without having to shout so loudly over the engines or the wind.

'The tandem's easier than the static line, and I'll run you through the basics, but you'll need to change harness.'

And then Kaspar was addressing her, for the first time in fifteen years. She stared at him intently, as though willing up some spark of recognition, even if it was only to realise she was the kid sister who'd bugged him and Robbie. The one who had tried to get her brother to let her in when Robbie had far rather push her out. The one who had taught her little words in Persian, and chastised Robbie when he'd taught her swear words.

She gazed and, for a moment, she thought he stared back.

Holding eye contact that fraction longer than necessary. It was as though the very blood was stilling in her veins, her body hanging for a split second. Everything seemed to tilt, to change colour.

But then he looked away, searching for the right harness, and she realised that moment had only existed in her own head. She could only watch in silence as Kaspar busied himself with the kit, slipping them both into the adult equivalent of a forward-facing baby carrier then sitting, with her perched on his lap, like the other tandem jumpers left in the plane.

It felt surreal. Nothing about this moment remotely resembled the hundreds of naïve fantasies she'd nurtured—for longer than she cared to admit—about how a conversation with him would go if she ever saw him again.

She'd envisaged beautiful clothes, perfect hair and make-up, and her sexiest smile. She'd imagined making Kaspar gasp at what he'd failed to see, right under his nose, all those years ago. She'd dreamed about making him chase her, just a little, before inevitably giving in to some all-consuming desire. Her innocent, wholly unrequited teenage crush finally blossoming into some movie-perfect moment.

She had *not* imagined being in an aircraft in the most unflattering, unshapely skydiving suit, which bunched around the crotch thanks to her heavy harness, and, to cap it all off, too frightened to even make her jump.

Well, she'd be damned if she was going to bottle this one, too. She had to make this jump. From ten thousand feet. With

Kaspar.

She absolutely was *not* thinking about how close they were going to be, strapped together in a harness, her back pressed against his front.

Her blood was absolutely not racing away in her body, leaving her feeling decidedly light-headed and clammy.

She was going to concentrate on the jump and be grateful for the second chance. She had to do this well.

For charity.

For her father.

For herself.

And not because Kaspar was going to be with her for every single spine-tingling nanosecond of it. *Truly*.

Abruptly, everything faded to a blur, from Kaspar sorting out her gear to going through rigorous checks that would ordinarily have been completed on the ground. And then they were ready. Waiting. Her back glued to his chest.

Somehow that inability to face him lent her confidence.

‘Why are you doing this?’ she asked suddenly, surprising even herself.

Kaspar frowned.

‘Sorry?’

Despite the relative quiet of the plane now the hatch door was closed, one still had to speak loudly and clearly to be heard and her murmur hadn’t been nearly loud enough.

‘Why are you doing this?’ she repeated, grateful that no one

else would stand a chance of hearing.

‘Why am I doing this?’ Kaspar repeated slowly, as if checking he’d heard right.

But she knew that cadence. Realised it meant he was choosing his words carefully. It felt like a tiny victory. She still knew him. Or a part of him anyway.

‘Like a lot of people up here today, I’m doing it in memory of someone.’

‘Who?’ The question was out before she could swallow it back. She could picture his face tightened, his jaw locked. So familiar even after all these years. The unexpectedness of it knotted in Archie’s stomach and stopped her heart for a beat.

‘We’ll be at altitude soon.’ He jerked his head to the door, clearly sidestepping her question, but she couldn’t help it. She couldn’t explain why but suddenly she needed to know.

‘Who?’ she insisted.

His jaw spasmed but, presumably because it was meant to be a charity jump and people had been sharing stories all day, he schooled his features into a neutral expression.

‘His name was Peter. I knew him...a long time ago.’

He stopped curtly, as though it was more than he had intended to say. But it was more than enough for Archie.

*Peter? Her father?*

Archie shook her head, her lungs burning with the effort of continuing to breathe. He was doing this in memory of her own father? An odd sense of pride surged through her that even now,

five years after his death, her big-hearted father still touched lives. And yet a sickening welling of emotion quickly snuffed out the pride. Kaspar clearly had absolutely no idea who she was. Despite all her earlier reasoning, that feeling of hurt, of rejection, coursed through her with all the power of a tsunami. She couldn't possibly hope to stop it, as illogical as she knew her reaction might be.

She opened her mouth, trying to find a way to tell him who she was. But at that moment the hatch door had reopened and her words were sucked out and into the ether before Kaspar had heard them. And as she sat there, her body feeling like lead, she was semi-aware of the other skydivers making their jumps even as her eyes blurred to everything around her.

The next thing she knew, Kaspar was hauling her to her feet, carrying out the final procedures, and then they were moving to the door, exiting the plane, dropping for what seemed like for ever but was probably no more than thirty seconds or so.

And without warning every thought, every emotion seemed to fall from Archie's mind, leaving her strangely numb.

At some point, it had to have been quite quickly, Kaspar tapped her shoulder to remind her to spread out her arms and legs in the freefall position as they rushed towards the ground, although it was as though the ground was rushing to them, her back pressed to his solid, reassuring chest. There was no chance for conversation up here, they could shout and yell and the other one would never hear them, and to Archie there was something

freeing in that. For all intents and purposes she was alone, even if she could feel Kaspar's rock-like mass securing her. As the adrenalin coursed through her veins, pumping along like nothing could hold it back, it was as though the wind not only blew away the stiffness from her body but the fog that had clouded her mind for so long.

*Too long.*

Kaspar opened the chute at what Archie knew would have been around five thousand feet, the loud *crack* ripping through her entire being as they were yanked up into a more upright position, as if breaking her open and allowing the first hints of fear and anger and regret to seep out.

And then absolute silence.

Peace.

Her heart, her whole chest swelled with emotion.

They were still descending but, with the parachute above them now slowing their rate of descent, if she didn't look at the ground, it almost felt as though they were floating. Suddenly time seemed to stand still.

Another thrill rippled through her.

