



CHARLOTTE HAWKES

The Surgeon's
Baby Surprise



**MEDICAL
ROMANCE™**



Charlotte Hawkes

The Surgeon's Baby Surprise

«HarperCollins»

Hawkes C.

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Discovering his secret child! For committed surgeon Max Van Berg, career has always come first. He's only ever risked distraction once—during his whirlwind affair with stunning psychiatrist Evangeline Parker... But now Evie's unexpected reappearance has turned Max's world upside down. Not only is Evie battling illness, but she's been forced to keep an even bigger secret from the surgeon! Against all odds Max is a father, and suddenly his sole focus is fighting for Evie, for baby Imogen and for the family he never knew he wanted until now...

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[Dear Reader,](#)

There are some truly brave and inspirational individuals in this world.

When I first came up with the idea of a heroine in need of a kidney transplant I knew I needed a woman who was strong, determined, and courageous enough to overcome her fears. The more I researched, the more moving stories I read about just such women. Women who, with their partners' support, had risked everything to have a precious baby of their own.

Then I stumbled on a support site for Living Donors—people who had donated one of their kidneys to family, friends, or even complete strangers. It was truly humbling, and so Annie, my heroine's older sister and her very own Living Donor, was born.

I do hope you enjoy reading *The Surgeon's Baby Surprise* as much as I enjoyed writing it. I'd love it if you dropped by my website—charlottehawkes.com—or found me on Twitter [@CHawkesUK](https://twitter.com/CHawkesUK).

Charlotte

The Surgeon's Baby Surprise

Charlotte Hawkes



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Books by Charlotte Hawkes

Mills & Medical Romance

The Army Doc's Secret Wife

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To my wonderful little boys, Monty & Bart.

I love you both 'to a million pieces' —xx

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‘DIFFICULT CASE, DR PARKER?’

Evie snapped her head off the cool glass of the vending machine at the unmistakably masculine voice and tried to quash the fluttering of attraction suddenly tumbling in her stomach, despite her inner turmoil.

When was she going to get over this particularly inopportune attraction?

A moment ago, her brain had been swimming with a particularly challenging case. After a day of fighting for her patient and consistently hitting a brick wall, she was feeling drained and unhelpful, but a question from one of Silvertrees’ foremost plastic and orthoplastic surgeons, Maximilian Van Berg, and she felt more fired up than ever.

Just as she did every time she was around the man.

Evie hastily dredged up a bright smile. Professional but not too flirty. He liked professional, as demonstrated by his use of her title rather than just using her first name as other colleagues did. And he didn’t care much for flirts—any more than Evie cared to be thought of as one.

‘Nothing I can’t handle, Mr Van Berg.’

None of this Dr Van Berg for Max. He was old-school, trained by the Royal College of Surgeons, and he used his right to revert to Mr to reflect that.

‘That I don’t doubt,’ Max murmured to her surprise before turning to the vending machine. ‘Has this thing been swallowing money again?’

Wait, did he just compliment her—and in a voice that was sexy as hell?

Her nerve-endings tingled at the uncharacteristic gravelly tone. She was used to his clipped all-business tone with colleagues. In fact it was a shame Maximilian Van Berg wasn’t a paediatric plastic surgeon—she got the feeling he wouldn’t put his own reputation ahead of the best interests of a patient. He had attended the Youth Care Residential Centre where she normally worked a few times, and they’d always seen eye to eye on the cases then. Part of her itched to run this case by him, too, but he would certainly deem that unprofessional of her. She needed to push all thoughts from today out of her head for the night, think about other things and come back to it, refreshed, in the morning.

Instead, Evie allowed herself a covert assessment of the man beside her. He was wearing off-duty gear, which, she concluded grudgingly, only managed to underscore a muscled, athletic physique more suited to some chiselled movie star than the gifted surgeon the man actually was. As a psychiatrist, Evie only came to Silvertrees when she referred a case from her centre for troubled teens, but even she knew that Max was the golden boy of the hospital. And it hadn’t surprised her to learn how high a proportion of the hospital staff had apparently attempted to land the man, succumbing to the heady combination of undeniable surgical skills and brooding good looks.

But it seemed that what made him most irresistible was the fact that Max was also intensely private. He was committed to his career, notoriously elusive, and inflexible in his rules about keeping emotions and personal life out of his department; on the rare occasions he was snapped by the media at high-profile events, his dates were always the most stunning media starlets, hanging perfectly on his arm. He strongly disapproved of co-workers dating and had even earned himself the moniker

Demon of Discipline. She had never known him to break his own rules, and she could still hear the censure in his tone when he'd heard about her semi-relationship with one of his colleagues.

And yet, during her not infrequent visits to Silvertrees, hadn't she sensed some kind of spark between the two of them whenever they'd met?

Not that she meant to act on it, of course. She knew his rigid reputation only too well, which was one of the reasons she'd enthused about whatever—in reality, lacklustre—relationship she'd been in at the time they'd first met. And it had worked: Max had relaxed in her company, assured that she wasn't flirting with him. Still she'd sometimes felt there was an uncharacteristic softness from him during the rare moments they'd been alone together.

'Dr Parker?' He broke into her musings. 'I asked if the vending machine has been swallowing money again.'

Evie glanced through the glass panel to the item currently lodged, frustratingly precariously, on the half-open metal distribution arm, and sighed.

'The last of my small change...' she nodded, unable to help herself from adding '...and I'm starving.'

Evie tried not to gape as he fished in his pocket for coins for her. Or to notice the way his trousers pulled tantalisingly taut around well-honed thighs as he did so.

'What were you after?' he asked, his eyes not leaving hers.

Evie startled. If it had been anyone else offering to buy her a vending-machine snack she doubted she would have hesitated, but with Max it somehow seemed a more intimate gesture.

'It's just a granola bar, Dr Parker.' He sounded almost amused, as though he could read her thoughts.

She was being ridiculous; she gave an imperceptible shake of her head. It was foolish to allow her own futile attraction to him to lead her to imagine there was more to the simple act than he actually intended.

'As it happens,' she managed wryly, 'it was the raspberry and white chocolate muffin.'

'A sweet tooth.' He smiled. 'I didn't imagine that.'

A charge of heat fizzed through her. Logically, Evie knew he meant nothing by it but she couldn't shake the idea that he'd imagined anything about her at all. Just a shame it wasn't the same X-rated images she'd been unsuccessfully fighting whenever she imagined him.

'It's a weakness.' She fought to show a casual smile, but she couldn't help her tongue from darting out to moisten suddenly parched lips.

As Max's eyes flicked straight down to the movement, Evie could have kicked herself for giving too much away. All she could do now was hold her ground and feign innocence, fighting the tingling heat as his eyes tracked up to meet hers. Boy, she hoped he couldn't really read her thoughts.

'Mine's dark chocolate,' he replied eventually, releasing her gaze as he turned flippantly back to the machine.

'Sorry?' She drew in a surreptitious deep breath.

'My weakness. At least seventy per cent cocoa solids, though probably not more than eighty-five.'

As weaknesses went it was hardly significant yet she felt a thrill of pleasure. In all the time she'd known him she'd never once known him to make such small talk. It loaned her an unexpected confidence.

'I didn't think the lauded Max Van Berg had any weaknesses,' she teased daringly.

'I have them.' He met her gaze head-on again. 'I just make it a point not to show them.'

