



CHARLOTTE HAWKES

The Army Doc's
Secret Wife



**MEDICAL
ROMANCE™**



Charlotte Hawkes

The Army Doc's Secret Wife

«HarperCollins»

Hawkes C.

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Falling for her husband?Theirs was a marriage of convenience borne out of desperate circumstances, but Thea can't forget the wedding night she spent in Ben Abrams' arms! Only by dawn it was all over, and her army doctor husband had shipped out—of the country and her life!Now Ben is badly wounded, and Thea must nurse him back to health. Having lost her heart to her reluctant husband once, she fears getting close to him again. Dare she hope this time Ben will choose his desire for her over duty?

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‘It looks bad, but Ben’s one of the truly strong ones. If anyone can pull through this he can. With *your* help.’ The nurse smiled encouragingly. ‘Your husband’s a hero.’

Your husband’s a hero?

Nausea churned Thea’s stomach. Her mouth was parched—too parched to respond. It took her several attempts to swallow, then flick out a nervous tongue to try to moisten dry lips.

Her husband?

For the first time since she’d heard about the accident and rushed in to the hospital Thea felt her pain and fear give way to something even more visceral.

Anger.

The man lying in that bed—her husband—was almost as much of a stranger to her as he was to the nurse standing next to her now. That was if Thea set aside the fact that the last time she’d seen Ben they’d had wild, crazy sex, only for him to walk out on her the next morning. Leaving her abandoned and alone. It was a far cry from the Ben everyone else saw—the self-sacrificing soldier who had always seemed to save the day in her brother’s war stories. Where had Ben the hero been when *she’d* needed saving?

Instead, she’d had to save herself.

So why, even now, did he still have the power to affect her the way he did?

[Dear Reader,](#)

Thank you for picking *The Army Doc’s Secret Wife*—my debut novel for Mills & Boon Medical Romance. I’m so proud and honoured to be a writer within the M&B family. I picked up my first M&B at fifteen—when a school friend lent me one from her collection—and I was hooked.

I love high-octane heroes, and I’m so proud of our soldiers—who are prepared to lay down their lives to protect their country, whether they agree with the politicians or not.

My very own hero is my former Troop Commander—a shy young man who nonetheless was a stickler for discipline. We resisted the sparks of attraction for three years whilst I was an Officer Cadet under his command...But I wondered what would happen if my hero and heroine, Ben and Thea, were caught up in a more emotional situation, with Ben’s terrible survivor’s guilt over the death of Thea’s brother playing a part in the way he responds to her.

The idea of a second chance at love also appealed—especially as my hero walked away for such honourable reasons. But Thea is no pushover. She’s a high-flying professional in more than one sense of the term and, having been hurt in the past, has an inner core of steel. As much as she loves her hero, she’s determined to help Ben beat his demons before she opens herself up to him again.

I hope you enjoy *The Army Doc’s Secret Wife*, and I’d love it if you dropped by my website —charlottehawkes.com.

Charlotte

Born and raised on the Wirral Peninsula, 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: charlottehawkes.com.

The Army Doc’s Secret Wife is **Charlotte Hawkes’s** debut title for Mills & Boon Medical Romance!

The Army Doc's Secret Wife Charlotte Hawkes



www.millsandboon.co.uk

To my beautiful boys, Montgomery and Bartholomew. You may never read these books, but—for the record—one of you is very excited that you're almost able to read the back of your pirate bubblebath bottle!

To my parents, for your unfailing love and support throughout my life—even if you *do* now spoil my boys terribly.

To Flo, my editor, for getting me here. You whipped me—and my book—into incredible shape. Don't stop *hmmmmmm*-ing!

To my husband, my real-life hero (& Capt.). Without you, none of this would be possible. Sorry(ish) about the *Sir* stuff.

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[CHAPTER ONE](#)

ICY NUMBNESS HAD been sneaking around Alethea 'Thea' Abrams' body from the moment she'd received the phone call. The drive to the hospital was a blur but somehow she must have done it. And now the chill finally took a grip of her shaking limbs, forcing her to stop and lean on the

door frame as if to draw strength, as she stared down the military wing's ward and into the side room where Ben Abrams, her husband, lay—still asleep—in a bed.

'I understand you've been fully briefed?' The nurse consulted her notes. 'And that you're also a civilian doctor, working for the Air Ambulance Emergency Response Unit? That'll certainly help a lot. And Dr Fields has prepared you for the chance that Major Abrams... Ben...might not recognise you?'

Thea managed a stiff nod, surreptitiously sliding cold fingers around the doorjamb. Yes, they had warned her it was a possibility. Words of caution she often had to say to other people, and yet it had still been a shock to hear them said to her. It all felt surreal—like some kind of nightmare. The broken body in that bed was so far removed from the robust, spirited, dynamic Ben she knew.

If she had ever really known him.

'I understand how difficult this is but you need to be ready. Your reaction could influence how Ben approaches his recovery.' The nurse was kind but firm.

'I understand.' Miraculously, Thea made it sound as if she did, despite the fact that the professional, medical side of her brain appeared to have completely deserted her.

'Are you ready to go over there?'

Thea watched as Dr Fields moved around Ben's bed. There was another man there, an older man who looked vaguely familiar, but Thea couldn't place him. He wasn't interfering, and she couldn't tell whether he was overseeing or not. An Army specialist perhaps? Not anyone she knew.

Not trusting herself to speak, Thea forced out a couple more jerky nods. The nurse seemed unconvinced.

'Listen, it's a lot to take in all at once. Do you need a few more moments? We can go to the visitors' room—it's just down the corridor.'

Thea shook her head, unable to drag her gaze from Ben, who looked so utterly alien to her, and yet so painfully familiar at the same time.

'Just run me through it again.' Her voice was so hoarse she couldn't even recognise it herself. 'Ben was caught in a roadside bomb?'

'Yes—well, two, actually. His vehicle was the fourth in a convoy, and the IED was detonated as the second four-by-four passed. Ben was quite severely injured in the initial blast, severing his arm at the level of the proximal humerus, and he has since undergone successful micro-vascular replantation. However, even with that level of injury we understand he ran to the front vehicles to pull out the rest of his patrol.'

The utter admiration in the military nurse's voice was evident, but Thea just stared at the uncharacteristically still figure in the bed, a maelstrom swirling in her head.

Dammit, Ben—you nearly died. Why do you always have to play the hero?

How was she meant to correlate this with the life-loving Ben who had always lived for his beloved sports?

'He pulled five soldiers to safety—he saved their lives—before the second IED went off, and then he was crushed under a vehicle and knocked unconscious.'

'Which is when he sustained the spinal damage,' Thea stated flatly, her medical brain finally—mercifully—kicking in. She needed to detach herself from her unsteady emotions. It was the only way she was going to get through this. If only it was that easy, she thought bleakly.

'It looks bad, but from what we've seen, Ben is strong. If anyone can pull through this, he can. With your help.' The nurse smiled encouragingly. 'Your husband's a hero.'

Your husband's a hero.

Nausea churned in Thea's stomach. Her mouth was parched—too parched to respond. It took her several attempts to swallow, then to flick out a nervous tongue to try and moisten dry lips.

Her husband...

For the first time since she'd heard about the accident and rushed to the hospital Thea felt her pain and fear give way to something even more visceral.

Anger.

The man lying in that bed—her husband—was almost as much of a stranger to her as he was to the nurse standing next to her now. That was if Thea set aside the fact that the last time she'd seen Ben they'd had wild, crazy sex, only for him to walk out on her the next morning. Leaving her abandoned and alone. That was a far cry from the Ben everyone else saw—the self-sacrificing soldier who always seemed to save the day in her brother's war stories. Where had Ben the hero been when she'd needed saving?

Instead, she'd had to save herself.

So why, even now, did he still have the power to affect her the way he did?

'I understand your husband has been hailed as a hero before?' The nurse broke into Thea's preoccupation with another encouraging smile. 'Wasn't he awarded the Distinguished Service Order?'

'He was part of a patrol that was ambushed.' Thea forced herself to acknowledge the question, her tongue feeling too thick for her mouth. 'Ben took out at least twenty of the enemy before back-up arrived.'

'I can believe it.' The nurse smiled, shaking her head incredulously. 'And his patrol mates?'