She remembered what it had felt like on that first jump with her father. The life she'd intended to have. The strength of character that used to be hers. And for a moment she felt that again. Free of any responsibility for opening the parachute, steering them to the landing zone, or even having to land safely, she felt her body relax for the first time in years. And the more

her body let go of some of the tension it had bottled inside for too long, the more her mind also opened up.

Lost in her thoughts, she was almost startled when a thumb appeared in front of her.

‘Okay?’ he yelled, his mouth by her ear.

Instinctively, she thrust both her hands out in a double thumbs-up, nodding her head as vigorously as she could, and then he was offering her the paddles to try controlling the chute for herself for a moment.

She was about to shake her head when something stopped her. For a split second she could almost hear her father’s voice in her head encouraging her to do it. Tentatively, she reached up and took hold, changing direction slowly at first, surprised at just how comfortable and natural it felt. Even six years on, it was as though her muscles had retained the training her father had given her.

‘Were you really going to do tandem jumps today?’ She twisted her head so he could hear her easier.

Kaspar nodded. ‘I was subbing for another instructor friend of mine who’s unwell today. Originally, though, I was going to sky surf. Peter would have loved that.’

He stopped again, clearly catching himself.

Archie thought back to the surfboards she’d seen in the hangar on the ground and smiled into the expanse of blue. Of course a simple skydive wouldn’t be enough for adrenalin junkie Kaspar, but he was right, her dad would have loved it.

Bolstered, she tried a slightly trickier turn, surprised and

delighted at how comfortable and natural it felt, things that her father had taught her coming back quicker than she might have anticipated. Again and again she steered the chute, going further, trying things out, wishing she had the skill to really push her boundaries. All too soon it was time to release the paddles back to Kaspar.

Almost as though he could read her mind, Kaspar steered them into a high-speed turn, a gurgle of laughter that she hadn't heard from herself in years rumbling through her and spilling into the silent sky. She revelled in the sound as Kaspar led them both into a series of high-speed manoeuvres that thrilled her beyond anything she'd hoped for.

They held such echoes of what she'd loved until recently. For a moment it was as though she could almost reach in and touch the spirited, strong girl she'd once been.

It was transitory. Archie knew that. Soon Kaspar would have to stop and once they landed this moment, this connection to her old self, would be lost.

But this jump had done the one thing she'd desperately wanted it to do. It had finally reminded her of the girl she'd once been and—however deeply buried that part of her may be—today had helped her to begin her journey back to the old Archie.

The biggest shock of all was that it wouldn't have happened but for Kaspar Athari.

He might have no idea who she was, and once this jump was done he'd be out of her life again. Maybe for another

fifteen years. Probably for good. But she was grateful to him nonetheless. Part of her longed to reveal her identity to him, but part of her was afraid of ruining the moment.

She was still gazing at the scenery spread out beneath them like the most vivid green screen image, trying to decide, when a small explosion by a truck in a layby below them snagged her attention. They were still a little too high up to see much detail but a dark shape lay on the ground. Archie opened her mouth to speak but Kaspar was already steering the parachute around for a better look.

‘Is that a person?’ she asked tentatively after a few moments. ‘Or bins? Or bags?’

‘I can’t be sure. Possibly a person.’

His grim tone only confirmed her fears. If it was a body, they would likely have been caught in the blast.

‘They have ambulance crews on the ground at the fete,’ she shouted.

‘That’s true but the fete’s some way away, they won’t have seen the blast we saw. And I know that stretch of road, it’s on the route from the hospital and Rick’s Food Truck is parked in that layby six days a week, popular with both weekday truckers and with weekend walkers, all looking for a hot bacon and egg bap. For me, Rick’s sausage and tomato toasties are more than welcome after a long night shift.’

‘So what’s the plan?’ she asked, knowing neither she nor Kaspar would have mobile phones on the jump.

The decisive note in her tone was something she hadn't heard in all too long.

'There's about a mile over the fields, as the crow flies, between the truck and the fete. If we land as close as we can to the layby we can check it out. If it *is* a person, I'll stay on scene while you run back and alert the medical crews at the fete. Understood?'

'Understood,' she confirmed, caught off guard by an unexpected flashback to a time when Robbie had come off his bike, trying to do some somersault trick, and had been lying deathly still on the ground.

She'd been beside herself, but Kaspar had taken control then much as he was now. Assessing, verifying, trying to assimilate as much pertinent information as he could. Kaspar had taught her a lot, even as a kid.

Just like her father had.

Right now, she suddenly realised, she felt more like her old self than she had for years. Who would have thought she would owe Kaspar Athari part of the credit for that?

## CHAPTER TWO

KASPAR VAULTED OVER the hedge and through the field. A part of him was glad to be getting away from the girl—*Archie*, her instructor had called her—with her expression-laden eyes that seemed to see altogether too much. It made no sense and yet even through her obvious fear up there in the plane, every time she had fixed that clear gaze on him he'd been unable to shake the impression that she could see past the façade he'd carefully

crafted for a drooling press over the years, and read his very soul.

If he'd actually had a soul. But that had been long shattered. As much by his own terrible mistakes as anything else. Not least the one night that had altered the course of his life for ever.

And yet he couldn't seem to shake the notion that this one girl—woman—almost *knew* him. As though she was almost familiar.

He told himself it was just the emotion of the day. Five years since he'd heard Peter had passed away, the closest thing he'd ever had to a real, decent father figure. Who, even as a widower trying to hold down his air force career, had been more of a father *and* a mother to his son and daughter than either of Kaspar's own very much alive parents could or would ever have been.

Peter Coates had taught him that the volatile, physically terrifying marriage of his own parents wasn't normal or right. He'd taught Kaspar to handle his emotions so that he didn't lose control the way his own father had. The way his own mother had, for that matter.

Hearing about Peter's death had winded him. Along with the rumour that Robbie had subsequently sold the old farmhouse and emigrated to Australia. Kaspar could understand why. With both parents dead, Robbie, only twenty-five, and with that kid sister of his to look after, it made sense to have a completely fresh start. And yet somehow, knowing the Coates family no longer lived in that cosy, old, sandstone place with its roaring open fires, it had felt like the end of an era.