She swallowed abruptly before taking the proffered muffin from him and promptly tearing off a chunk as her empty stomach growled its appreciation. It had been a long, busy day.

'I can't believe you're still here, going through patient files. Shouldn't you be home, sleeping after a long shift? Or is that another weakness in your book?'

It was meant to be a joke but in her nervousness it came out more clipped than she'd intended. Fortunately, he didn't seem to notice as he cast a grim gaze up the corridor.

'No, I was boxing off my open cases before I leave next week.'

'Oh, that's right.' Evie dipped her head; she remembered hearing something about that. 'You're going away to work with Médecins Sans Frontières, aren't you?'

'An eight-month project in the Gaza Strip,' he acknowledged grimly, shadows chasing across his handsome profile as he turned his head away. 'Helping burn victims, performing reconstructive surgery, amputations.'

'From the fighting?' Her heart flip-flopped at the idea of him risking his life in such an environment.

'Sometimes.' Max shrugged. 'But around seventy-five per cent of my patients will be kids under five years old.'

'I don't understand.'

'Electricity is cut off on a daily basis so the people rely on power from domestic-size gas containers for cooking or to heat their homes. But because the canisters are such poor quality, explosions are an everyday occurrence, and children are usually the victims.'

'It sounds like...rewarding work,' she managed weakly, studying his expression of grim determination.

'It is,' he agreed.

And it was essentially Max Van Berg. On the occasions she'd been to Silvertrees, Evie had found he was the surgeon every trauma doctor wanted to hear was on call for any orthoplastic cases with trauma victims from the A&E. She certainly wasn't surprised that MSF had snapped up a surgeon of Max's calibre.

'I wish every surgeon had your desire to help,' she murmured.

'Problems?'

Why was she hesitating? What did she have to lose?

'It that why you were leaning on the glass, staring so grimly into the machine when I first came into the lounge?' he enquired. 'Because it wasn't for your lost muffin.'

Evie wrinkled her nose. He moved to the coffee machine as she followed on autopilot, refusing to let him intimidate her and trying to ignore the defined muscles that bunched and shifted beneath his black tee shirt.

'I was just thinking about my patient,' she hedged.

'Go on.'

She smiled as his interest was instantly piqued. She could have taken a bet on that. Anything patient-related and it had Max's attention.

'Like I said, nothing I can't handle.'

'I imagine you can,' he repeated. 'We've worked together a couple of times now, Dr Parker. You're focused and you're dedicated to your patients but you don't make rash decisions. I respect your opinion as a psychiatrist, Doctor, and I like that.'

She stared at him in delight until the happiness turned to heat as he pinned her down with an intense gaze of his own.

'I like that a lot,' he repeated, his voice a low rumble. 'In plastics particularly, it's important to me to know who wants my help, and who truly needs it to turn their life around. Sometimes it's easy to tell but other times it isn't so clear-cut.'

Caught in his regard, she felt the atmosphere between them shift slightly. Heat began to rise in her face, travelling down her neck, through her chest until it pooled at the apex between her legs. This was the effect Max always had on her. Sometimes, the way he looked at her almost convinced her he was attracted to her, too.

But that was just fanciful thinking, wasn't it? She'd give anything to know what he was thinking, right now.

'Thank you, I—'

'So, how's she doing?'

'Sorry?'

'Your patient with the significant breast asymmetry.'

Another thrill fizzed through Evie. Had he been watching her?

She hastily reprimanded herself. It was the cases Max was interested in, not the fact that she was on them. She shouldn't be surprised that he knew the patient. She would bet he kept track of all the cases that came through his department—he was that kind of conscientious surgeon.

'That is why you were staring so distractedly into the vending machine, I take it? I also heard you've been reading the Riot Act to one of my colleagues. Are you always this passionate about your patients, Dr Parker?'

Evie blinked, suddenly thrown. His guess might be off, but his assessment of her state of mind was surprisingly on the money.

She had always got deeply involved with her patients, it was true. Her work at the centre had always been more than a job; it had been a calling. But he was right, this case felt personal. She needed to win this battle and help this young girl change her life.

Because this week Evie had received the worst news of her life. Her own body was failing her and soon she might not even be able to help herself, let alone anybody else.

It hadn't been completely out of the blue. Fifteen years ago she'd been diagnosed with polycystic kidney disease, PKD, but she'd never shown any symptoms. However, during her routine check-up this week, to her shock, decreased kidney function had been detected. Her nephrologist had warned her that, whilst she could continue as normal for now, within the next six to twelve months she would begin to feel too exhausted to even continue as a doctor, and within a couple of years she would need a kidney transplant.

If she didn't get a new kidney she would never be able to help another troubled child, never have a child of her own. Worst-case scenario, she might not even have her life.

She hadn't confided it to a soul. She hadn't wanted to. And part of her had an inexplicable urge to spill all her fears to this man right here, right now. If she could trust anyone with this secret, it would be Maximilian Van Berg.

Yet another part of her held back. Better to stay away from her personal problems, concentrate on someone she could help: her patient.

Evie drew in a breath and sipped tentatively at the hot drink to steady her nerves.

'Honestly, it's just that my patient really does need this operation, not just for the obvious physical benefit but, as far as I'm concerned, for her mental well-being. She's on the brink of psychological depression, becoming more and more disruptive in school, and becoming so reclusive that her social skills aren't developing.'

'The issue, as I've seen, is that one of her breasts is barely an A-cup and the other is almost a D-cup, so the need for an operation in the future is inevitable?' he stated abruptly.

'Right.' Evie nodded as Max frowned. So he had been looking into the case file.

'She can't wear a bra that fits, she can't go swimming with her friends, or go to friends' houses for a sleepover. She can't even change in front of them for a basic PE lesson in school without being taunted. It's making her withdraw socially, and she's now developing stress-induced Irritable Bowel Syndrome.'

'I read the file, Dr Parker,' he responded, removing his drink from the machine and taking a generous gulp.

The man must have an asbestos mouth.

She gave an imperceptible shake of her head to refocus her thoughts.

'However, the paediatric surgeon we spoke to doesn't want to operate due to her young age. He doesn't want to operate when the patient is still growing and developing, and he doesn't know if she could cope mentally with the procedures, including an implant.'

'He has a point.'

'I appreciate that, and you must know how cautious I am about making such recommendations. But I've worked with this girl for almost a year. I don't believe its body dysmorphic disorder, and I know it's a fear of all paediatric plastic surgeons that they could miss such a diagnosis. In this case it clearly isn't an imagined or minor so-called defect in her appearance. It is something which is understandably imposing significant limitations on her life.'

'And what about realising the impact of these procedures? Does your patient understand that her body will never be perfect, that she will have to deal with the scars from the operation?'

'She absolutely does understand that. But, in her own words, the scar is something she could live with. It wouldn't prevent her from wearing a bra, or a swimsuit, or a prom dress. All things she currently can't do.'

He pinned her with a look that was more about the undercurrents running between them than the conversation they were ostensibly having.

'And your assessment is that this procedure isn't just about rectifying the physical problem but is necessary for developing well-being?'

'I think it's essential to her self-esteem and her social development at this crucial time in her life, Mr Van Berg.'

Her hands shook as she took another steadying sip of her coffee, her eyes still locked with his over the plastic rim.

'Then I'll take a look at the case before I leave.'

'You would do that for her?'

'I told you before, I respect you as one professional to another,' he growled. 'So, how's the boyfriend?'