'That's all I know.' Thea heaved her shoulders and fought back tears. She didn't want to talk any more—didn't want to tell the nurse that Ben's patrol mate—her own brother Daniel—had died. Having already lost her parents when she was nine years old, Daniel had been all she'd had, and back then the pain of losing him had been raw. She hadn't asked Ben exactly what had happened, and he had never spoken about it.

'Can you just give me a few moments, please?' Thea asked the nurse, grateful when she nodded her understanding and moved away to give Thea some space.

This was harder than she could have imagined. This one event had opened a floodgate of emotions and memories she'd kept locked away for almost two decades.

After their parents' death it had been just her and Daniel, but whilst she'd stayed with foster families—twice being offered and turning down a permanent home—her brother, seven years older than her, had remained in the children's home. No one had wanted a teenage boy. Hardly surprising that Daniel had joined the Army the day he'd turned eighteen.

The day Thea had turned eighteen she'd thanked her kindly foster family, packed her bag, and left to be reunited with her brother. Looking back, she realised that moving from the free accommodation within the Army barracks to renting a tiny flat in town for them both must have taken every penny Daniel had—and yet he'd never once made her feel anything other than welcome.

Three years later he'd been killed in that ambush and she'd gone to pieces, fallen in with the wrong crowd. It seemed doubly ironic that Ben—the one person who had tracked her down night after night and dragged her out of illegal warehouse raves, the one person who had stayed with her until the very worst of the grief had started to clear and she'd been able to see that being hell-bent on self-destruction wasn't the way to go—should have walked out on her too, leaving her more alone than ever.

Of all the losses in her life, none had left her feeling as abandoned, as bereft, as when Ben had walked out on her. Except perhaps the loss of their baby. Ben's baby. Thea pushed away a surge of nausea but couldn't tear her mind away from the devastating memory.

When Ben, barely twenty-five years old, had offered her marriage Thea, just twenty-one herself, and looking for someone to cling to after Daniel's death, had jumped at it. With hindsight, Ben's subsequent walking out on her had been inevitable.

Daniel had once claimed that Ben had always appeared older than his years. Something to do with a regimented upbringing and a strict Army Colonel father, which had left Ben with an overdeveloped sense of responsibility for everything and everyone around him.

And Ben had honoured the responsibility side of their marriage. His Captain's income had given her security, money to fund her continued education and a home of her own—not that he'd

ever returned to it after their wedding night. If he hadn't done all that, where would she have ended up? Certainly not as one of the youngest doctors with the Air Ambulance, that was for sure.

She would have to keep reminding herself that that was why she was here. Not because she still cared about Ben, but because she owed him a great debt. However much he had hurt her.

Nothing could ever completely erase the pain of losing the people who had loved her the most, but the one consolation she'd always held on to was the fact that both her parents and her brother had been ripped from her against their will—they hadn't abandoned her.

But Ben was different. He had chosen to leave her. Worse still, he had walked out on her the morning after their wedding. The morning after their wedding night—when she had thought they had made the ultimate connection.

She'd been wrong.

'Dr Abrams?' Thea hadn't noticed the nurse return, and she swung around to meet her gentle gaze.

'I'll be over at the nurses' station—just let me know when you'd like to go in to see your husband.'

'Great,' Thea croaked.

What the hell was she supposed to say to him?

Her mind whirled. This was a walk of shame and an oh-so-awkward morning-after conversation all rolled into one. And to make matters worse it was five years too late.

She squeezed her eyes shut, as if blocking the memories which suddenly threatened to engulf her. She had to stop being silly. No doubt the last time they'd been together—the awkward sex—was the least of Ben's problems right now. Besides, nothing good could come of wallowing. She knew that from bitter experience. It might have taken her almost all of these five years to come to terms with what had happened, but she had finally managed to.

At least she'd thought she had. The moment she'd received that call—shocked that she was still noted as Ben's next of kin—and seen him lying immobile in that bed, her emotions had been whipped into a confused mess.

Ben was hurt. She couldn't ever forgive him for abandoning her emotionally when she'd needed him, but she had to concede that he hadn't abandoned his responsibility to her. Now he needed her help, and she couldn't ignore the sense of commitment that struck in her—half buried as it might be. She owed him loyalty for that, at least.

She stuffed the anger back down, feeling calmer as the genuine concern she felt for him slowly started to regain control over her errant emotions. Perhaps seeing Ben through this, helping him to recover, would be the closure she finally needed? She had no choice. It was proving impossible to put Major Ben Abrams into her past any other way.

Thea felt a tiny sliver of resolve harden in her chest—her strong, professional inner core finally peeking its head out again—and she clutched at it before it darted back into the shadows. Tilting up her head, she urged her leaden legs to move in the direction of the nurses' station just as the nurse glanced up.

'Dr Abrams? Are you ready to go in now?'

Thea jutted out her chin and fell back on all her training. It offered her a much needed confidence boost.

'So...' Thea injected as much authority into her tone as possible. 'What's the prognosis?'

It barely took a moment for the nurse to register the difference in her. She shot Thea a look more akin to one colleague looking at another, rather than at a patient's next of kin.

'Fortunately the ambush occurred not far from the camp, and they were able to get a team out quickly to secure the area and recover the casualties. Ben was med-evacced to the nearest main hospital, which was when his arm was reattached. The seven-hour operation went smoothly, but there will be follow-ups, of course.'

‘And what about regaining normal function?’ Thea asked. That sliver of resolve was starting to grow, lending Thea a new sense of determination.

‘Under ideal circumstances, with consistent physio and positive rehabilitation, Major Abrams can expect to regain up to eighty-five per cent of normal function.’

Eighty-five per cent of normal function? Ben was a surgeon.

Thea suppressed a shudder. How would he cope with never being able to operate again? What was more, these weren’t ideal circumstances.

She could see the concern in the nurse’s eyes.

‘I’m guessing that with Ben’s additional spinal injury that replantation prognosis is optimistic? What level of spinal injury is it?’

‘Honestly...? We simply don’t know at this stage.’ The nurse shook her head. ‘We know the bomb blast was significant, and that Major Abrams went into spinal shock. So there is spinal cord damage. But the swelling means we have no idea just how extensive the damage is.’

Thea nodded grimly, struggling to keep those icy fingers from curling their way around her heart again.

‘I appreciate you’re Air Ambulance,’ the nurse was saying, ‘but how much do you know about spinal injuries post-emergency rescue?’

‘These days it’s mainly assessing, securing and stabilising the patient to ensure no further damage during transport,’ Thea acknowledged. ‘As you say, I don’t usually get involved with the post-emergency rescue care. But before I joined the Air Ambulance I did do some work on the Keimen case.’

It was one of the things which had helped to propel her up the career ladder at such a young age. That and her driving need to block out the pain caused by Ben’s ultimate rejection.

‘The boy whose spinal cord was completely severed and who took his first steps some two years later?’

Thea dipped her head. The work had been cutting edge, and she wasn’t surprised that it had caught the nurse’s attention.

‘I understand they transplanted cells from the part of the brain involved in sending smell signals from the nose to the brain to stimulate the repair of his spinal cord?’

‘That’s right.’ Thea managed a smile despite herself. It had been inspiring to work on that case.

‘I see.’ The nurse nodded. ‘Then you’ll completely understand the difficulty at the moment with Major Abrams. As I said, there’s still too much swelling to get a clear MRI, and unfortunately we do know that the impact of the second IED and the Land Rover crushing him was significant.’

‘So it’s a waiting game,’ Thea stated as calmly as she could.

As unlikely as it sounded, she could only hope that the swelling was protecting his back and that any injury was as low down as possible. Usually, the lower it was, the better. The sacral nerves, perhaps, at worst the lumbar. But the higher the damage—the thoracic nerves or, God forbid, somewhere within the cervical vertebrae—the more chance Ben might be paralysed for life.

Thea squeezed her eyes shut at the thought. Ben was such a physical guy—not just as a soldier but in his personal life, too. She couldn’t imagine how he would react to such news, but she would need to start considering options just in case. He loved sports. All sports. Mountain biking, climbing, kayaking—even base jumping. And their fake honeymoon had been a skiing trip—not that they’d gone after he’d walked out.

Before that failed night Ben had promised to take her, after she’d told him that the highlight of her years in and out of care homes had been a charity group who’d taken a bunch of them to some rundown hostel every year.