‘Rick? Mate, can you hear me?’ Kaspar shook the memories off and called out with deliberate cheerfulness as he approached the figure lying on the ground, one eye half-closed and bloodied.

The extent of the blast damage made it almost impossible to recognise the man as Rick, but the man’s build and clothing fitted. There was one way to tell for certain, though. Carefully, Kaspar ripped the man’s shirt sleeve.

A clipper ship stared boldly back.

*Rick.* But he wasn’t conscious. Pinching the man’s side, Kaspar began a quick examination, surprised when Archie came running up not far behind him. Her intake of breath was the only acknowledgement that the dark shadow was indeed a person.

‘Is it your friend Rick?’

‘Yes. Get a medical crew,’ he instructed.

‘He might have a mobile,’ she suggested hopefully, but Kaspar shook his head.

‘He doesn’t. Claims to hate them. So you’ll just have to hoof it. Can you do that?’

‘Yes.’

‘Good. Tell them to alert the air ambulance and say we’ve got an unresponsive adult male, around fifty, with severe maxillofacial blast injury, including tissue loss of the right eye and nose and unstable maxilla. GCS three and his airway is going to need to be secured immediately.’

She recited it back clearly and competently despite the slight quake in her voice then left. Kaspar turned back to Rick. By the

looks of it, the man was mercifully beginning to regain some degree of consciousness.

‘Rick? It’s Kaspar. Can you hear me?’

At least the older guy was making vague groaning noises now, even if he didn’t appear to recognise Kaspar at all. He certainly couldn’t seem to speak, although that was hardly a surprise. Keeping up light, breezy conversation, Kaspar concentrated on the injuries and the potential damage to the man’s airway. If that collapsed, things would spiral downwards pretty damned fast.

Occupied, it felt like it was only minutes later when the helicopter landed and the on-board trauma doctor came racing over.

‘Kaspar Athari.’ The doctor nodded in deference. ‘Your partner said it was you. I’m Tom. What have we got?’

‘Adult male, around fifty years old. Name is Rick.’

‘Rick the food truck guy? You’re sure?’

‘Sure enough.’ Briefly, Kaspar tapped a bold, unusual tattoo on the man’s upper arm. ‘Approximately fifteen minutes ago he was changing a gas bottle on his food truck when it exploded, no witnesses except myself and my skydiving partner but we were too far away to see clearly. He appears to have been projected by the force and hit his face and neck on something, I would guess the vehicle bracket. There’s tissue loss of the right eye and of the nose, unstable maxilla and suspected crushed larynx. Initially unresponsive, he’s now producing sounds in response to verbal stimuli. GCS was three, now four.’

‘And he’s breathing?’

‘For now,’ Kaspar said quietly. ‘But with the soft tissue swelling and oedema there’s still a risk of delayed airway compromise, while haemorrhage from vessels in the open wounds or severe nasal bleeding from complex blood supply could contribute to airway obstruction.’

‘Okay, so the mask is out, given the damage to his face, supraglottic devices are out because of his jaw, and intubation is out because if the blast caused trauma to the larynx and trachea, any further swelling could potentially displace the epiglottis, the vocal cords and the arytenoid cartilage.’

The trauma doctor ran through the list quickly, efficiently. He was pretty good—something Kaspar always liked to see.

‘One more thing,’ Kaspar noted. ‘There’s a possible cervical injury.’

‘One p.m. So we’ve got a high risk of a full stomach after lunch, which means increased risk of regurgitation and aspiration of gastric contents. I could insert a nasogastric tube or I could apply cricoid pressure, but either of those procedures could worsen his larynx and airway injuries.’

At least the guy was thinking.

‘Yes,’ Kaspar agreed slowly, not wanting to step on anyone’s toes. Ultimately, this was the trauma doctor’s scene. He himself might be a surgeon, but today he was a skydiver on his day off. ‘Still, I’m not confident that his airway will hold without intervention.’

‘Can’t intubate, can’t ventilate,’ Tom mused. ‘Which leaves a surgical airway option. Tracheotomy or cricothyroidotomy.’

‘I’d say so,’ Kaspar concurred, thrusting his hands in his pockets to keep from taking over. The doctor was actually good, but Kaspar knew he’d be faster, sharper. It was, after all, his field of expertise.

It was the one thing that gave him value in this world. Every patient. Every procedure. They mattered. As though a part of him imagined that each successful outcome could somehow make up for his unthinking actions that one night with a couple of drunken idiots. As though it could somehow redress the balance. A hundred good deeds, a *thousand* of them, to make up for that one stupid, costly error of judgement.

But it never would.

Because it hadn’t been merely a mistake. It had been a loss of control. The kind that was all too reminiscent of his volatile father.

The kind that Peter Coates had tried to teach him never to lose.

The memories burned brightly—too brightly—in his head. It must be why he was feeling so disorientated. He’d thought the jump would help, but jumping with that woman had somehow heightened it all.

A familiar anger wound its way inside him. Even now, all these years later. All his awards, his battlefield medals, the way the media lauded him meant nothing.

In many respects he was glad that Archie woman was gone. She was, for some inexplicable reason, far too unsettling. The way she'd looked at him on that plane. As though seeing past the playboy front and believing he would do the right thing and help her.

He couldn't explain it, but she didn't look at him the way almost everyone else in his life looked at him. She didn't look at him as though calculating what being with him would do for her career, or reputation, or fame. In fact, she'd looked at him with eyes so heavy with meaning he hadn't been able to stop himself from wondering what it was she'd seen. Why she made him feel more exposed than anyone had in long, long time.

It made no sense. And Kaspar hated things not making sense.

Just as he hated the part of him that had wondered whether, when this was over and the patient was safely on board the air ambulance, he might head back to the fete or the hangar and perhaps buy her a coffee. Or a celebratory drink that night.

For the first time in a long time the idea of a *date* actually made him feel...alive.

'Want to do the honours?'

Tom's voice broke into his thoughts.

'You're the on-duty trauma doctor.' Kaspar hesitated, fighting the compulsion to jump straight in, needing to be sure. Not to protect himself but to protect the hospital. He owed them that much. 'And you're good.'