Evie stiffened. As it happened her latest attempt at a boyfriend had resulted in being unceremoniously dumped when his mother had deemed her not good enough for her precious son, after Evie had revealed that she would never be able to give the woman the longed-for grandchild.

She hadn't loved the guy, but, still, it had been painful. It had hurt being told that she wasn't good enough, an echo of the hurt she'd felt when her father had walked out all those years ago.

But surely Max couldn't know about her pathetic love-life? She'd be a laughing stock. Hospital gossip was an unstoppable machine, everyone knew that, but, not working at Silvertrees permanently, she'd always convinced herself that she escaped the worst of it. Still, if people did know, then she couldn't afford to lie to Max now.

'Gone.'

She fought to affect nonchalance.

'Good. He didn't deserve you anyway,' Max murmured, his hand reaching slowly up to lower the cup from her lips.

'You didn't know him,' she protested mildly.

'I know if he lost you, he's a loser.'

Evie swallowed hard, unable to tear her eyes away from his.

'I'm going to check on your patient now. All I ask in return is that you join me for a drink in the bar across the way as soon as I can get away from this farewell party I'm supposed to be at right now.'

'What about your business and pleasure rule?' she whispered.

'In a few days, I won't even be in this country, let alone this hospital.' He gave a lopsided grin, so sexy it made her toes curl. 'I think we can bend the rules this once, don't you?'

His head inched closer until his nose skimmed hers. It was like some kind of exquisite torture. She knew she should be strong, back away. But didn't she know only too well that life was short?

Stretching her neck, she closed the gap between them, a small sound of pleasure escaping her throat as her lips met his.

Max responded without hesitation. One hand slid around the back of her head as the other pulled her firmly to him. The reality of the feel of his solid body even more impressive than the eye had allowed the mind to imagine. His teeth grazed her lips as his tongue danced seductively. He might seem dedicated to his career and refuse to date within the hospital pool, but there was no doubting that Max had dated. He knew exactly what he was doing to her.

It was all Evie could do to raise her hands and grip his shoulders and she hung on for the ride.

'Is that you?'

'Is what me?' she muttered, frustrated that he'd pulled away from her.

'The beeper.' His voice was laced with amusement.

Slowly a familiar sound filtered into her head.

'Oh, that's me,' she gasped as her brain slowly clicked back into gear.

'Yes...' the corners of his lips twitched as she stood dazed and immobile '...Evangeline. You need to go now.'

'I do,' she murmured, muscle memory allowing her legs to start moving, backwards but in the right direction, even as her brain felt frazzled.

'I'll go and see your patient. When you're done with whatever your message is you can come and find me. I'll be back in my office.'

'I... Okay, I'll...see you later, Mr Van Berg.'

She watched Max turn smoothly and walk towards the double doors at the far end of the corridor, unable to stop him or say anything. It was only when her back slammed into something solid that she realised she'd reached the double doors at her own end.

She wanted to say something, but no words would come.

'Oh, and, Evangeline?' Max twisted his head to call over his shoulder. 'For the rest of tonight shall we agree that it's Max, and not Mr Van Berg?'

A slow grin spread over her face as he disappeared through the doors.

CHAPTER ONE

EVIE PACED THE hospital corridor.

The wait was excruciating. The squeak of her shoes sounded unusually distracting as she slowly turned on the polished floor. The ever-present smell of disinfectant pervaded her olfactory senses in a way it never had before, so strong that she could almost taste it. Once she'd been a doctor here, now she was a patient like anyone else. She could wait in the visitors' room but there was already a woman in there who seemed to want to talk every time Evie was in there.

And anyway, out here she felt more in control, and closer to her sister-in-law, Annie. Beyond the double doors, Annie was going through yet another set of checks to confirm that she was still suitable to be Evie's living donor for a new kidney. But after almost a year and a bombardment of test after test to confirm compatibility and eligibility, these final cross-matching and blood-pressure checks still had to be run.

She subconsciously touched her lower abdomen, more out of habit than pain since the cramps had already subsided after today's dialysis session. Less than a week and this whole nightmare would hopefully be behind her.

Yet that wasn't even what had her heart performing its real show-stopping drum solo, as it had every single visit she'd made to Silvertrees since that night with Max, almost one year ago to the day. The double doors clanged at the end of the corridor, causing her to whirl around, her heart in her throat, just as it had been every other hospital visit in the last four months since he'd returned from Gaza. But it was always just patients or hospital staff she didn't know or barely recognised. Evie had no reason to think she would ever just bump into Max here. The transplant unit was in a dedicated

wing set slightly apart from the main hospital. And yet every time she feared—and hoped—that the next person to walk through the doors would be him.

She could have chosen a different hospital, the one closer to where she now called home, but Evie's referral to the state-of-the-art facility at Silvertrees was like gold dust and she'd have been a fool to turn it down for fear of bumping into a man who, for all intents and purposes, had been nothing more than a one—okay, five—night stand.

At least, that was the argument she told herself, and the one she was sticking with. After the two catastrophic attempts she'd made to contact him when he'd still been in Gaza, to tell him about the baby they had created together, she wasn't about to admit out loud that some traitorous part of her secretly dreamed that Fate might intervene. That, in the silence of the night, a tiny, muffled voice challenged her to venture into the main hospital and find him.

Not that she had any idea what she would say to him. How she would even attempt to begin to explain the choices that she'd made. In her heart she knew everything she'd done had been for their baby—a miracle, given the deterioration in Evie's kidney condition at the time of the pregnancy—but it didn't make her feel good about herself.

And still.

She'd hardly been in a state to think clearly when she'd accepted the hush money. In a daze from her premature baby and her kidney failure, rushing between NICU and her dialysis sessions. So when Max's parents—the people who should have their son's best interests at heart—had told her that neither they, nor their son, would want anything to do with the baby, a fiercely protective new-mother instinct of her own had kicked in. She'd worked with enough troubled teens to know how damaging it could be when a child was unloved, unwanted. And she had her own painful experience of being left by her father, too.

Both she and Imogen deserved better than that. They deserved to be cherished, not made to feel like a burden. And so Evie had allowed herself to be persuaded it was in her precious baby's best interests not to tell Max Van Berg he was a father.

But what if she'd been wrong? What if Max would have wanted to know about his daughter? Her head whirled with doubts, drowning out the sound of the double doors slamming open once again.

'Evie?'

Goosebumps swept across her skin. She didn't turn around; she couldn't. The voice was painfully familiar and intensely masculine. It evoked a host of memories that Evie had spent a year trying unsuccessfully to bury. A prong of doubt speared her insides. Had she been wrong to believe he didn't care? Because in that perfect moment Max actually sounded happy—albeit a little shocked—to see her.

She swallowed ineffectually, her mouth too parched, and her heart wasn't so much beating in her chest as assaulting her chest wall. Whatever she'd imagined, she wasn't mentally prepared for this but there was nothing else for it.

Steeling herself against the kick from the moment she laid eyes on Max again, Evie lifted her head boldly and completed a slow one-eighty.

She hadn't steeled herself enough.

'Max.' She gritted her teeth, striving to sound calm. In control.

'What are you doing here, Evie?'

There was still no trace of chilliness in his tone. Was that a good thing, or a bad one? It suggested he knew nothing about Imogen, so maybe there was still hope. But then again, it also meant he'd been happy with their fling and certainly hadn't been thinking about her these last twelve months so the bombshell of a daughter wouldn't be well received.