Thea shook her head before the memory could get a grip. It was those caring, thoughtful moments from Ben which had meant that the same morning he’d walked out—the morning after

they'd made love for the first time—Thea had been screwing up all her courage to suggest that one day they might possibly have more than just a fake marriage. Even if it took time.

Odd, the randomness of the memories which now popped into her head...

'Yes, it's a waiting game,' the nurse confirmed sympathetically.

Thea blinked slowly. Ben didn't know any of this yet. She stood for a moment, looking down the ward in silence. Life was precious,—so very precious. Why was it that people lost sight of that so easily—including her? Especially her.

Abruptly she stepped forward, as if to steel her body as well as her mind, and headed to the side room. As she got closer she could see the traction which stopped Ben from moving his neck and back, his legs, until they were able to assess the damage. He looked so uncharacteristically fragile that she felt her emotions start to bubble once again.

Ben—who had rejected her not once, but twice, leaving her broken. And yet it seemed entirely fitting that, as she stood by his bedside, across from the nurse as she checked his vitals, Ben chose that moment to wake up.

'Thea? What are you doing here?'

He recognised her!

She blinked back tears as the nurse swung around to pour a beaker of fresh water and offer a straw for Ben to take a sip. He was clearly still groggy from the sedatives, and his brain was no doubt a mush of memories that he wouldn't be able to process or even arrange in chronological order. But the fact that he knew who she was an encouraging start. And, despite the painful rasp, the unexpected warmth in his voice at seeing her had caught her off guard. But it had also made her feel more helpless than she'd ever felt before. It was as if the last five years had momentarily been erased.

She wouldn't cry, she wouldn't.

'I'm sorry. I'm so sorry...' His voice cracked as he struggled to speak. 'About Daniel...about the wedding...'

'Shh...don't talk. Just rest.' She blinked furiously to stop the unwelcome tears from falling. Tears of fear, but also of relief.

So much for the concern that he might not remember anything. She should have known better—this was Ben Abrams they were dealing with. She should have known he would fight through.

'I'm sorry about everything...'

His slurred words were barely clear, but she could decipher them.

'I'll protect you, Thea. I'll never leave you again.'

It was absurd that her heart should lurch so unexpectedly. Thea chastised herself. It was the medication talking—she knew that—and even groggy he wasn't saying the three words she had once longed to hear. Though no longer. There weren't any words she wanted to hear from him any more.

Caught up in her thoughts, Thea realised too late that Ben was fighting to move his arm and take her hand. His injured arm. As if in slow motion she watched him struggle to raise his head, only for the restraints to stop him. His eyes slid to the damaged limb as it lay obstinately on the bed, refusing to obey the commands his brain was sending out.

This was happening all wrong. She needed to speak to him, explain things to him—not have him find out for himself...especially not like this. In horror, she saw Ben stare at the arm, then down to the other restraints around his pelvis and spine. Finally came the realisation of memory, and it chased long, furious shadows across his bruised face. His eyes met hers one final time.

'Get her out of here. Now,' he snarled, his eyes unexpectedly full of accusation and despair and loathing before he abruptly passed out again.

Did he still blame her for that night? That night when she'd barely been able to think straight with grief. That night she'd craved just a few moments of dark oblivion, to forget everything. An oblivion that only crazy, stupid sex with Ben might have momentarily brought.

Emotions rushed to crowd in on her, dense and suffocating. Her initial relief had been swallowed up in pain, anger, frustration, sympathy and misplaced love. They coursed around her body, leaving her weak and nauseous.

Pain gripped her heart. This wasn't about her—she knew that—and yet she couldn't help reliving her utter devastation of almost five years earlier. It wasn't right that this should be the first time she'd seen him since he'd walked out. It wasn't right that he should be lying there so battered and broken. And it wasn't right that—even like this—he still had the power to hurt her.

A strangled sob escaped her throat before she could stop it. Her emotions were pushed to the limit. And suddenly all she could think about was the baby she had conceived as a result of that one incredible night. Their baby—although he'd never known. Almost five years on, she could still feel the pain which had torn at her heart the day she'd lost it.

Another sob threatened to break free and she choked it back just as Dr Fields came back into the room.

'It's just the sedative talking.' He looked up at her sharply before softening his voice. 'Think of Ben like any other patient, if it helps. Don't let it get to you, Doctor.'

She bowed her head, unable to speak and yet unable to leave the room.

The surgeon continued. 'His vitals are stable. Rest is the best thing to help his body to heal at this time, and I've no doubt that, despite his initial reaction, seeing you will help to calm any fears he has and help him to be patient until we know more.'

Thea wasn't so sure. But when Ben woke up she'd finally have to tell him. Everything. Yes, she definitely needed closure.

CHAPTER TWO

Five years earlier

'SHOULD I...? THAT IS...do you want me to carry you over the threshold?' Ben hesitated at the cottage door, his key still unturned in the lock.

'Sorry?'

Her voice sounded thick, as if she was in some kind of fug. He could empathise with that.

'Now we're married...' Ben shrugged, feeling uncharacteristically helpless. He didn't do emotion at the best of times. But Thea's brother—his best friend—had just died. How was he supposed to support her? 'I just wondered...'

He trailed off, hating these alien feelings. His career depended on him being decisive and sure. He gathered the best intelligence he could and made his plan of action accordingly. But how did he gather intel on the right way to help a grieving sister? How did he ensure he said the right thing, did the right thing? He didn't know the right protocols. He didn't know the rules. It left him feeling ineffective and uncertain.

But he did know it was now his responsibility to help Thea. And that ignoring loss, pretending it didn't exist, didn't make it go away. He knew that from bitter experience.

'I don't know if I'm expected to carry you over the threshold,' he stated uncomfortably.

'Oh. No, Lord, no—of course not.' Thea shook her head in distress. 'I just want to get into the house and off this street. I can practically feel the curtains twitching.'

Ben glanced around. Not a single curtain had moved, but he could understand Thea's discomfort and her need to escape inside.

Marrying someone with whom he'd only been on one date wasn't something he'd ever thought he would do. He wasn't impulsive. At least not in his personal life. But this wasn't about impulsiveness. It was about practicality. It was about fulfilling his promise to Dan—Thea's brother and his army buddy—that he would take care of Thea. The guy had taken a bullet for him—fulfilling that promise was a given.

Ben had taken over payment of the fees for Thea's medical degree, given her access to other necessary finances, but finding her a new home had been harder, given the time constraints. Her

landlord had evicted her the moment he'd discovered Dan was dead and she could no longer pay the rent. Finding her a new flat would have taken more time than he had.

The only solution had been to marry her, so that the Army would allocate them a house within the officers' married quarters on the base. With its tight-knit community, and the fact that he was often away on courses, exercises and tours of duty, he'd thought it the safest place for a twenty-one-year-old girl who had already lost her parents at...what had Dan said...eight? Nine?

'I'm just not used to all...this.' Thea waved her hand in the direction of the cul-de-sac as Ben opened the door and she practically fell inside.

'Community?'

She shook her head. 'People knowing your business.'

There were boxes in the hallway. He hadn't had time to sort anything out yet, although neither of them owned much stuff. She didn't seem to hang on to personal effects; that was something they both had in common.

'It's...pretty,' she sounded surprised. 'Until the other day, I'd always assumed married quarters just meant a different wing in the barracks.'

'No. Married soldiers get a house either on, or near to, the camp,' Ben dredged up a smile. 'The higher rank the soldier is, the nicer the accommodation. And the quieter the area on camp.'

'Right,' Thea nodded robotically.

He doubted if she had even really seen the place properly when the Housing Officer had marched them in a week ago to take inventory and do a damage report. She had still been coming to terms with burying Dan.

He knew Dan hadn't been able to afford to rent more than a one-bedroom flat for his sister, so she could have a roof over her head. He had always put Thea first.

Dan had been a great medic, but he would have made a great doctor—a great officer. Just as Ben was. The only reason Dan hadn't become one was because he hadn't been able to afford the time out for courses. The guy had signed on into the Army the moment he'd been able to, just to get out of that children's home and earn enough money to send the gifted Thea to uni when she came out of foster care.

He'd given his sister every advantage he hadn't had, and the fact that she was in the third year of her medical degree was as much down to his love and encouragement as Thea's ability.

Now Dan was gone, and Ben had promised to take on the mantle of responsibility. To put Thea first. He'd be damned if he was going to betray the promise he'd made to his dying buddy. But that meant he was also going to have to remember his own promise to himself never to go near the only woman he'd ever felt strongly about.