'I am.' There was nothing boastful about the way the doctor

said it. Simply factual. Exactly as Kaspar might have said it. ‘But you’re the oral and maxillofacial specialist, it’s right up your street and this is a particularly complex patient. I can’t afford to make a wrong move. If anyone is going to be able to stabilise him enough to survive the flight, it’s going to be you.’

‘Fine,’ Kaspar acknowledged. It was all he needed to hear.

He bent his head to concentrate on the job he loved best, and pushed all other thoughts from his mind. He wouldn’t think any more about Archie. He wouldn’t be taking her for a drink that night. And he certainly wouldn’t be attending the charity wrap party.

\* \* \*

The party was in full swing and, predictably, people were crowding around him, from awed wannabe colleagues to seductive wannabe girlfriends.

But there was only one person from whom Kasper couldn’t seem to drag his gaze.

It was ludicrous. So uncharacteristic. Yet it felt inexorable.

He hadn’t been able to eject her from his thoughts since the skydive, however hard he’d tried. And he wasn’t a man accustomed to failure—as a surgeon he had one of the highest success rates—which made it all the more incredible that banishing one woman from his thoughts was defeating him. If anything, with each day that passed she’d become more of a delicious enigma until he’d found himself powerless to resist coming here tonight.

Just on the off chance that he might see her again.

*When was the last time a woman had done that to him?*

Had *any* woman? Ever?

He tipped his head in consideration, finally allowing himself to give in to impulse.

Archie was stunning. Not necessarily in looks, although she was certainly very pretty, from her sexy pair of *look-at-me* heels to legs that seemed to go on for ever before they finally slipped beneath a short, Latin-inspired, tasselled dance dress number, showing off perhaps the shapeliest pair of legs he ever recalled seeing. He couldn't seem to help himself, but he practically imagined her wrapping them around his body as he sank into her, so deep that she wouldn't know where he ended and she began.

His body tightened just thinking about it.

*Him.* Kaspar Athari.

He had never wanted *any* woman quite like this.

He'd never *wanted* quite like this.

He'd had enough women throwing themselves at him on practically a weekly basis that he'd never had to lust after any woman quite so...*helplessly*. Not the most stunning supermodels, or the most worshipped Hollywood starlets. But he was lusting after this perfectly pretty, perfectly cheeky, perfectly ordinary woman. Who, it turned out, was to him most extraordinary.

A little like the woman who had been too frightened to do the static line jump but who, when steering the tandem jump chute with him, had displayed a skill and eagerness that had belied his

initial conclusion that she was a novice.

Against all logic, Kaspar found himself fascinated.

There was a story there. *But what?* And why did he even care?

Sexual attraction was one thing. But this was something else. Something...*more*. Certainly more than the physical. She possessed a magnetism in the aura she gave off and the way people gravitated towards her. Especially—and Kaspar gritted his teeth at the thought—the other men on the dance floor. Was he the only one to notice how she danced and twirled, shaking and shimmying quite mesmerisingly, and yet all the while deftly kept her friend between herself and any would-be suitors?

As if the intensity of his stare had finally reached her, she lifted her head, met his gaze and froze. Even from this distance, in this light, he could see the sweetest bloom staining her cheeks and down the elegant line of her neck, her chest rising and falling rapidly in a way that had nothing to do with the fact she'd been dancing. Or perhaps it was just the vividness of his imagination. Remembering the way she'd flushed in the plane the other day.

Either way, he was certain she was consumed by the same greedy fire as he was. The fire that had brought him here tonight, against every shred of logic.

And then she moved, heading off the floor and away from him. His stomach lurched in a way that was all too alien to him and before Kaspar knew what he was doing, he had set his untouched drink down on the bar behind him and was shifting his feet, ready to move. Not prepared to lose her.

Abruptly, her friend caught her and pulled her back. He kept waiting for them to glance in his direction, maybe share a giggle, which he'd seen from women time and again. A part of him almost welcomed it. It might help to topple her from whatever invisible pedestal on which he'd set her, help remind him that she was a woman like any other.

But it didn't happen. If anything, Archie studiously avoided meeting his gaze again, and had clearly omitted to mention him to her friend, and her dignified discretion only seemed to add to her allure. Especially when she resumed dancing, only to be a little more self-conscious, a fraction stiffer than she had been before. It was the tell he needed, knowing now she was indeed equally attracted to him.

It should concern him more that it felt like such a victory.

Alarm bells were sounding but too faint, too distant to have the impact he suspected they should have had. To jolt him back to reality. To warn him that she didn't look like the kind of woman who did one-night stands. She looked like the kind of woman who did walks along beaches, and romantic meals, and talking until dawn. Relationships. *Love*. It was such bull.

He'd seen first-hand the toxic depths to which such emotions could plunge. His parents' explosive marriage had been equalled only by their acrimonious divorce. And him, in the middle of it all his life. Their pawn. The tool they'd used to goad and taunt each other. The burden they'd each tried to make the other one bear.

And not just his parents. What about his own explosiveness? That out-of-control side of him that had only had to emerge once to completely ruin someone's life. He'd sworn it would never happen again, and it hadn't. Some might call him emotionally detached, or unavailable. He wasn't. Where his patients were concerned he felt as much empathy as he could, for patient and family, without it impairing his ability to do his job. It was only in his personal life where he exerted such emotional...*discipline*.

So he did sex. He did fun. He did mutual gratification.

He didn't do intimacy and he didn't do complications.

Something told him that this Archie woman was both, and the best thing he could do, for both of them, would be to stay away.

Turning back to the bar, Kaspar picked up his drink and tried not to be irritated by the group of preening, simpering women who had begun to cluster around his part of the bar. It was about as easy as pretending he wasn't searching out blonde hair and a metallic shimmer in the reflection of the mirror behind the glasses.

Apparently, his skydiving butterfly was now edging her way off the opposite side of the dance floor. About as far away from him as she could get.

He didn't give himself time for second-guessing. For the second time that evening, he set his untouched drink down and gave in to temptation.

### CHAPTER THREE

'ARCHIE, WAIT. SLOW DOWN. Where are you going this

time?’