So she stayed silent and contented herself with drinking in the man she recalled so very intimately.

Time apart had done little to diminish the sheer physical presence he exuded and she was grateful for the few feet of space between them, acting as something of a safety buffer, both mentally and physically. But space couldn't erase everything. The way Max looked and the authority he exuded. The feel of his skin beneath her hands and her body. The way he smelled—no overpowering aftershave for Max, but instead a faint, intoxicating masculine scent underpinned with a hint of lime basil shower gel she remembered only too well.

'Are you working here again?' he pushed.

'No.'

Silence hung between them.

'Evangeline, why are you here?'

She had to say something. She was standing in the middle of a dedicated transplant unit—she had to explain her visit somehow. So she settled for a half-truth.

'My sister-in-law has some tests before her appointment with Mrs Goodwin,' Evie started carefully, studying his face for any kind of reaction.

'Arabella Goodwin?' He frowned. 'The nephrologist?'

'That's right,' she confirmed slowly.

'Is it serious?'

Evie searched his face; she needed to be careful here. Really be sure of herself before she said anything.

Admittedly, he seemed genuinely interested, but that meant nothing. This was the side of Max she knew, his sincere concern for his patients and their families. But it didn't mean he wanted a family of his own. It just meant he was dedicated to his career.

Just as his parents had cruelly reminded her.

Just as they'd made her see that, for Max at least, their short-lived fling had been just that. It certainly hadn't been the start of something. He hadn't asked her to wait for him whilst he was away in Gaza. He hadn't even told her that his parents were the renowned surgeons she had read about, attended guest speaker talks to see, studied, throughout her medical studies.

In short, they had shared five nights and four days of intense, unparalleled intimacy, yet told each other so very little about their lives beyond the bedroom.

What if she told him everything now only for him—out of some ill-considered knee-jerk sense of obligation—to involve himself in their lives, only to resent his daughter's existence every time it even threatened to impact on his career?

Wasn't that the nightmare scenario his parents had painted for her? Right before they'd offered her enough money to secure her daughter's financial future in the event that her kidney transplant failed and she wasn't around to look after her precious daughter herself?

But it wasn't just what they'd said, it had been their calm, assured delivery. As if they were acting in her interests as much as in their son's. As if they really believed that her taking the money and staying away was the best solution for everyone. That was what had convinced her to take their word for it.

The savage protectiveness Evie felt for her new daughter still caught her unawares sometimes. There was nothing she wouldn't do to protect her beautiful daughter from anything which—or anyone who—could potentially hurt her.

If the Van Bergs had been cruel or vindictive, she probably wouldn't have believed them, wouldn't have taken the money. But she'd been frightened. And vulnerable. Between her bleak prognosis and her premature baby, she hadn't been able to face a battle on a third front. And if his parents were right and Max didn't want to know, how could she face yet more anguish? She couldn't risk it. So now, she needed to buy herself time to think. She'd never expected to see Max again.

But was that completely true? Hadn't she always hoped, deep down, when she was stronger, and if the transplant was successful, that she might be able to track him down again? Hadn't she told

herself that, if all went well, she would push past her own fears of rejection and loss to finally tell him about his daughter? For Imogen's sake, because her precious daughter deserved so much more.

But now was not that moment.

'Annie's going through final checks for a kidney transplant. Blood pressure and all that,' Evie trotted out.

She sounded more blasé than she'd have liked, but it was better than having to tell him Annie was actually a kidney donor and that she herself was the recipient. And it was better than breaking down and telling him how frightened she was.

She should have known better than to think she could fool someone as astute as Max. Disbelieving eyes raked over her and she tried to suppress the wave of heat at his intense assessment, all too conscious of the toll her illness and the pregnancy had taken on her over the last year. Dark pits circled her eyes, her frame was unattractively thinner, and her skin flat and pallid—no matter how much she tried to lift it with clever make-up.

She squirmed under his sharp gaze.

'God, Evie, I'm so sorry. I had no idea.' The reserved tone was gone again, replaced by an open candour she thought was more Max-like. 'Didn't you say you were close to your brother and his wife? No wonder you look so pale—you must be so worried about her.'

Her stomach flip-flopped. He'd actually remembered some of the few things she'd told him. Was that really something he'd have bothered to take notice of if it had only been about the sex? Her mind swirled with conflicting thoughts.

She jumped as she closed the gap between them, his hands closing firmly around her shoulders, drawing her in so that she had no choice but to look him in the eye.

'Evie, if you need anything, you know you can come to me, don't you?'

Residual sexual attraction still fizzled between them.

Chemistry. It's just chemistry, Evie repeated to herself, clinging to the mantra like some kind of virtual life raft. But her grip was slipping and a flare of hope flickered into life deep in her chest. At this stage of her renal failure, a man who could make her feel attractive, wanted, who could make her forget her constantly exhausted body and her regular rounds of dialysis, was a rare male indeed.

Only Max could have snuck under her skin in five minutes flat.

She so desperately wanted to let him kiss her, take her, reassure her that she was still a sexy, desirable woman. It would be welcome relief after the year she'd had.

But this wasn't about her, this was about Imogen, too, and Evie couldn't risk her daughter being drawn into some game as a pawn. Hadn't her own biological father used herself and her brother to hurt their mother? First by walking out on them when Evie had been a baby, with no contact for years, and then by trying to play them off against each other when their mother had finally found happiness with a new man. A kind man who Evie considered to be her true father rather than simply her stepfather. A man who had saved her from going down the kind of route that too many of her troubled teens now found themselves stuck on.

Even now, eighteen months on from the fatal car crash on the winding, twisting Pyrenees' roads on what had been her parents' second honeymoon to celebrate their twenty-fifth wedding anniversary, she still missed them.

It was the kind of close, loving relationship she'd always imagined for herself. The kind of relationship Max had never offered—could never offer—her.

She looked up into his dark eyes and shuddered.

Despite all her self-recriminations, the need to give herself up to Max, to take him up on his offer of support and to give in to her body's welcome burst of energy and unexpected ache for him, was all too thrilling.

'Here, put this on.'

It was only as Max was wrapping his coat around her shoulders that Evie realised he'd thought she'd shivered with the cold. She couldn't help casting a glance up and down the corridor, spotting a couple of nurses at the far end. Too far away to hear their words but watching their exchange with interest.

'Max, please,' she whispered. 'We're being observed.'

He followed her gaze to their curious audience and, muttering a low curse under his breath, turned her around and propelled them down the corridor.

'In here,' he ground out as he bundled her into an unoccupied room off the corridor. And so help her, she let him.

* * *

'What's going on, Evie?'

It took everything in Max to push her away from him when all he wanted to do was pull her into his arms and remind himself of her taste, her touch, her scent.

'I don't know what you mean.'

She was lying.

He'd spent the last year unable to get this singularly gentle, funny, sinfully sexy woman out of his head. So much for telling himself, before giving into temptation with her that night, that it would be a one-time fling. He'd always been a firm believer in avoiding dating workplace colleagues, something he'd had no problem adhering to before Evangeline Parker had come along. He wasn't exactly short of willing dates with women who had nothing to do with the hospital, or even the medical profession at all, yet no one had ever got under his skin as Evie had.

She was the first person to ever make him think about anything other than his career as a surgeon. To ever make him wonder if there was more out there for him than just reaching the very pinnacle of his speciality. It had only been that phone call from his parents, on the last evening of his time with Evie, that had unwittingly brought him back to earth.