For one dangerous moment memories of their one incredible date together assailed him. Instantly Ben slammed the shutters on his mind before those memories could take hold and complicate matters. He could not afford to go there. He would have to keep reminding himself that he wasn't the right man for Thea. He would only end up hurting her, and she had enough to contend with.

'I thought you might feel more secure here.' Ben forced himself to go on. 'The neighbours are all army spouses too. You'll have a support network when I ship out in a few days—they'll look after you.'

'Yes, it should help,' she agreed flatly.

'Plus, getting something through the Army was the fastest thing I could do in the time frame.'

He saw her wince, regretted his directness. But the truth was he had only been given one month of compassionate leave. One month in which to break news to Thea which would destroy her whole life as she knew it. One month in which to fulfil his promise to look after Thea for life. One month to convince her that marrying him wasn't lunacy, but necessary to ensure her financial security.

'Can I get you anything? A drink? Something to eat?'

She shook her head, refusing to meet his eye. Spying her canvas clothes bag, she made a relieved grab for it. 'If you don't mind, I just want to go to bed.'

'It's barely eight-thirty,' he noted with surprise.

'It's been a long day.' Thea shrugged. 'I figure I could try to sleep. Just hope that, if I do, when I wake up it won't be this day any longer.'

'Right.' He nodded quickly. He doubted she'd slept much in the three weeks since he'd told her that Dan was dead. 'Of course. I understand.'

She was still standing there, as if waiting for him. Was he supposed to go with her? That wasn't the agreement they'd made.

'Um...which room is mine?'

She flushed a deep red and Ben cursed his lack of sensitivity. The sooner he was redeployed, the better.

'Oh, the second on the right. But we can swap later, if you prefer. I won't be here much.'

She gave an uninterested nod and, dismissing his words, turned swiftly to head up the stairs. He heard her moving around up there as he tried to still his mind with the banal task of unpacking some of the boxes. The kettle, some mugs, teabags for a start.

He opened the first box and came face to face with a photo of himself and Dan on their first tour of duty together. This was harder than he had feared. Slamming the box shut, he grabbed a sleeping bag and followed Thea's lead, heading upstairs to the other bedroom.

Ben lay rigid and motionless on his back in the bed, his hands locked behind his head. There was no way he could sleep. He watched the numbers counting up painfully slowly on the clock projecting the time onto the ceiling. Twenty-one hundred hours. It wasn't just the time. Normally he could sleep on a clothesline, and anyway he'd been to bed at more ridiculous hours in his time on tour. It was more the fact that on the other side of the wall he could hear Thea in her own bed as she shifted, coughed and sporadically sobbed.

He had no idea if he'd done the right thing by marrying her, but he knew he was honouring his promise to Dan and that was all that really mattered. Plus, even if their marriage was fake their friendship didn't have to be. Thea was grieving, and Ben knew just what she was going through.

Unable to lie there listening to her distress, he got up off the creaking bed and ducked out of his door to knock gently on Thea's. No answer, but by the sudden silence it was clear that she had heard him. She didn't respond.

He should leave. She obviously didn't want him there. But a little voice told him she needed him. He knocked again, then turned the handle, tentatively at first.

'Thea, is there anything I can do?'

Thea was sitting up, her knees pulled to her chest. Her tense features relaxed slightly as she looked up and saw him.

He crossed the room in a couple of long strides, scooping her up and pulling her into his arms, assiduously ignoring the pretty lacy lemon negligee. One hand secured her to him, the other smoothed her hair gently, and he let her cry it out. Holding her until she finally grew still.

When she did, he shifted as though to lower her back onto the bed.

'Don't go,' she whispered. 'Please, stay with me...just for tonight...'

'It's not a good idea.'

So why was he so tempted?

Lifting herself, Thea searched his face with red-rimmed eyes. 'Then at least talk to me, Ben.' Talking. The thing he was least good at.

'What about?' he asked, faltering.

'Anything...' She hiccupped. 'Distract me.'

'Why did Dan always call you Ethel?' he blurted out, his mind having gone suddenly blank. 'I never knew your real name was Thea until our date. When I found out you were Dan's sister.'

Way to go, idiot. Talk about the very person she doesn't want to think about.

But Thea smiled. A small, fond smile which tore at Ben's heart.

‘When I was a kid I couldn’t pronounce Alethea, so I used to tell people my name was Ethel. Dan loved it. Even when I started to be known as Thea he still called me Ethel. It was our thing. No one else could share in it.’

‘Right...’ Ben swallowed uncomfortably. He wished he’d never asked. Somehow it had made him feel closer to Thea. He didn’t want to feel closer to Thea. He clenched his fists as the image that had haunted him for the last three weeks swam into his head in high definition.

Dan...cradled in his arms as he lay dying on that hard desert ground.

Their two-man patrol had walked straight into an ambush and the two of them had been alone and pinned down by the enemy, with only a rocky outcrop for protection. Ben had tried and tried to stem the bleeding but it had been just too severe. Time had started to run out for the guy he’d fought alongside twenty-four-seven, for three hundred and twenty days of their last year’s tour of duty. And for multiple tours over the last seven years before that.

Grief hovered in the back of his mind but he refused to let it in. There was no place in his mind for mourning—he had to stay strong for Thea. She didn’t know the half of it. And he was never going to tell her. Besides, wasn’t he the king of shutting out emotions? He’d been doing it well enough for the last decade and a half.

‘Did you ever wonder how we’d never met before?’ Thea asked suddenly. ‘I mean, you were Daniel’s best friend and I was his sister.’

‘Not really.’ Ben paused thoughtfully. ‘Dan was always careful to keep the two sides of his life separate—his personal life and you, and his Army life. I think after your parents died he didn’t have the easiest time of it in the kids’ home. He never really talked about his past to anyone.’

‘Except you?’ Thea observed. ‘Because he trusted you?’

‘Right,’ Ben answered bleakly.

‘But still...’ Thea shook her head, still confused. ‘If he trusted you that much, surely you’d have come with him round to the flat?’

‘No, I never came round.’ Ben shrugged. ‘You have to understand I’m a commissioned officer. Dan wasn’t. Being part of a team and in each other’s company twenty-four-seven is one thing, but socialising back home isn’t that easy.’

‘Because the Army don’t allow it?’

Thea frowned, confused. Ben didn’t blame her. The Forces had their rules, their protocols, and if you were a part of it then it all made sense. It could save lives. But to an outsider trying to understand it might seem strange.

‘They don’t encourage it,’ Ben admitted. ‘We have separate messes for socialising. But the Army do realise that the bonds formed in war time don’t just dissolve when you get back home. So, like some of the others, Dan and I used to go on training runs together, and we headed into the mountains once or twice a year—but always off the base.’

‘Right...’ Thea hedged. ‘But when you were deployed together he never even showed you a photo of me?’

‘Having a photo of your wife, or girlfriend, or baby is one thing. But having a photo of your sister... There’s no way Dan would have risked the guys seeing a photo of a girl like you. It would have invited attention...comments that a brother wouldn’t want to hear about his sister.’

‘Oh.’

Thea flushed a deep scarlet as the meaning of his words sank in. He found it surprisingly endearing—a reminder than she had never really appreciated just how stunning she was. Even now.

‘Tell me what you thought the first time you met me,’ she said. ‘On that date we went on together.’

He stiffened. This wasn’t a conversation he wanted to be having.

‘Please, Ben. I need to hear something...pleasant... Everything’s gone so very wrong. I just want to hear what you told me that night.’

Ben met her wobbly, pleading gaze. She wanted distraction, a better memory to offer some flicker of consolation at one of the worst times of her life. After the way he'd treated her, surely he owed her that much?

'I thought you were the most beautiful woman I'd ever met,' he said quietly. 'Not just aesthetically, but on the inside, too. You were fun, impetuous...you had a vibrancy about you which was wonderfully infectious to all those around you. You made everyone want to be near you, to be part of your group.'

He'd been on a rare night out with some other officers—at a crowded bar—when Thea had slipped into the space beside him. They'd started talking casually and that had been it—he'd never felt such an inexorable attraction to a woman before. He'd excused himself from his group as soon as he'd been able to, just to spend the rest of the evening in Thea's company.

'Oh...'

She sounded let down, and he knew why. She thought he'd understood her better.