‘Relax,’ Archie cast over her shoulder, a bright smile plastered to her lips at her friend’s typically bossy tone. ‘I’m just going for a drink.’

Still, she didn’t slow down in her quest to get off the dance floor and around to the other side of an enormous pillar that would shield her from Kaspar’s view. No easy feat in the ridiculously high heels Katie had insisted on lending her to go with the seriously sexy metallic number her friend had also talked her into buying this afternoon.

It was years since she’d been out so called *clubbing it*—not that she’d ever had the time or inclination to go out all that often, neither was this charity wrap party exactly *clubbing it*—but, still, she hoped she hadn’t looked too awkward and robotic out there on the dance floor. She’d felt fine...right up until she’d seen him watching her.

The minute she’d spotted him, her body hadn’t quite felt her own. As though it wasn’t completely under her control. Even now the memory of his eyes scanning over her left her blood feeling as though it was effervescing through her veins, making her entire body hum.

It was an unfamiliar, but not altogether unpleasant sensation.

Ducking behind the pillar, Archie pressed her back against the cool, smooth concrete and rested her hand underneath her breastbone. She could feel the tattoo her heart was drumming out, leaving her unable to even catch her breath. And it had

nothing to do with the dancing. Oh, she'd tried to ignore him, especially when his usual harem had draped themselves around him and he'd barely had the decency to offer any of them the time of day.

But who could ignore Kaspar Athari?

'So, if you're getting a drink why are we the other side of the room from the bar?' Katie bobbed under her nose, her brow knitted.

'Hmm? Oh. I just...needed to catch my breath.'

It wasn't exactly a lie, but she might have known her old friend would see through it.

'Archie, you're about as jittery as a beachgoer trying to get across hot sand.'

'No, I'm not.'

Katie's eyes narrowed sharply.

'Is this about "the Surgeon Prince of Persia"?'

'I don't know what you're talking about,' she managed loftily, only for Katie to snort in derision.

'Yeah, sure you don't. He's been devouring you with his eyes all night and you've been lapping it up.'

'I have not,' Archie spluttered, her knotted stomach twisting and flipping. 'And it hasn't been all night. It has been half an hour at most.'

'Aha!' Katie declared triumphantly. 'So it *is* about the perennially sexy Kaspar Athari.'

'No...not at all...well, not really. That is... Why are you

frowning? Aren't you the one who said I needed to get back out there and have fun, like we used to in uni? Like I did before my dad...died? Before I married Joe?

She tailed off awkwardly as Katie pulled a face.

'I've said it before and I'll say it again, I always hated the way you changed when you married Joe. You went right into yourself. Nothing like the fun, sassy Archie I'd come to know.'

'It wasn't Joe who did that.' Archie wrinkled her nose. She'd tried a hundred times to explain it to Katie, but her friend had never quite understood. Still, she couldn't help feeling she owed it to Joe to try again. 'He was exactly what I needed at that time in my life.'

'I disagree.'

'I know you do. You remind me often enough.'

Still, there was no rancour in Archie's tone. In many respects it was buoying that her friend cared enough to do so. And Katie's wry smile of response revealed that she knew it, too.

'I just feel that, while he may not have intended to, Joe took advantage of the fact that you were young and naïve. You were grieving for your dad, and your brother and his new wife were half a world away.'

They were falling into a conversation they'd had a hundred times before, but it was impossible to stop.

'He didn't take advantage. It was mutually beneficial.'

Katie's eyebrows were practically lost in her hairline, but at least she had the tact not to bring up any painful reminders

of more than three years of failed pregnancy attempts. The miscarriage at eighteen weeks.

Agony seared through her. Black, almost debilitating.

*Faith.*

As though it didn't lacerate her from the inside out just *thinking* her unborn daughter's name.

She swayed dangerously.

Had it not been for the silent, supportive hand at her elbow, Archie was afraid she was about to tumble to the floor. She blinked at Katie gratefully. Unspoken, unequivocal support shone back at Archie. Bolstering her. Making her want to forget the fact that, barely a year after she'd lost her unborn daughter, Joe was expecting a baby with his new wife.

It hurt.

Though not, perhaps, in precisely the way Archie might have thought it would. She couldn't pinpoint it, but neither could she help suspecting that it had less to do with Joe than it ought to, and more to do with the simple pain that another woman seemed to find it so easy to have a baby while her own traitorous body hadn't been able to do the one thing she felt it had surely been designed to do.

'Fine, let's say it was mutually beneficial...' Katie conceded at length, though Archie could hear by her friend's tone that she didn't remotely believe that.

'You look like you've swallowed a bee.'

She couldn't help a chuckle, even it did sound half laugh, half

choked-back sob. Katie valiantly attempted to ignore her.

‘Mutually beneficial,’ she repeated firmly. ‘And you’re right. Now is your time to get back the Archie I used to know. The one I admired so much that I used to wish I was more like you. The Archie who threw herself out of a plane today, for her father, for Faith, for a new start.’

‘You make it sound so easy.’ Archie smiled softly, the sadness she tried so hard to shake but couldn’t still tiptoeing around inside her.

But she wanted to. And the jump today was the first time she’d felt she might actually be ready to do so.

*Because of the jump? Or because of Kaspar?*

Archie slammed away the unbidden thought in an instant but it was too late. It couldn’t be *un*-thought. Instinctively, her eyes were drawn back to where Kaspar had been standing, staring at the pillar as though they could bore a path straight through it to see him.

It was pathetic.

But it was also the biggest vaguely positive reaction she’d had to anything or anyone in a very long time. And that felt strangely compelling.

Kaspar Athari, back in her life after all these years. He’d been her first, only crush. Except back then he hadn’t even noticed her and so she hadn’t had the guts to do anything about it. Suddenly, here he was again and this time he had certainly noticed her. It was as though she was being offered a second chance. It couldn’t

be just a coincidence, surely? It had to be *fate*. Either way, it was making her want to...*do* something. Anything.

She turned to Katie with as firm a nod as she could manage.

‘Fake it till you make it, right?’

‘Absolutely.’