They were skilled surgeons but cold, selfish parents, and his childhood had been bleak and lonely, a time he rarely cared to look back on. Talking to them that night had reminded him why he would not put any wife, any family, through the only home life he had known. It was a choice. Be a pioneering surgeon, or be a good family man. Never both.

And he could imagine that a family was what Evie would want. What she would deserve.

So he'd thrown himself into his eight-month tour in Gaza, appreciating the challenging working conditions, the difference he was making—and the fact that it was providing a welcome distraction from memories of that one wanton, wild, yet exquisitely feminine woman. However many amazing, lifesaving surgeries he'd performed, he'd always gone back to his tent at night wishing he could share the day's events with Evie. Wishing he were sliding into his emperor-sized bed with her rather than dropping onto his tiny cot, alone.

Yet now she was standing here in front of him, and he wanted her as much as he ever had, telling himself that the only reason he hadn't walked away from her was because she clearly needed someone to talk to. A flimsy excuse, since she clearly wasn't jumping at the chance of opening up to him. Just as they'd revelled in the sex but both been so careful to avoid much personal conversation those five hot-as-hell nights together.

'I think you do know,' he contradicted quietly. 'This is about more than just your sister-in-law and her kidney transplant, isn't it?'

Evie bit her lip, refusing to meet his eye.

'What do you mean?'

She didn't want to talk. But she probably needed to.

'You're concerned for her, frightened for her? That's understandable. But I'm guessing this is more about you feeling as though you need to be the strong one because you're the doctor, and people are looking to you for the answers.'

She chanced a glance at him but didn't answer, so he pushed on.

'It's very different being on the other side of the fence when you're used to being the one making the decisions, but I'm guessing you can't talk to Annie, or your brother, about your fears. So I'm offering for you to talk to me instead.'

'Why would you do that?'

She sounded bewildered. Was he really that unapproachable?

'Because I once told you I respect you as one professional to another.'

'I see.'

Was that a flash of disappointment? She shook her head, the moment gone.

'I can't.'

If he simply walked away then he'd feel like a cad. But if he pushed her then he risked misleading her into thinking that he was open to something more between them.

'Can't, or won't?'

She opened her mouth, closed it, and then opened it again.

'Can't. I want to, Max, more than you know. But I can't.'

There was no reason for his chest to constrict at her words. Yet it did. He gritted his teeth. As long as he could persuade her that there was nothing more between them—that he wasn't remembering how incredible it had been to undress her, lay her on the bed and kiss her until she came undone at his every touch—then she might talk to him. And she definitely needed to talk to somebody.

'Fine, let's discuss the elephant in the room.'

She swallowed hard.

'So, we had a one-night stand—'

'Five nights,' she interrupted, flushing bright red.

He felt a kick of pleasure. So it mattered to her?

'Okay, five nights,' he conceded, allowing himself a lopsided grin and watching her carefully. 'Five nights of, frankly, mind-blowing sex.'

She flushed again, crossing her arms over her chest as if to reinforce an invisible barrier between them. But it was too late—he'd seen the way her pupils dilated in pleasure at his words. She might not want to talk to him, but she was certainly still attracted to him.

Her breathing was slightly more rapid, shallower than before, the movement snagging his eye to the satin-soft skin his fingers recalled even now. Her lips parted oh-so-slightly as her tongue flicked out to leave a sheen glistening on her lips. An action that he'd experienced in other ways over those five nights. An age-old response had his body growing taut.

He needed to walk away.

He couldn't.

He closed the gap between them until he could feel her breath on his skin, smell that mandarin shampoo of hers in his nostrils.

'It doesn't have to be over,' he muttered hoarsely. 'Neither of us have the time or inclination for wasting time playing at relationships. But we're both consenting adults, why not enjoy the sex?'

'Just sex?' she whispered again.

He couldn't help it. Before he could stop himself, he reached his hand out and slid his fingers under her chin to tilt her head up. Her eyes finally met his and the sensation was like an electric shock through his body.

'Just sex,' he ground out, as much to remind himself as to convince her.

For a moment he thought she was going to turn him down, but suddenly she raised her hand to catch his and held it against her cheek. Closing her eyes, she rested her chin in his palm as though drawing strength.

'Evie.' His other hand laced through her silky hair to draw her to him; he inhaled her gentle scent, so painfully familiar. The feel of her hands gripping his shoulders then running down his upper arms, the way her breasts brushed against his chest, heating him even through the material that separated them both.

And then his mouth was on hers and Max couldn't be sure which one of them had closed the gap first. He didn't really care. With one hand still threaded through her hair, he trailed the other hand down her cheek, her neck, her chest, feeling her arch her back to push her breast into his palm.

He heard his low growl of anticipation as the hard nipple grazed his palm through the layers of thin cotton, dropping his hand so that he could flick his thumb across it. He dropped down to perch on the corner of the table as she moved over him and his thigh wedged between her legs, which pressed against him so that he could feel the heat at their apex. He dropped his other hand down her back to cup her wonderfully rounded backside, smaller than he recalled. And then she kissed him intensely and it was just the two of them as everything else fell away.

'God, I want you,' he groaned.

'How much?' she whispered.

'You must know the answer to that,' he rasped out, her uncertainty surprising him. The woman he'd known last year hadn't needed validation or reassurance, she'd been sexily confident in her own skin. Still, if she wanted him to show her then he was more than willing to oblige.

But before he could act, Evie had tugged his shirt out, the buttons opening easily beneath those nimble fingers of hers. Dipping her head, she nipped and kissed his body that was leaner and tighter than ever. It ought to be—he'd been hitting his home gym hard ever since his return from Gaza, the only way he could burn off excess energy since he hadn't wanted to sleep with any other woman since Evie.

As she made her way back up to his lips Max pulled her back into him, his hands sliding under the fitted blouse that followed the curves of her pert breasts, revelling in the way her breath caught in her throat.

Suddenly he froze. Her once slender form felt thin. Too thin. He could actually count her ribs. He drew back shaking his head; nothing was as clear or sharp as usual. Was he missing something?

'Evie, stop...'

And then Max felt her slump slightly, as though the sudden flame of energy she'd had had just been stamped out without warning.

He was a first-class jerk. Evie was worried about her sister-in-law and he was only interested in rekindling the connection between them.

'I'm sorry, that should never have happened.'

Evie shook her head, and as she pulled away from him he clenched his fists by his sides just so that he didn't pull her back.

'No, it was my fault, Max.' She sounded distraught. 'I shouldn't have come back here.'

For the first time, Max wondered if he'd made a mistake. It wasn't a feeling he was accustomed to. He could read charts, he could read patients, he could read histories. He'd never been bothered to learn to read relationship signals before.

Dammit. Had he got it all wrong?

'Evie, is there something else going on here?'

'Leave it, Max. Please.' She stepped back so abruptly that she almost fell, but it was the pleading in her eyes that stayed his arms from catching her.

Max watched some inner battle war across her features, then, apparently unable to trust herself to say another word, she straightened up and forced her legs to move. He knew it wasn't the moment to stop her. He had some investigating to do before he charged in there.

He forced himself to stay still as she stumbled out of the room, the slamming door reverberating with raw finality.

CHAPTER TWO

IT WAS TIME for answers.