He hesitated, then conceded. 'At least that's what you wanted people to see. But beneath that veil there was a quietness, almost a shyness about you when you thought no one was watching you. Judging you. I assumed it was a defence mechanism you'd created after your parents had died, to stop people asking if you were all right.'

'Really? You saw that?'

Her evident pleasure that he'd seen a part of her others had been only too happy to ignore made him want to kiss her and berate her all at the same time. And that was the damned problem.

'So the next day, when you told me we couldn't see each other any more...?' She hiccupped, clearly torn between not wanting to say the words and needing to know the truth. 'You didn't have feelings for me anymore?'

How was he supposed to answer that? From the moment they'd met he had been hooked. This spellbinding young woman had persuaded him to take her to a funfair. There had been a small group of them—Thea's friends—but he hadn't even noticed them after the first few minutes. He had only seen Thea.

They'd hurled leather balls at the coconut shy, laughed their way through the hall of mirrors and shared an incredible, intense first kiss at the top of the Ferris wheel.

In most of his life—even much of his childhood—Ben had never felt as happy and free of responsibility as he had that evening with Thea. And he'd known even then that she had an ability to make him fall for her such as no other woman ever had.

And now she wanted to know why he'd walked away from her. What could he say? He owed her something. Perhaps a variation on the truth was the safest option.

'We're just...weren't a good match. I'm sorry, Thea.'

Her body seemed to curl even more into his arms and he felt worse than ever. But it was a necessary lie...no, a half-truth... They weren't a good match. Ben could recall tantalising glimpses of a real inner confidence and a love of life, rippling constantly beneath that artificially shimmering, vivacious exterior. He had seen them from the beginning. She was the kind of person who made people feel good, want to bask in her warm glow for ever.

He wished he could be the kind of person who made her feel good, who could inspire that hidden side of Thea.

Instead he knew that he was the kind of person who would eventually extinguish that dancing light in her soul. If he was the kind of man his father had been he would drag Thea down, as his mother had been dragged down. What kind a life would that be for a woman like Thea?

He'd known as he'd walked her home that night, wondering at the way she had made him feel about her after just one incredible date, that he needed to walk away from her before he did hurt her. But he hadn't been able to. Even as he'd walked up the pathway to her ground-floor flat his head

had been telling him one thing whilst his heart had been making plans to take her out the next day. Imagining a future with her.

And then Dan had opened the door and demanded to know what the hell Ben was doing with his sister.

Dan—the guy who'd had his back through countless tours of duty. The buddy who would have given his life for Ben, and for whom Ben would have sacrificed his own.

Only Dan had and Ben hadn't.

So, just like that, the woman he had thought he might actually be able to fall in love with had been off limits. Still, Ben had to wonder whether Dan had been the real reason that he'd walked away from Thea.

Or just the excuse.

He could have fought for her. The thought slid, unbidden, into his mind. But would that have been fair? All the women he'd dated in the past...he'd never felt strongly enough about any of them. With Thea it was different. It had been even from that first meeting. But the closer you were to someone, the more hurt you could cause. Ben had learned that from his parents. If his father had taught him anything, it was never to get close to anyone. Or let them get close to you.

It was a lesson he'd do well to remember with Thea.

Lost in his own dark thoughts, it took Ben a while to realise that she was asleep. He heard her breathing ease and deepen, felt her heartbeat drop to a slow, rhythmic pulse. And for the first time in a long time—with Thea still wrapped in his arms—Ben fell into a deep, restful sleep of his own.

He woke to the sound of an unfamiliar phone alert. A text? An email? Not wanting to wake Thea, Ben squinted through the curtains to the darkness beyond. Years of field experience told him it had to be around four in the morning.

Nevertheless he felt her stir beside him, felt her raise her head up and then reach across him for her phone. He felt the skim of soft breasts and lacy fabric against his bare chest and fought to stop his body's primal reaction. He didn't stand a chance.

Thea froze.

For a moment Ben vacillated. Should he apologise? Leave? She had wanted him there, to comfort her. She had trusted him. Such a base reaction was the ultimate betrayal of that trust. He had no doubt she would consider it as unexpected as it was unwanted.

He was shocked when, instead of scooting off the bed away from him, Thea reached out and touched his face.

'Don't, Thea. It's not a good idea.' He gripped her wrist, stilling it and moving it away from him as he opened his eyes and came face to face with her direct gaze.

She still looked pale, drained; but there was a glint in her eyes which he hadn't been expecting—something he couldn't quite pinpoint.

It held him in her bed, motionless. Part of him knew he should leave. He had promised her this was a marriage on paper only, assured her she could trust him. Still, part of him wanted to stay. He couldn't deny his attraction to her, and all their talk last night had only made it harder to put his feelings for her safely away in their box.

'Why isn't it a good idea?' she whispered, gently twisting her wrist from his loosened grip, slowly returning it to his face.

She traced the outline of the scar which pulled at the corner of his eye. 'Some war wound, huh?' Her voice shook as she spoke,

Memories punched into him. The last time she'd asked that exact question had been on their one and only date, moments before they'd shared their first kiss. Could it only have been six weeks ago? It had been a gentle yet powerful kiss which had rocked him to his foundations in a way he'd never suspected a mere kiss ever could. It was the moment he'd realised he wanted more, so much more, from this woman.

She'd asked him how he'd got it—assuming, as others had done in the past, that it was something to do with the Army. Ben had always been happy to go along with their assumption—not that he'd dated a lot since his career had begun to come first. But instead he'd found himself telling Thea how the scar was a result of running into an open kitchen drawer when he was boy.

In fifteen years he'd barely even spoken to anyone about his mother. But that night he'd regaled Thea with the story of how he'd been running away from his half-furious, half-scared mum, having been found blown halfway across the room after jamming a kitchen knife into an electrical socket, trying to retrieve his wedged-in toy soldier.

Thea had been shocked and amused in equal measure, with no idea of the enormity of what Ben had just done in telling her something so personal. And now she was tracing his scar and asking him the same question again. Deliberately reminding him of that night.

He felt his willpower slipping.

He snatched his head away, jackknifing his body upright to slide her off him and launching himself sideways out of the bed. But she slipped her arms around him, stopping him from leaving the bed completely.

'We can't do this, Thea,' he repeated.

If he didn't stop this his self-control would crumble, and at some point she would come to hate him for letting this happen. She would never forgive him for not staying strong enough for both of them.

'I don't want to be alone. Not tonight,' she whispered hoarsely.

Grief was still etched into her expression. He felt torn. He was supposed to be here to look after her, to support her—how could he walk out on her now?

He had to get things back to where they'd been a couple of hours earlier. He could hold her, comfort her, but nothing more was going to happen.

He moved back to the bed and sat down to pull her into his arms and soothe her, as he had a few hours earlier, but Thea had other ideas.

Turning her head to his, she pressed her warm mouth to his skin, kissing his temple, his cheek, the skin inches from his mouth.

He moved his hand to stay her. 'Stop, Thea. Neither of us are thinking straight.'

'You're wrong...'

Her shaky voice should have told him more, but he didn't want to hear.

'I know you still want me. And it's precisely because we aren't thinking straight that we can do this. We need this. I need this. I need oblivion. Take me away from all this. Make me forget the last three weeks. Make me forget everything. If only for a short while.'

'It will still be there afterwards,' he said.

Resisting her touch was taking all his willpower. She was right—he did still want her. Despite the promise he'd made to himself six weeks ago, never to go near Thea again, he hadn't stopped wanting her or thinking about her. She had haunted his dreams.

'Just make me forget for a moment. Please, Ben, can you do that?'

She touched him again and his mental grip slipped further. He shouldn't give in, but he was losing control, his head was spinning. Grief, guilt, lust—all mingled together with his lack of sleep over the last month, and Ben struggled to pick his way through the tangle of emotions.

As if sensing his weakening resolve, Thea slid hesitant fingers under the waistband of his boxer shorts, looking to him as if for compliance. He should stand his ground, tell her that she was still grieving and scared and confused, that she didn't know what she was doing.

Except it seemed as if she knew exactly what she was doing. She seemed to know what she wanted and just what effect she was having on him. And, as she'd already pointed out, she knew only too well how much he wanted her.

With a slight dip of his head he conveyed his acquiescence, sucking in deep breath as Thea slid his boxers off him and surveyed every inch of him. Then, almost shyly, she took his hand and moved it to her breast. Her nipple was hard against his palm.