It was easier said than done, but what the heck.

‘Fine.’ Archie sucked in a deep, steadying breath. ‘Then if I’m going to...what did you say earlier this evening? Get back on the horse? Then why not go all out with the infamous “Surgeon Prince of Persia”?’

Why did it feel easier to call him by his ridiculous nickname? Was it because it felt too close to home to call him Kaspar?

‘Yes.’ Katie didn’t look remotely abashed. ‘I did say that. But not with him. He’d gobble you up and spit you out. The man is pure danger.’

Seriously, how difficult could it be to dredge up a casual grin while simultaneously trying to stop her stomach from executing a perfect nose-dive?

‘Maybe that’s what I need?’ she tried hopefully. ‘A bit of danger.’

‘Absolutely not.’ Katie shook her head so vigorously her shiny halo of curls bobbed perfectly around her pretty face. ‘No chance. There’s absolutely no way I’m letting a guy like that get anywhere near you. Over my dead body. You can count on me for that.’

Archie frowned, confused.

‘I’ve heard you drool over the Surgeon Prince a hundred times.’

Are you really saying you wouldn't go there after all?

'Of course I would,' Katie scoffed loudly. 'Trust me, I'd be in there like a shot if the guy so much as squinted in my direction.'

'So he's okay for you, but not okay for me?'

Archie didn't know whether to feel insulted or honoured.

'He's not okay for you *right now*. If you were the old, fearsome Archie from back in uni, then I'd say go for it. *That* Archie could have handled a man like Athari.'

This was it. She could either go along with what her friend was saying, proving Katie right. Or she could show a little spirit. Like she had on that skydive. Not that she'd told Katie, who'd been occupied with her own charity water-polo match, about the tandem jump.

Archie blew out sharply.

'You know, I think I can handle one little prince.'

Katie opened her mouth, eyed her and closed her mouth again. A crooked smile that Archie knew so well hovered on her friend's lips.

'I do believe you mean it.'

'I do.'

Katie paused, considering.

'Then far be it from me to stop you. Okay, you know that sexy, dangerous scar across his jawline?' Archie nodded silently. 'Apparently it was the result of some big fight when he was younger.' Katie hugged her arm tightly and whispered in conspiratorial tones. 'You remember those massive Hollywood

kung-fu, karate-style blockbusters he did as a seven-and eight-year-old?'

The Hollywood life he'd been only too desperate to run away from, Archie remembered. Not that she could say anything.

'Yes, I think so,' she hedged instead.

'Of course you have to know them. They were *huge*, until his mother apparently demanded too much money or riders or whatever and he got kicked out and replaced.'

The rumours didn't come close to the damage his volatile mother had caused. But she couldn't say that either.

'So you heard he got the scar on those films?' Archie tactfully changed subject.

Katie's eyes sparkled with excitement.

'No, the rumour I actually read somewhere was that the fight was down some back alley when he was about seventeen or something, and wasted after a drinking session. Apparently he was outnumbered five to one but he still beat their collective backsides. Juicy, isn't it?'

'Juicy,' Archie agreed half-heartedly.

The idea of the quiet, controlled Kaspar of back then drinking, let alone fighting, was a complete anathema to her. No doubt a lie the press had spun to help them with their paper-shifting image of the playboy Kaspar. Not that he hadn't played his own stupid part to a T.

But the man in the media bore little resemblance to the boy she'd once known. And it was the latter who had stolen her

adolescent heart.

Besides, she'd been there when he'd really got that scar, climbing the forty-foot oak tree outside Shady Sadie's house when he'd been fifteen. Or at least she'd been in the living room with her father when Robbie had raced back to say that a damaged limb had given way and Kaspar had fallen to the ground. He'd been carted off to the hospital with a few superficial cuts and bruises and that one deep gash. He'd worn it with all the pride of a battle scar, of course. Trust the media to come up with something far more dark and exotic to explain it.

But they couldn't have made up *everything*, could they? The playboy lifestyle? The dangerous reputation? It had been fifteen years since she'd last seen him so of course he wasn't going to be the same boy she'd known. As Katie gabbled on, Archie let her head drop back, the cool concrete of the pillar seeping into her brain, and tried to think a little more clearly. Maybe opening the Kaspar Athari can of worms really wasn't the best idea she'd ever had.

As Katie's hands grabbed her shoulders and hauled her off the pillar, Archie was tugged back to the present.

'This is your chance, here comes your Surgeon Prince.'

Before she could stop it, she was being swung around and thrust out around the column. The breath whooshed from her body. She didn't need to turn to know that Katie would have already gone.

'And there I was thinking you were hiding from me, Archie.'

The rich, slow drawl was laced with a kind of lazy amusement as every inch of Archie's skin prickled and got goosebumps. Not least the fact that he knew who she was after all. Her stomach spiralled like a helter-skelter in reverse.

*Archie.* He rolled her name on his tongue as though sampling it, tasting it. She imagined he was measuring it against the woman she was now, compared to the 'Little Ant' he'd always known her as.

She opened her mouth to speak just as Kaspar stepped closer to her. Everything in her head shut down as her body shifted into overdrive. Heady, and electrifying, and like nothing she'd ever known before.

He was dressed smart-casual, a vaguely lemony, leathery scent toying with her nostrils, and he practically *oozed* masculinity. Enough to eclipse every other male in the room most probably. Even every other male in the county. The world.

Even her childhood crush on him didn't compare. It made her feel physically winded and adrenalin-pumped all at once.

The indolent crook of his mouth, so sinful and enticing, gave the distinct impression that he could read her thoughts. Feed into her darkest desires. It made her very blood seem to slow in her veins. A sluggish trickle, which her thundering heart seemed to be working harder and harder to process.

He was simply intoxicating. She cast around for something, anything, that wouldn't betray how at sea she felt.

'How is the patient? Rick, wasn't it?'

Not exactly ideal, but it would have to do. Kaspar only hesitated for a moment.

‘He’s in pretty bad shape.’

‘But you can help him?’

‘Possibly.’

He didn’t want to talk shop, she could understand that, but it was buying her some much-needed time. She had to settle down. Katie was right, she was like a beachgoer on hot sand.