Max pulled up outside the unfamiliar house and turned the purring engine off with satisfaction. His sleek, expensive supercar—one of his very few real indulgences to himself—was incongruous against the older family cars and the backdrop of the suburban street. He checked the address he'd hastily scribbled down on the back of a hospital memo.

It was definitely the right place. But the nondescript, nineteen-fifties semi-detached house on a prepossessing street, almost ninety minutes from Silvertrees, was the last place he would have expected to find Evie—it all seemed so far removed from the contemporary flat that he was aware had come as part of her package working at the Youth Care Residential Centre.

But then, what did he know about the real Evie Parker?

And for that matter, what was he even doing here?

Instinct.

Because decades as a surgeon had taught him to follow his gut. And right now, as far as Evie was concerned, he couldn't shake the feeling that there was something fundamental he was missing. Sliding out of the car, he crossed the street, his long stride easily covering the ranging pathway from the pavement to the porch. He knocked loudly on the timber door, hearing the bustle on the other side almost immediately, before it was hauled open.

'Max.'

'Evangeline.' He gave a curt nod in the face of her utter shock, wishing he didn't immediately notice how beautiful she was.

And how exhausted she looked. He'd seen the dark rings circling her eyes yesterday, along with the slightly sallow skin, so unlike the fresh-faced Evie he'd known a year ago. Just like how thin she'd become, all clear indicators of the toll her illness was taking on her body. He could scarcely believe his surgeon's mind had allowed her to fob it off on being concerned for the health of her sister-in-law. But as soon as she'd gone and his gut had kicked back in, it hadn't taken much digging to discover that it was Evie who was unwell, not Annie. That it was Evie who needed the transplant, not Annie.

He felt a kick of empathy. And something else he didn't care to identify. He shoved it aside; he was here to satisfy himself there really wasn't something he was missing, and to be a medical shoulder to cry on. Nothing more than that.

Evie stepped onto the porch, pulling the door to behind her, clearly not about to invite him in.

'What are you even doing here?'

Ironic that he had asked her the same question less than twenty-four hours earlier.

'Why did you tell me Annie was the one who needed the transplant?' He was surprised at how difficult it was to keep his tone even and level with her, when at work his professional voice was second nature.

Evie's face fell. He didn't miss the way her knuckles went white as she gripped the solid-wood door tighter.

'I didn't.' She tilted her chin defiantly.

'You implied it, then. It's semantics, Evie.'

'How did you find out?'

'I was concerned. Things didn't seem to add up.'

To her credit, she straightened her shoulders and met his glare with a defiant one of her own. That was the Evie he knew.

'You've been checking up on me? Reading my file?'

'You left me with little choice.' He shrugged, not about to apologise. 'And don't talk to me about ethics—for the first time in my career I don't care. You should have been the one to tell me, Evie.'

‘Well, you should be sorry,’ she challenged, although he didn’t miss the way her eyes darted nervously about. ‘You were the one who always used to be such a stickler about doctor-patient confidentiality.’

‘Is this really the conversation you want to have?’ Max asked quietly.

She stared at him, blinking hard but unspeaking. One beat. Another.

‘You’re right, I’m sorry,’ she capitulated unexpectedly. ‘Yesterday...it’s been playing in my head and now I’m glad you know. I...just didn’t know how to tell you.’

His entire body prickled uneasily.

‘Are you going to invite me in?’

She fidgeted, her eyes cast somewhere over his shoulder, unable to meet his eye.

‘First tell me exactly what you gleaned from my file?’

Max hesitated. There was something behind that question that was both unexpected and disconcerting. The Evie he’d known was feisty, passionate, strong, so unlike the nervous woman standing in front of him, acting as though she had something to hide, as much as she tried to disguise it.

‘As it happens, I didn’t read your file. You can relax. I just spoke to Arabella.’

‘Sorry?’

‘Arabella Goodwin, your nephrologist,’ Max clarified patiently. ‘I told her you’d approached me about the kidney transplant yesterday whilst your sister-in-law was having her tests done. Which, technically, you had done. Imagine my shock when she assumed I knew that Annie was a living donor and that you were the recipient.’

He’d just about managed to cover up his misstep with his fellow surgeon in time.

‘Oh,’ Evie managed weakly. ‘What else did she say?’

‘That your sister-in-law was in for the final repeat tests to ensure nothing had changed before the operation could proceed. I understand you’re due for your transplant next week but you’ll be taken in for the pre-op stage in a matter of days.’

‘And?’ she prompted nervously.

He frowned at her increasing agitation.

‘Do you mean your PRA results and your plasmapheresis?’

He heard her intake of breath before she offered a stiff nod. His frown deepened. Her tenseness made no sense—surely she had to know that the Panel Reactive Antibody blood tests were undertaken by every potential renal transplant patient in order to establish how easy—or difficult—it would be to find a compatible donor?

What was he missing here?

‘Evie, it isn’t uncommon,’ he tried to reassure her. ‘You must know that around twenty-five per cent of patients who need renal transplants go through plasmapheresis to remove dangerous antibodies from their blood and increase their compatibility. You’ve nothing to worry about.’

‘Did she tell you anything else about it?’

She asked the question quietly, but he didn’t miss the shallow rise and fall of her chest.

‘Evie, is this about your previous transplant not working? Is that why you’re so frightened?’

‘My previous transplant?’

He bit back his frustration at her resistance to confiding in him.

‘You have high antibody levels, Evie, so either you’ve had a transfusion, a pregnancy, or a previous transplant. I’m guessing it’s the latter, presumably when you were a kid?’

It would certainly explain her ever-increasing agitation, if she was afraid her body would reject another kidney.

‘You’re guessing a previous transplant,’ she repeated, almost to herself before twisting her head up to him again. ‘You really didn’t read my file.’

‘Of course not.’ Max blew out a breath. ‘Although I admit I was tempted. But I didn’t want to do that to you, or to a colleague like Arabella. I do want to hear it from you, though. Like I said last

night, I can imagine you're having to be strong for your family and that leaves no one to be there to support you.'

Not least since, over the last twelve months, there must have been a veritable battery of tests for Evie. And for Annie, too. But it was Evie who concerned him, right now.

'Since when do you have the time to leave your surgeries?' she asked sadly. 'Or, for that matter, the inclination?'

It was a valid question. He didn't think he'd have even delayed a surgery for a five-minute coffee with a needy colleague in the past, let alone shuffle his schedule so he could drive a three-hour round trip, not to mention the fact that he was determined not to leave here until Evie had confided all her fears and uncertainties.

He wanted to help her. Needed to help her. There was no point pretending otherwise.

'Since it was you,' he answered honestly, 'I made the time.'

He'd sensed she needed the shoulder to cry on from the moment he'd run into her the previous day, but he'd had no idea just how much until she stared at him with wide, suddenly glistening eyes, before almost buckling at the door. He moved forward and swept her up before she hit the ground.

'Let's get you inside.'

He had no idea what Evie wanted from him as he carried her through the hallway. She was staring at him, blinking back the tears, and he felt as though she was evaluating him, as though somehow he'd just passed some kind of test he hadn't even realised he was taking.

He crossed over an original-looking, slightly broken-up parquet floor, past family pictures of people he didn't recognise, and past a coat rack sagging under the weight of coats and waterproof jackets in a rainbow of colours. Pairs of shoes and trainers, women's, men's and clearly a young boy's. An old pram and a box of toys.