The effect was instantaneous. Pushing her back into the middle of the bed, Ben moved to cover her body with his, and as she arched slightly to meet him every inch of their bodies was pressed into delicious contact. Slowly he lowered his mouth to hers, to claim it as his own, but she squirmed slightly beneath him.

'I don't need the niceties,' she said, flushing red at her boldness. 'I just need you to take me. To make me forget.'

Ben scanned her face. It must have taken some courage for her to say that. He hesitated. Since he'd met her, kissed her, six weeks ago, she had danced into his late-night fantasies, but this wasn't the way he'd imagined their first time to be. Still, there would be plenty of time for languid, indulgent exploration of each other's bodies the next time—and the time after that. If immediate release was what she wanted now, this time, then he wasn't objecting. He just wanted Thea—to touch her, to claim her.

He slid his knee between her legs, gliding his hands over her skin.

'Open for me,' he murmured, revelling in her immediate compliance, sliding his fingers between her legs and finding her hot and wet.

'God...' He gave a guttural groan. 'You're going to be my undoing.'

She gasped as he dipped inside her, finding her clit and flicking back and forth, knowing just the right amount of pressure to elicit a moan of pleasure from her. But before he could continue her hand pushed down between their bodies, her fingers latching around his wrist as she pushed him away, wrapping her legs around him instead and shifting her body so it was central to his.

The tip of his erection skimmed her damp heat and he heard another low moan. It took him a moment to realise it was his own voice.

'No niceties, Ben. Remember?' Thea muttered.

'This is all you want?' Ben asked. Holding back when he was this close was almost unbearable, but he had to be sure.

'It's all I want,' she confirmed, burying her head in his shoulder.

Unable to hold back any longer, he pushed inside her, feeling her stretch around him, tilting her pelvis up slightly to draw him in deeper and deeper. Her arms slid around his back, holding on to him as he rocked inside her. He knew he was close—six weeks of almost nightly dreams of Thea, and none of them had come close to the reality. And this wasn't even their best. But, if the way she was tightening around him was anything to go by, he wasn't the only one close to the edge.

Resting his weight on one arm as he continued his relentless rhythm, he reached for her thigh with his other arm, hooking his hand under her knee and locking her leg around his back. The action opened her up just a fraction more, and Ben heard her little sounds of pleasure as he thrust deeper, harder. Then she was arching up again, her breath quickening, and as she orgasmed she tightened around him—only moments before he felt his own climax crashing over him. His back stiffened and he groaned, spilling inside her, barely able to think but careful to hold his weight off her.

'Ben...?' she whispered, almost expectantly.

Was she waiting for him to say something? For a split second he wished he was good with words—wished he could tell her how he felt right now. Instead he froze, and reality hit him.

This was exactly why he'd needed to stay away from her. He would always be shutting her out, and she would always be fighting for him to let her in. He would never be able to give her what she needed. He was useless.

It was only when he raised himself up to look at her that he saw the tears spilling from her eyes. Horrified, he slipped out of her, rolling onto his side to pull her into his arms.

Thea resisted.

This was what he'd been afraid of.

'This was one of the three most horrific days of my life...' She stumbled over her words.

'I know.' What more could he say?

'I just thought it would make it better. Us. Together. Just this once.'

'And it didn't?' He felt sick. Of course it hadn't. Hadn't he told himself this would happen?

She shook her head, the tears coming faster now.

'If anything, it's made it worse.'

Moving quickly off her bed, he searched for his boxers. Found them. Slid them on as quickly as he could.

He had known she wasn't thinking straight. But he should have known better—saved her from herself. Instead he had taken shameless advantage of her. All because his own lust for her had let him believe her when she'd said it was what she wanted.

His brain searched for something to say—anything which would express how very sorry he was. Nothing came. How could it?

The past—their past—his emotional distance...it was all bound to catch up with them sooner or later. Perhaps it was best that it was sooner. Before anything more happened between them. He needed to get away—put some space between them before he hurt her any more than he already had.

'You're leaving?' she asked flatly.

'I think it's for the best.' So why did the words stick in his throat?

'What now?' Her sad, wary eyes sought his.

He hesitated by the door. 'My compassionate leave is almost over. I'll be shipping out soon anyway.'

'So we go back to the original marriage agreement?' she asked urgently, as if seeking that security at the very least.

He wanted to say no, to tell her that he couldn't go back to anything after what had just happened between them. He wanted to tell her that he wanted more from her, from their marriage. But what had happened between them had only cemented his fear that she was already under his skin and he'd never want to let her go. He owed her more than that. He was no more able to be the kind of man she needed now than he had been six weeks ago. On top of which, his guilt at not being someone she could trust weighed heavily on him. Until he was able to make amends for that he could never ask more of her. So he owed her what he'd originally promised.

'Yes,' he confirmed at length. 'We go back to the original deal.'

She nodded once—a sad bob of her head.

Before he could say anything more—wreck things any further—Ben yanked the door open and escaped into the hallway. Forget a few more days. There was no way he could stay in this house with Thea for even one more night. He needed to get out of here. Now.

CHAPTER THREE

Present day

BEN WATCHED THE interns shuffle out of his side room. The habitual idolising smiles they gave whenever they saw him set Ben's teeth on edge.

'They annoy you, don't they?' Thea asked, suddenly appearing at his door.

He ruthlessly ignored the kick of pleasure at her presence. She shouldn't have to be here. He wasn't her problem.

'They treat me like some kind of...'

'Hero?' Thea smiled.

'I'm not a hero.' Ben ground out the words.

'Two weeks ago you were caught by two IEDs. The first one severed your left arm, yet you still managed to drag your men to safety before getting caught by a second IED. Geez, Ben, you were

pinned under a Land Rover with a suspected crushed spine—it could have left you in a wheelchair for the rest of your life.’

‘It could have but it didn’t,’ Ben growled. ‘They couldn’t tell because of the swelling so they suspected the worst. They were wrong,’ Ben refuted flatly. ‘It turned out I’m fine. I just need to get out of here.’

‘You’re hardly fine,’ Thea scoffed. ‘You still suffered contusions of the spinal cord. You were lucky not to sever it. Not to mention you’ve dislocated and shattered a whole raft of vertebrae which have had to be pinned and bolted. Oh, and did I mention the replantation of your arm?’

‘Really?’ Ben arched an eyebrow at her. ‘I hadn’t noticed—other than the fact that my left arm is now two centimetres shorter than my right arm.’

If he’d thought to intimidate her then he’d thought wrong. If anything, she looked almost amused.

‘Then you’re damned lucky. I saw a girl last year whose right arm was not only severed, but crushed. By the time they cut away the damaged tissue and bone her arm ended up twelve centimetres shorter than the other. This year she underwent bone-lengthening surgery and she’ll be over the moon if she reduces that to a two-centimetre difference. And did I say that she’s right-handed, like you, but unlike you she’s now had to learn to be left-handed?’

‘Then, like I said before,’ he pointed out, ‘I’m fine.’

‘You’re lucky, Ben, but you’re not fine. And pretending you are is only making you push yourself far, far harder than anyone else is comfortable with.’

Before he could respond Thea advanced into the room, ticking off her fingers as she counted the days.

‘Let me break this down for you, Ben. Days one, two and three you were operated on, flown here, and put into traction until the swelling could go down and they could better assess the damage to your spine. That happened on day six. By day seven they were able to operate. By day eight you already had sensation in your lower limbs and were able to move your left big toe on command. Day nine your left toes and your right big toe. By day ten you could move both feet. By day eleven you could lift your left leg above the bed, and day twelve your right leg—’

‘Is there any point to this?’ Ben interrupted.

He shifted irritably in the wingback chair. He hated being in this thing almost as much as he hated being in the damned wheelchair. The sooner Thea left, the better.

‘Yes,’ she replied, unflustered. ‘It’s now day eighteen. By rights you should be up and about in a wheelchair, and you might be able to take a few steps around your room with the aid of a frame. Instead of which you’re pushing yourself around in gruelling laps of the hospital like you think you’re some kind of superhero.’

‘I do not think I’m some kind of superhero.’

‘Really? Then let me check your chart.’