‘I think I read last year that you had a patient who’d had a firework go off in his face and you used some kind of layering technique?’

‘You’re in the medical profession?’ Kaspar’s stare intensified. Archie swallowed. Hard.

‘No, actually I’m in the construction industry. I build the hospitals, you work in them.’

‘You build them?’

‘Well, I work out layout, ease of movement so it isn’t a rabbit warren; service routes such as for heating, lighting and medical gases especially for the operating rooms; whether to connect to the existing back-up generators, or build new ones; medical incinerators, that sort of thing.’

There was a lot more to it, and given how much she loved her job she could probably go on about it all night. Which would be a problem. It was hardly the most seductive of conversations.

‘Are you part of the team building the new women’s and children’s wing for our hospital?’

Pride outweighed her need to change the subject.

‘Yes.’

‘I’m impressed. It’s looking really good and I believe you’re pretty much on time and on budget.’

She was powerless to prevent a grin so wide it might well crack her face in two.

‘Thanks. It isn’t going too badly. There are a few niggles but I built decent float into the programme so it shouldn’t be too much of an issue. Once we’ve finished on the new wing we’ll start on the new hospice facility across the site. We should be done within ten months, hopefully.’

‘Even more impressive.’

‘Dad always loved what I did,’ she added suddenly.

Waiting, *hoping*, for Kaspar to add something he also remembered about her father. Then fighting the sense of discouragement when he barely even reacted.

‘I can imagine.’

‘Anyway,’ she caught herself, ‘we were talking about your firework patient.’

She didn’t know why it felt so important that he should answer her. Perhaps because her dad had once told her and Robbie that getting Kaspar to open up about the things he loved was the key to knowing the boy. He kept everything that mattered to him so closely guarded, as though he feared the pleasure could be snatched from him at any time. The way his mother had often cruelly snatched away anything he’d shown an interest in as a kid,

from toys, to hobbies, to his only decent stepfather.

According to her dad, Kaspar had never been a kid in the strictest sense of the word. His parents' volatile relationship had caused him to grow up quickly, to distance himself from people, to distrust easily. But her own father had brought him round, treating him exactly as he'd treated Robbie, encouraging when he could, laying down the ground rules at other times. And she'd treated him like a brother while Robbie, of course, had just been Robbie, sweet, funny and easygoing.

Did Kaspar remember all that? If he did, did he care? Enough to answer her?

He hesitated and, for a moment, she thought he was going to sidestep it.

'The boy's jaw was shattered. He'd lost a chunk of it along with the teeth on the right side. He couldn't eat, couldn't even speak, so I needed to build a new jaw and simultaneously implant teeth. We layered pieces of titanium and then used a laser to harden the material. The lattice structure allowed us to really bend and form it so that it was the right size and shape for the kid, fitting perfectly and looking natural.'

Archie didn't realise she'd been holding her breath until he stopped speaking. He was looking directly at her, his eyes were dark, intense, like a moment of understanding. Of connection.

She didn't know whether it was a good or a bad thing that at that moment the music cranked up a notch and whatever else he was saying was lost, swallowed up by the thumping bass line.

‘Say that again?’ she shouted, but he shook his head.

The moment of opening up to her about his career was clearly over. She leaned in to speak into his ear, swaying slightly on her friend’s heels, her body lurching against his as he put his arm around her to steady her. Her lips grazed his skin and she smelled the tantalising citrus scent.

It hit her again, that wall of primal need, stealing her breath away as his touch seared every inch of her flesh. It was almost a relief when the music kicked down again and he released her.

‘You want to get out of here?’ she asked instead.

‘Together?’

‘Is that a problem?’

The words were out before she had even thought about them. Seductive, teasing, another flash of the old, adult Archie. Yet the way she could never have dreamed of being as a thirteen-year-old with a crush. It was exhilarating.

‘Not for me,’ he growled. ‘But, then, I’m sure you’ve heard the endless scandals that seem synonymous with my name. This isn’t a high-profile charity event, but it isn’t a small gathering either. If any press spot us, your photo will be on the internet before we even get to my hotel.’

‘Is that your attempt to warn me?’ She deliberately rolled her eyes. ‘Only I make it a point never to believe idle gossip. I don’t think they know the old Kaspar.’

‘The *old* Kaspar?’ His brow furrowed and as two light indentations peeked out from between his eyebrows a wave of

familiarity unexpectedly coursed through Archie, making her clench her fingers into a fist just to keep from reaching out and lightly skimming them even as her stomach executed another downward dive.

So he *didn't* know who she was. No wonder he hadn't reacted to her mention of her father. Sick disappointment welled in her, but instead of backing away, as she might have done, a flash of the daredevil Archie Katie had been talking about suddenly flared within her.

Maybe, just maybe she could jog his cobwebbed memory. She would rather he piece it together himself than simply hit him over the head with it. She didn't want to risk anything that might make him back away from her.

'You know, the pre-"Surgeon Prince of Persia" reputation,' she prompted. 'The kid who climbed trees, and built dens, and fought with his best friend.'

Another beat. Imperceptible to perhaps anyone else. She felt rather than saw the shift.

'There is no pre-"Surgeon Prince of Persia".' He winked.

It should have irritated her, being altogether too seductive, suggestive and downright overconfident. It didn't. She'd seen the façade sliding back into place as though he regretted his moment of perceived weakness. That *tell* she recognised from long ago. More polished now, but there nonetheless. Kaspar the playboy might be standing in front of her, but she'd seen the Kaspar she'd known, the one she'd wanted, was still in there. She could still

unearth him. For a moment back there she had succeeded.

A thrill coursed its way through her, lending her the confidence she'd been lacking.

'I don't know whether to admire your confidence or deplore your arrogance.' She cocked her head to one side as if genuinely giving it serious consideration. 'I rather fear it's the latter.'

'Oh, I seriously doubt that.'

His wolfish smile did little to soothe her jangling nerves. It was as though he was enjoying the banter. Relishing the challenge. Maybe if she dropped the right prompts, he would finally realise who she was. Finally remember.