There was no doubt it was a family house, practically bursting at the seams. And there was nothing of Evie he really recognised about it.

Finally reaching a quiet living room, just as packed with paraphernalia as the hallway, Max lowered her carefully to the floor.

'This isn't where I'd have pictured you. I take it this is your sister-in-law's home?'

'Yes,' Evie answered slowly. 'And my brother's, obviously. I lost my flat at the centre when I became too tired to work there. Annie invited me to move in with them about nine months ago when I... I needed the help.'

She stopped short of whatever she'd been about to say. He didn't think now was the time to push her.

'That can't have been an easy thing to do.'

'It wasn't,' Evie answered, her voice brittle.

'You sound surprised.'

'I didn't expect you to be so sympathetic. I thought you were all about career, career, career.' She chopped her hand in the air to emphasise her words. 'Drink?'

The sudden change of topic caught him off guard. Did she really think him so heartless?

'Okay.'

She left the room and he heard her bustle about the kitchen. He'd wanted to ask her what yesterday had been about, the way she'd kissed him, their intimacy. Had he pushed her, or was her desire for him genuine? But then, how could it be when she was as ill as she was?

Now didn't feel like the right moment to challenge her; he needed to bide his time. Standing up, Max searched for a distraction, for the first time allowing himself to look properly at their surroundings. A picture on the back wall caught his interest. A photo of Evie with what had to be her brother and sister-in-law at their wedding. His eyes scanned over the other photos, mainly of Annie's family, older ones of a baby, growing into a young boy maybe nine or ten years old. A couple with Evie in them, in various fashions and hairstyles, and Max smiled. There was no denying that Evie and

her brother were siblings, with similar features and colouring, and yet, whilst Evie was undeniably feminine, her brother looked strong and confident. Not as if Evie needed Max to support her at all.

It should please him to think that Evie didn't need more help, yet Max found himself bristling at the idea that she didn't need him. Suddenly a baby photo on the bookshelf snagged his gaze.

Recent. Presumably the baby who used that pram in the hallway. The picture was in a double frame with one as the close-up of the baby that had first caught his attention, the other a photo of Evie with a new baby. A new niece most likely. The baby had to take after her father, but the similarities he'd already observed meant that he could imagine it would be what any baby of Evie herself could look like. Max's chest actually constricted. Evie looked particularly ill and yet the look of unadulterated love on her face was unmistakable. He'd been right thinking this was exactly the kind of life, of family, that Evie would want for herself. The only reason she hadn't got it yet was because of her illness.

He could never give Evie the family she would want, once she got the transplant she needed. And it was foolhardy pretending he was here just for support for a woman who was, effectively, nothing more than a one-night stand. He needed to go. Get back to his life at Silvertrees. Refocus on his work. Forget about Evangeline Parker.

Moving quickly away from the photos and back to the armchair to wait for Evie, Max sought a way to best extricate himself. He'd have the drink she was preparing, and then make his exit.

'Anyway, I just thought I'd make sure you're okay. It's great that you have a living donor in your sister-in-law,' he offered when she came back through the door at last, a jug of orange juice and two glasses in hand.

'Yes.'

'No waiting on a transplant list. The procedure can be done at the earliest opportunity, before the body goes into kidney failure, and before it puts additional stress on your other organs.'

'Yes.'

He tried to bite his tongue as she poured the first juice, but as her hand hovered over the second glass, he couldn't stay silent.

'Are you supposed to be drinking that? I'd have thought you should be limiting your potassium intake.'

'What are you? The juice police?' she grumbled, but he noted that she set the jug down without pouring a glass for herself. Settling herself on the couch opposite him. Distancing herself once again.

'Evie...' his voice was gravelly with concern, startling even himself '...I'm here. Talk to me.'

So much for extricating himself.

* * *

Evie had barely managed to stop herself from sinking back into his arms and confessing everything. He was here.

Here.

And more than that, he'd uttered the words she'd never even dreamed she would hear from him. He had made the time to come to her because he knew she needed him.

He just didn't know how much, or why. And she had to be sure—she owed it to Imogen. She couldn't bring Max into her daughter's life until she knew it was absolutely worth it. That Max was worth it.

Not that she had a clue how she would even begin to tell him, anyway.

'How are you feeling?' he asked gently. 'Besides the obvious.'

Tears pricked her eyes again. After years of dealing with troubled young adults, her own father, and even the unkindness of Max's parents, she was used to the darker side of human nature. But sometimes other people demonstrated a depth of human kindness that was truly humbling. Not least the way her sister-in-law had stepped up to offer her a kidney, and then the way Annie and her brother had opened their home to her without question.

And now here was Max—the man with whom she'd shared little more than the most incredible and the only five-night stand of her life—and he had tracked her down here because he was a good person. How far would that goodness extend, though?

'Besides the obvious physical exhaustion?' she asked with a weak smile in a bid to buy herself more time. 'I'm feeling mentally drained.'

It might send him running, but at least then she would know.

Max said nothing. Instead, he stood up and crossed the room to sit next to her on the couch. She couldn't hold back the torrent of words any longer.

'There have just been tests. So many tests that I thought they would never end. Not to mention all the tests which Annie endured just to help me.' Evie lifted her hands to count off on her fingers. 'EKGs to check her heart rhythm, chest X-rays to rule out lung disease or lung tumours, pap smears and mammograms, CAT scans to check for kidney stones, not to mention a whole gamut of blood tests.'

She cast Max a sheepish glance.

'You'll already know that, I'm sorry. It's just I sometimes can't believe what she's put up with, for me.'

'You're important to her.' Max spoke quietly. 'And to your brother. Besides, you can't tell me you wouldn't have done the same thing for one of them.'

That was true. But it wasn't her doing it for them, was it?

'I just wish they didn't have to go through this for me. What if Annie gives me her kidney and her son needs it? She and my brother have a nine-year-old boy.'

'Is there any reason to think he would need it?' he asked calmly.

She knew what Max was getting at. PKD was usually inherited. Her nephew was about as healthy as wild, boisterous, vitality-filled nine-year-old boys got.

'My brother doesn't carry the gene, and my nephew was checked out and found clear. But that's not the point,' she objected. 'He could get hit by a car, develop some other undiagnosed kidney disorder, or anything.'

'Unlikely, given what you've just said,' Max soothed. 'Is that what happened with you? You only discovered you had a kidney disease this last year?'

Old memories crashed into Evie out of the blue, sideswiping her. Memories of her mother and her stepfather, and of her brother. How they'd rallied around her as a teenager when they'd first discovered there was a problem. She couldn't have hoped for a closer-knit family back then and, with Annie as her sister-in-law now, she was still so very fortunate. But she missed her parents. Almost every single day. Her heart ached for the fact that they would never even know about their granddaughter. Imogen would never have the incredible memories of loving grandparents that her nephew had.

'Evie?'

She'd been staring off into the distance. With a start, Evie dragged herself back to the present.

'Sorry. What were we saying?'

'Did you discover your illness this past year?'

'No,' she admitted, her eyes meeting his. 'I was diagnosed with polycystic kidney disease when I was a kid, but I only started entering the first stages of renal failure one year ago.'

That had been the same week she'd allowed herself to break her rules and sleep with Max.

'What happened?'

'I'd been working with a particularly troubled young boy when I got kicked.'

'That must have been some kick,' he growled.

'I guess.'

She wasn't about to tell him it had been so forceful it had propelled her several metres backwards across the office. The kick hadn't caused the problem, it had merely been a catalyst. She tried to lighten the tone.