She was right about one thing, though. He was desperate to get out of the room, away from Thea, and push his broken body to try another circuit of the floor. Even the pain was a welcome distraction from the nightmares which haunted his darkest thoughts. Nightmares of explosions and of IEDs, of flying debris and vehicles. The old nightmares too, of Daniel screaming out to him. And now, this last fortnight, inexplicable new nightmares—of Thea, looking on as he lay helpless and weak. In his nightmares he could never work out whether her expression was one of satisfaction or sympathy. Vindication that he’d finally got his comeuppance? Or pity?

No, the pain was good—it meant that he was alive.

So he forced himself to stay still, trapped as he was in the too-soft seat, and tried to let Thea’s words wash over him. He studiously averted his gaze from the detestable hospital bed—in which he tried to spend the very least time he possibly could—and attempted to conceal his frustration.

‘Aha, nothing to indicate a problem on your read-outs. However...’ She glanced up at him before reading the notes. “‘Visual assessment suggests breathing seems shallow, cheeks flushed and feverish—query possibility of infection.’”

‘It’s wrong,’ Ben dismissed it.

‘Of course it is,’ Thea snapped. ‘Since you know, and I know, and fortunately even Dr Fields knows enough to note that any potentially concerning visual indicators are nothing more than a result of the fact that you got up at around five a.m., and then spent the last couple of hours pushing beyond your body’s limits in completing circuits of the hospital before hobbling here—probably in considerable pain—to beat Dr Fields and his interns back on to the ward before they started their rounds.’

‘It’s called recovery.’ He gritted his teeth. ‘I need to push my body to help it heal.’

‘You need to rest!’ Thea cried out. ‘Ben, in all seriousness, you have done incredibly well—in no small part due to your grit and determination. It usually takes five weeks to get where you are now, and you’ve done it in under three. But you need to take things easy.’

‘The sooner I recover, the sooner I can get out of here.’

‘Ben, you have to know that’s not going to happen. Not whilst you still refuse to come home with me. You need someone to take care of you during your recuperation.’

‘I don’t need anyone,’ Ben snarled. ‘Least of all you.’

He didn’t want to hurt her, but it was the only way he could think of to chase her away. She shouldn’t be here—he wasn’t her responsibility. Not when he’d treated her the way he had. But, really, what choice had he had?

There’s always a choice. The thought crept into his head before he could stop it. You just made the wrong one.

‘That’s why I need to push my body. Recover. Then I won’t need to be discharged into anyone’s care,’ he spat out.

‘That isn’t going to happen, Major.’ Dr Fields strode into the room, one of his interns by his side. Dammit, that blasted smile of adulation again.

‘Ben, this isn’t just about your physical recovery. Even if your rehabilitation continues on this fast track you’ve put yourself on—and I highly doubt that it will, since I think you’re pushing yourself far too hard and will end up doing your body more harm than good—I would still need to know you had someone to stay with during the last part of your recuperation. Someone to support you, talk to you, observe you and make sure they’re on hand if there happen to be any unforeseen complications.’

‘If you’re talking PTSD, Doc, just come out and say it.’ Ben shook his head. ‘I’m fine.’

‘You might not want to admit it...’ the doctor spoke gently ‘...but the nightmares which wake you in the night, have you screaming out in a cold sweat, are a symptom of PTSD. It’s still relatively mild at this stage, and only natural after all you’ve been through, but the longer you refuse to deal with it, the worse it will get.’

‘There are men out there who have suffered a lot worse than me,’ Ben growled, not wanting to be having this conversation. ‘Buddies of mine who lost limbs or didn’t even make it. I’m already back on my feet. I’ve nothing to complain about.’

‘Which is the problem.’ Dr Fields sighed. ‘Still, we’ll save that for another day.’

No, they wouldn’t. Ben gave an almost imperceptible shake of his head. He was fine, even if he didn’t deserve to be. But he needed to get out of here.

His eyes slid to Thea. For all her bravado now, he could still remember her standing by his bedside in those first few days, her face white with fear and concern for a man she hadn’t seen in five years. He clenched his fists; she’d been dragged into this out of some misplaced sense of obligation but it had nothing to do with her. There was no way he was about to let her take responsibility for his care. Her unfailing loyalty was her downfall.

He could only imagine how much she must have resented being summoned here. How much she must hate him—dragging her into a marriage in order to fulfil his own need to honour his promise to her brother. Only to give in to his baser desires, his long-standing attraction to her. So what if they had both shared the attraction at one time? He'd had no right—it hadn't been part of the plan. And, anyway, what kind of man bedded his dead best friend's grief-stricken sister?

'Ultimately, Ben, your body still has a lot of healing to do, and I am concerned that you're driving yourself too hard. You need to back up a little, or you risk doing permanent damage.'

'I hear you, Doc.' Ben nodded flatly. No chance. He was out of here as soon as they all left him alone.

Dr Fields turned away from Ben to the intern. 'Dr Thompson—since Major Abrams isn't feeling compliant, I suggest you run those tests after all. Time-consuming, yet non-costly,' he added pointedly. 'I may not be able to stop Major Abrams from destroying the body I worked so hard to repair, but I can slow him down. At least for a few hours.'

'Really, Doc? Pointless tests?' challenged Ben.

'They aren't pointless if they stop you from hauling your butt out of here the minute we walk out the door for another set of exhausting laps. Now, Dr Abrams—' Ben started, and then realised that Dr Fields was addressing Thea. 'Have you got a moment?'

Ben resisted the uncharacteristic compulsion to get up and throw the chair out of the window. For a start, he doubted he'd have the strength. And secondly he never let his temper get the better of him. He never let any emotion get the better of him—hadn't his father always drilled into him the need to keep a tight, unrelenting control over all his emotions as all times? He'd be ashamed of Ben if he knew how his son had used Thea five years ago. Not that his father had ever been proud of him—even when he'd followed in the Colonel's footsteps into the army.

Ben shut down the familiar sense of failure, but it had already got a grip, and as the intern began his nonsensical tests Ben couldn't deny that part of him was grateful for the excuse to take a break—if only for an hour of rest. It was probably the same part of him which was finding it so damned painful to put one foot in front of the other as he shuffled along at such an interminably slow pace.

Weakness, he thought with disgust, and his father's words echoed in his ears. Weakness has no place here.

* * *

Ben grunted with effort as he executed a one-armed pull-up out of the wingback chair and into the wheelchair which would allow him off the ward without attracting attention. Ever since Thea had visited yesterday that intern had held him hostage, running unnecessary test after test. He hadn't managed to get out once, and it had left him feeling irritable.

Yet he couldn't deny that his body felt stronger than ever after a full twenty hours of rest. Maybe today was the day to push himself to walk outside in the fresh air. Once he was outside, in the quieter areas of the hospital grounds, he could discard the unwanted lump of metal and force his body not to be so weak. Dr Fields was wrong. He needed to push harder, not less.

He propelled the wheelchair along strongly with his good arm, only stopping once he'd reached the peaceful gardens outside and found a quiet spot. With a deep breath he pulled himself to an unassisted standing position. So much for a walk. He didn't think he could even take a step. Thank goodness no one could see him like this—weak as a kitten and utterly tragic.

'So now you're trying to kill yourself trying to walk around outside the hospital, without even a wall to lean on?'

His head jerked up. It was an effort to stay upright, but he'd be damned if he fell over in front of her. In front of anyone.

He lashed out before he could stop himself. 'What the hell are you doing here? Are you following me?'

Thea blanched visibly at his hostility and he immediately felt ashamed of himself. Yesterday she'd been so strong, so unintimidated, he had forgotten how easily undermined she could be. The last thing he wanted was to hurt her, yet he had to stay resolute. Thea was only here because the Army had contacted her as his next of kin—as his wife.

His wife. The words echoed around Ben's head, taunting him.

For five years there had been no contact between them, and these sure as hell weren't the circumstances in which Ben would ever have chosen to have her back in his life. When he was helpless and unable to provide for her...to protect her. A wave of self-loathing washed over him. He wasn't even a proper man any more. Just a shell of a man who couldn't walk without leaning heavily on a wall, a rail, a walking frame.

Pathetic, he thought scornfully.

He needed Thea to leave. Now. And surely she wanted to leave, deep down? She couldn't want to be with him now. No one could. He had to convince Thea that her duty was done, that he was fine and that he didn't need her. Then she could leave, get on with her life.

He steeled himself. 'Hell, Thea, can't you see that I don't want you here?'

'I don't understand what I've done to make you hate me so much.'

As fast as the anger had arrived, it disappeared. Hate her? What on earth made her think that? If anything, it should be the other way around.