'Are you really the blasé Lothario the press paint you as? Bedding a different woman every other night?' she challenged.

'Well, if it's in the press, then it must be true.'

Which wasn't really, she couldn't help but notice, an answer at all. It begged the question of why, if he was more like the Kaspar she remembered than the Kaspar the media seemed to describe, he would ever have allowed this unfavourable reputation of his to slide?

'So you haven't slept with any of the hundreds of women you've been linked with over the years?'

'I didn't say that either.' His teeth almost gleamed and Archie shivered as she felt their sharp edges as surely as if he had them against her skin.

Grazing her. Nipping her. An intimacy she'd read in books or experienced in her fantasies. Never in real life. Certainly not

with Joe. She held his gaze, steady and sure, until eventually—incredibly—he broke his gaze.

Archie wasn't sure who was more surprised, her or Kaspar himself.

'I confess that I'm always impressed how I have the time to date quite so many women. Although I won't deny that when I get chance I do enjoy the company of the fairer sex.'

Something kicked hard, low in her stomach.

'Of course you do.'

'I am, after all, a man.' He took a step closer to her and she found herself backing up to the pillar, her entire body fizzing with anticipation. 'Or are you going to pretend that you haven't noticed?'

'And if I said I hadn't?'

'I'd say that, public perceptions and exaggerations aside, I know women well enough to read that such an assertion would be a lie.'

'Is that so?' She barely recognised the husky voice coming out of her mouth. And Kaspar only cranked that sinful smile up all the higher.

'That's so. You noticed me. What's more, you want me. Almost as much as I want you.'

'There's that hubris again.'

'Perhaps it is hubris.' He took another step closer, not looking remotely remorseful. 'But it doesn't make it any less true. Shall we put it to the test?'

Suddenly, she was caged. The pillar at her back and Kaspar on the other three sides. Huge, and powerful, and heady. He wasn't actually touching her, and yet she felt the weight of him pressing in on her. Holding her immobile.

Not that she felt remotely like trying to escape.

'You really are altogether too sure of yourself.' She had no idea how she managed to sound so breezy.

Especially considering the frenzy into which her body currently seemed hell-bent on working itself. Lust and longing stabbed through her.

'Imagine how disappointing it would be if you fell short.'

He actually looked affronted just for a split second, before his eyes crinkled and a warm laugh escaped his lips. It was as though all the air in the room—in the world—went into that laugh. As though she didn't need it to breathe and could exist on that laugh alone. As though there was nothing else but Kaspar.

'I can assure you, Archie, I do not...*fall short*. In any respect.'

Her name on his lips again. If only she had the guts to reach up and kiss him, to discover whether his mouth tasted just as good as she imagined. She tried to but her body wouldn't move, probably due to this overriding need for him to recognise her properly. So in the end she simply stared back into eyes, which were all too familiar. In colour if not in expression.

'Well, of course, you would think that.'

'It isn't a matter of what I think.' His dark, indolent tone spiralled through her. Every inch of her body felt it wrapping

around her. Pulling tighter. Drawing her closer. 'It's a matter of what I know.'

It was all she could do to offer a nonchalant eye-roll.

'Let me guess. A hundred women hailing you as a deity in the throes of passion?'

She didn't want to think of those stories the papers loved to run with. The fact that his sexual prowess was lauded quite as much by quite so many. Although, now he'd mentioned it, it didn't add up that he should be quite such a driven, dedicated surgeon and yet have so much time for personal indulgences.

'Bit of an exaggeration. Although, frankly, I wasn't thinking of a single other woman. I was only interested in one. And she's standing right in front of me.'

'Oh, you *are* good,' she conceded, hoping against hope she didn't look half as flushed as she felt.

Hoping he couldn't hear the drumming of her heart or the roaring of blood in her ears. Hoping he couldn't read the lust pouring through her and making her nipples ache they were so tight. Hoping he couldn't feel the heavy heat pooling at the apex of her legs the way no man had ever made her feel before. At least not quite so wantonly.

She had a terrible fear that perhaps no other man would make her feel that ever again.

'Care to confirm that conclusion?' he murmured, his voice pouring over her just the way she would imagine warm, melted chocolate would do.

If she'd ever been that sexually adventurous, of course. Which she never had been. She imagined this version of Kaspar was, though, and the thought made her pulse leap in her wrists, at her throat.

*What was the matter with her?*

Kaspar didn't miss a thing. His eyes dropped to watch the accelerated beat, his face so close she could almost draw her breath as he exhaled his. His eyes never left hers, their intentions unmistakable.

What wouldn't she have given for Kaspar to look at her like this when they'd been kids and she'd been besotted with him? And now he was.

Before she could stop herself, she reached out to trace the scar Katie had mentioned earlier.

'Is this really the result of some drunken bar brawl?'

'What else could it be?' His voice rasped over her as though his very fingers were inching down her spine. It was all she could do not to give in to a delicious shiver.

'I don't know, something more banal.' Archie had no idea how she managed to execute such an atypically graceful and nonchalant shrug. 'Like a childhood accident. Falling off a bike? Charging into a table? Tumbling from a tree?'

His eyes sharpened for a moment.

Something hanging there. Teetering between them.

'You have brothers?'

Her breath caught in her chest. A tight ball of air. Was Kaspar

finally remembering?

A slew of emotions rushed her. Feelings she'd thought long since dead and buried. Idealistic, romantic, intense fantasies she'd cherished as an adolescent fancying herself in love with the oblivious Kaspar.

He'd ruined her, without ever touching her. Archie was sure of it. His mother had hauled him back to America right at the peak of her crush on him. If that hadn't happened, no doubt the infatuation would have run its course, as it did with most young girls. Instead, for years, she'd imagined she and Kaspar to be some kind of modern-day star-crossed Romeo and Juliet, torn away from each other before Kaspar had even had a chance to open his eyes and see what had been in front of him all along. She'd carried the ridiculous dream with her long after she should have let it die.

It was the reason she'd never had a serious boyfriend, always holding a part of herself back in her relationships. Until Joe, of course. But that had been tainted with other issues.

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