'But it was right over the site of my weakest kidney. Murphy's law, I guess.'

'I see.' Max nodded grimly. 'No wonder you left your job. I would imagine that would have been a hard decision for you. I know how passionate you were about your work there.'

Evie frowned.

'I haven't left for good, I just took leave when I became too exhausted to work there.'

She wasn't prepared for his reaction.

'Evie, you can't possibly go back to work there.'

'Of course I can.' She bristled at his authoritative tone. 'As soon as I'm well again.'

If all was well again.

'Don't be stupid.' He snorted with derision. 'If this is what can happen to you before the transplant, think of the damage it could cause right over the site of a graft.'

Evie suppressed a shudder and folded her arms defiantly across her chest.

'Who do you think you are, ordering me around?'

'I'm not ordering you around.' He gritted his teeth at her, clearly trying to control his frustration.

They stared at each other in silence. Evie wondered whether, like her, Max was questioning how such an argument had come out of nowhere.

'I'm sorry.' Max held up his hands at last. 'You were telling me how you came to find out about your kidney disorder.'

'Right,' she acknowledged half-heartedly. 'We knew from tests back then that my brother wasn't a match, but my mother had been, so...'

She tailed off, unable to finish the sentence. They'd always assumed her mother would be her donor when the time came. As if losing her mother hadn't been bad enough to start with.

'Your mother is no longer around?' Max surmised, the previous heat now gone from his voice.

'She died just before I moved to Silvertrees. Well, to the centre, you know?'

'I see,' he said again.

'It was a car crash,' she choked out, shaking her head.

Clearly he was taking everything she said on face value, listening to her as a friend, not as a surgeon.

He trusted her. She hadn't realised that before.

If he had his surgeon's hat on he wouldn't have assumed earlier that her high-level HLA sensitisation was a result of a previous transplant. He'd have registered that she was talking about end-stage renal failure now and not a previous transplant failing, which would leave him with only two other realistic possibilities for her high antibody levels in her PRA results. A blood transfusion, or the pregnancy.

But it wouldn't be long before he worked it out. And Evie knew she had to get in there first and tell him about Imogen. His reactions this afternoon had shown more concern for her well-being than she could have imagined. Max wasn't as uninterested in her as she'd been led to believe.

'For what it's worth—' his voice cut through the silence '—I think the death of your mother, so close to your own recent diagnosis, is what's causing you not to think straight.'

'Think straight?'

'About Annie being your donor? I can tell you're having doubts, Evie. You're physically and emotionally worn out and you're getting cold feet because the operation is imminent. You know yourself how patients can get before an operation, any operation. I hope you're not considering refusing Annie's offer.'

She'd thought about it. A thousand times. But on the few occasions where she'd raised it with Annie, her sister-in-law had refused to listen, lovingly laying on the guilt as she reminded Evie that she was all Imogen had, and that she owed it to her daughter to accept the kidney.

'I'm not going to refuse. Annie wouldn't allow it,' Evie hiccupped. 'But it doesn't necessarily make it any easier.'

'It's called the gift of life for a reason, Evie.' He stroked her hand gently. 'And I understand your initial concerns. But think of it this way—you're clearly a close family and you owe it to your niece and nephew to be the cool aunt you clearly already are to them.'

Evie froze, his words hurling spikes of ice down her spine.

'My niece?'

'I saw the photographs.'

He jerked his head to the bookshelf. Nausea churned up Evie's stomach. This was it. She had to do it now.

She couldn't find the words and the room swayed. She grabbed at the couch; the familiar feel of the piping on the cushion was comforting and she plucked at it absently.

'Evie? Are you okay?' His voice was sharp, his hand slipping into her hair to force her to look at him.

The hallway clock ticked audibly, outside the street was quiet—to anyone else it might even appear peaceful—a gaggle of geese passing noisily outside the window.

'Evie.' He snapped his fingers in front of her face.

Slowly she lifted her eyes to his.

'That's not my niece,' she whispered.

He looked surprised but still didn't understand. A gurgle of semi-hysterical laughter bubbled up inside her.

Max Van Berg, the high-flying surgeon who never missed a thing in a patient, was missing the one thing staring him right in the face.

'Imogen is my daughter.' Her eyes raked over his face, willing him to really hear what she was telling him. 'She's your daughter.'

CHAPTER THREE

'YOU HAVE A DAUGHTER?'

He knew the words were there but his brain didn't appear to be processing the message clearly. It might as well have been trying to work in a vat of thick treacle.

'We have a daughter,' Evie repeated tentatively.

Slowly, slowly, his brain began to pick up speed.

'I have a daughter,' he repeated, his hand dropping from Evie's hair as he pushed himself away from her. 'I have a three-month-old baby, and you didn't tell me until now?'

Evie crossed her arms over her chest, refusing to meet his eyes.

'Five months old,' she answered shakily.

'Sorry?'

'Imogen is five months old. Not three.'

He turned to pin her with a narrow gaze as she reached for his glass and took a generous gulp as though she was parched. It took a moment for him to register.

'That's enough,' he bit out, taking the juice from her and setting it out of reach before pushing himself up from the couch and moving over to the window, reinforcing the space between them.

'Drinking that won't help you,' he muttered, staring out at the uneventful street scene.

'Thank you,' she whispered so quietly he almost missed it.

He could certainly go for a drink himself. A drink of the large, stiff variety, not a glass of orange juice. And he rarely drank.

'We slept together a year ago. You're telling me the baby was two months premature?'

'That's not unusual given my...condition.'

He had to strain to hear her.

'The baby was born at thirty-two weeks? Thirty-three?'

'Thirty-two weeks. I went onto dialysis five days a week to carry her for as long as I could, but my body was under pressure, so they made the decision...'

Part of his brain told him that she'd done well to get that far. Her health would have been deteriorating rapidly as the growing foetus put more and more strain on her already stressed organs. It certainly explained why she'd gone from healthy when they were together a year ago, to being taken in for her transplant within the week.

'You never thought to...not to have it? For your health? For the baby's health?'

Even the words tasted bitter in his mouth.

He knew instantly that he'd said the wrong thing. If he'd felt he'd somehow passed some unknown test earlier, he knew he'd clearly fallen short of the mark now. A shuttered expression dropped over Evie's features and her voice turned cold.

'That's all I needed to know.' Her voice was shaking. Whether from anger or distress, he couldn't be sure, but his own emotions were too uprooted to care.

'Please leave, Max.'

How had this turned around so that she was the one furious with him?

He swung around incredulously.

'Really, Evangeline? For the last twelve months you have wilfully kept the knowledge of my baby from me, and now you're the one acting hard done by?'

'Because you've just told me you thought I should have...never had her.'

'Don't put words in my mouth,' he bit out. 'I was only concerned about the impact on your health as well as the baby's. You admitted yourself that the stress of carrying a baby was too much for your body and they had to carry out a C-section when it was only seven months old.'

'She.'

He looked at her in confusion.

'Pardon?'

'My baby is a she, not an it,' Evie choked out at him.

'Fine. She.' Had he really said it?

He hadn't meant to but he was still processing the news. Dead air compacted the room, making it hard to catch a deep breath. Hard even to think.

'So the baby is all right? She's well?'

The look of pride that lit up her eyes was unmistakable.

'Yes, she's well.'

'How long was she in NICU?'

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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