Suddenly he felt exhausted. He didn't want to fight with her any more. He just wanted her to feel free to go back to her own life whilst he concentrated on his recovery.

'I've never hated you.' Ben spoke quietly. 'But our marriage was never meant to be anything more than on paper. You shouldn't be here now—this isn't your responsibility. I was just trying to make you see that.'

'If you don't want me here, then answer me something.'

'Answer you what?' he asked, wondering why he felt as though he was walking into some carefully set trap.

'Why am I still listed on your Army paperwork as your next of kin?'

Ben felt his breathing stop, before exhaling with a whoosh of air. So he was right—she was only here under obligation, because the Army had called her. She resented him for it, and he couldn't blame her.

'I left you on the Army paperwork because we were married. If I'd put down someone else as my next of kin it would have raised questions.'

'I see.'

Something flashed across her face, but it was gone before he could identify it.

He'd also left her on it so that she would always have a direct means to get in touch with him if she ever needed his help. He'd even hoped she would—especially in those first months after their wedding night. After all, they hadn't used protection. He supposed it was a blessing that nothing had ever come of it; in his experience an absent soldier never made a good dad. And yet he suspected a tiny part of him had once hoped otherwise. Not that he could say that now.

The silence hung between them.

'Now I see that it was a mistake,' he ground out eventually.

* * *

A mistake. Was that really how he thought of her?

Thea felt the nausea churn in her stomach, as it had been doing practically every day since she'd heard about Ben's accident.

She watched him edge painstakingly to the rock wall across the hidden courtyard, and resisted the urge to leap down and ram his wheelchair under his backside, just to stop him from punishing his body.

She spotted a movement out of the corner of her eye—it was the man who had been outside Ben's hospital room that first day. She'd thought he was some kind of Army specialist, but now she wasn't so sure. She'd seen him a few more times over the last few weeks, always observing but never making any direct contact with Ben. Perhaps he was some kind of counsellor—someone Ben could talk to. Someone who might be able to understand this irrational need Ben seemed to have to push his body to breaking point—and maybe beyond.

The first time she'd seen Ben in the wheelchair she'd felt a laugh of disbelief roll around her chest. It had been a welcome light-hearted moment in days of frustrating ignorance and gloom. Only Ben Abrams could have engendered a posse of men from his unit marching down to the hospital to present their hero commander with a racing chair which had once belonged to a former Paralympic basketball champion.

And only Ben would have hurtled around the corridors in it the following week as though he was in a rally car on a racing circuit, pushing his one good arm past its limits.

Even she, who was impervious to him now—or at least ought to be—hadn't been able to ignore the fact that the simple white tee shirt he'd worn had done little to hide the shifts and ripples of the already well-honed muscles which had glistened, to the delight of several of the medical staff, covered with a perfect sheen of sweat.

She could still remember the feel of that solid chest against her body...the sensation of completeness as he moved inside her.

You, my girl, have all the resistance of a chocolate fireguard. She shook her head in frustration. Hadn't she learned anything from that night? Despite his warnings, despite his resistance, she had pushed and pushed until Ben had ended up hurting her—more than she could have thought possible.

Yet here she was. And she might have come for closure, but he was already shaking up her emotions. It was difficult to keep hating a real-life hero who was prepared to sacrifice his own life for others time and again. Not just on an everyday basis, or even after Daniel had died, but when he'd been so very badly injured himself in that bomb blast.

According to some of the neighbourhood wives, all the Army convoys used frequency-jamming devices—which meant that the enemy who had detonated the IED which had caught Ben's patrol had to have been close by. Close enough to potentially have had a shooter to take individuals out.

Ben would have known that too. With all his training it would have been one of the first things he had realised. But instead of taking cover he'd stepped up anyway, to save the lives of five of his men. By rights he shouldn't be alive.

She had to admire this man who was so hell-bent on fighting his way back to full health, who refused to sit back and wallow in self-pity. Even his frustration, his anger now, was because he refused to accept the limitations his body was imposing on him.

She just wished he could let his guard down, even once, and let her in. But he never would. She wondered if he even knew how to.

There was no doubt that Ben's sheer grit had helped him achieve in a few weeks what other patients far more fortunate than him were still fighting to attain after months. She might have known Ben Abrams would be a rare breed... What was it her brother had once told her the men called Ben? Ah, yes, 'the Mighty Abs'. And indeed he was—by name and nature.

He even garnered attention in this place—not just as a soldier, but as a man. She wondered how much female attention he'd enjoyed over the last five years. It was none of her business, she knew that, and yet she couldn't seem to silence the niggling question.

Giving in to temptation, Thea allowed herself a lazy assessment of the man she had once thought herself in love with. Five years on and there were obvious differences, but he still resembled the young man she had known—if only briefly. Despite the dark rings around his eyes—testament to his recent experience—there was no mistaking that he was lethally handsome. Not pretty-boy handsome—he'd never been that—but a deep, interesting, arresting handsome.

The nose which had been broken in the field a few times only enhanced the dangerous appeal he already oozed, and the scar by his eyebrow snagged at his eye, lending him a devil-may-care attitude. She remembered kissing that scar. The feel of his skin under her lips. The glide of her hands down that infamous torso. In her naivety she'd believed that if he gave in to her once, just once, he would realise that they could start again...redefine their relationship.

Sheer folly.

Now, at twenty-six, she understood what Ben had known all along. Things between them would never have worked. He was too entrenched in his ways and she was too idealistic. Still, even if she had realised that one night would be their only night, she wouldn't have changed it—even to spare herself the pain. But she would have taken her time that night. She hadn't been a virgin, but at twenty-one she hadn't had a wealth of experience either. She'd spent the last five years imagining how it would have felt if she'd let Ben do all the things to her he'd wanted to, let herself explore him more...

Heat suffused her body and, embarrassed, Thea dragged her mind from such inappropriate ponderings. Her emotions had been all over the place since she'd seen him again.

Because you still haven't told him your painful secret, goaded a little voice. She closed her mind but it refused to be silenced. What about the baby you lost? Ben's baby?

As long as he'd been away she'd been able to convince herself that it wasn't the sort of thing that could be explained over the phone. But now that he was back she no longer had that excuse. She'd have to tell him before he left again. But not now—and not here.

'Anyway, I'm not following you,' she said abruptly. 'Yesterday I was visiting you, but today I'm working in the area. I'm on my lunch break.'

'You work here?'

'The scrubs didn't give it away?'

Ben frowned. 'You were in your final year of medicine at uni when I left. Then you were going to be a junior house officer. I thought you wanted to go into paediatrics after rotations? That your goal was Great Ormond Street?'

She felt an unexpected rush of pleasure that he remembered. It shouldn't matter. But it did.

'It was. But then Daniel died and everything changed.' She shrugged, seeing the flash of sorrow in his eyes before his face closed against her, as she remembered it doing a decade earlier when she'd spoken her brother's name. Just another reminder of the fact that he could never open up to her.

'I realised I was better in trauma. Daniel had taught me some stuff over the years—techniques you guys use out in war zones which had yet to filter down to Civvy Street. I was able to adapt those things into my own work, so I started to gain quite a reputation. Before long I was getting offers to go and learn from Army trauma doctors who were coming back from Afghanistan. The more I learned, the better I became, and the more offers I got.'

'So now you work here? Nice scrubs... Blue always was your colour,' he said without thinking. The conversation topic had momentarily given them common ground.

'Actually, I work with the Air Ambulance as a trauma doctor. I just happen to be on secondment here at the moment.'

He saw through the excuse immediately, and the moment of connection between them disappeared as he glowered at her. 'You're playing with your career to stay here and check up on me?'

Dammit—she hadn't wanted him to realise. She'd been lucky that the Air Ambulance had been so understanding from the moment she'd told them about Ben last month.

'I'm one of the doctors for the Air Ambulance. I don't play with my career,' she objected. 'They have set up a temporary exchange programme with one of the hospital-based trauma doctors for me.'

'Are you that good?' He looked impressed.

'Yes.' Thea nodded proudly and offered a cheeky grin. Typical of Ben to cut to the chase, and she wasn't about to disappoint him with false modesty. She was proud of all she'd achieved—especially after losing Daniel and Ben, albeit for very different reasons. 'I am good, as it happens.'

She'd worked hard for her achievements, and her past had driven her on—including Ben's abandonment.

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