



200
HARLEY
STREET

**LOUISA
GEORGE**

The Shameless
Maverick



Louisa George

**200 Harley Street: The
Shameless Maverick**

«HarperCollins»

George L.

200 Harley Street: The Shameless Maverick / L. George —
«HarperCollins»,

Junior surgeon Kara has been assigned her first high-profile case. Great news – if she wasn't working with surgeon Declan Underwood, the man she kissed at the hospital ball! Declan's notoriety with women is rivalled only by his reputation as the best reconstructive surgeon! But Kara's about to discover there's more to her charismatic maverick than meets the eye... 200 HARLEY STREET Glamour, intensity, desire – the lives and loves of London's hottest team of surgeons!

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Praise for Louisa George:

‘A moving, uplifting and feel-good romance packed with witty dialogue, intense emotion and sizzling love scenes.’

—*goodreads.com* on HOW TO RESIST A HEARTBREAKER

‘Louisa George is a bright star at Mills & Boon® and I can highly recommend this book to those that believe romance rocks the world.’

—*goodreads.com* on HOW TO RESIST A HEARTBREAKER

‘A refreshing, captivating and breathtaking medical romance.’

—*Romance Book Paradise* on THE LAST DOCTOR SHE SHOULD EVER DATE ‘ONE MONTH TO BECOME A MUM is one story you don’t want to miss!’ —*Harlequinjunkie.com*

A lifelong reader of most genres, **LOUISA GEORGE** discovered romance novels later than most, but immediately fell in love with the intensity of emotion, the high drama and the family focus of Mills & Boon® Medical Romance™.

With a Bachelor’s Degree in Communication and a nursing qualification under her belt, writing medical romance seemed a natural progression, and the perfect combination of her two interests. And making things up is a great way to spend the day!

An English ex-pat, Louisa now lives north of Auckland, New Zealand, with her husband, two teenage sons and two male cats. Writing romance is her opportunity to covertly inject a hefty dose of pink into her heavily testosterone-dominated household. When she’s not writing or researching Louisa loves to spend time with her family and friends, enjoys travelling, and adores great food. She’s also hopelessly addicted to Zumba®.

200 Harley Street: The Shameless Maverick Louisa George



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Dear Reader

When I was invited to take part in the *200 Harley Street* continuity I was absolutely thrilled—not only because this is my first ever Mills & Boon® Medical Romance™ continuity contribution, but because it also meant I got the chance to work closely with some amazing authors and some very interesting plotlines. So a big thank you to everyone for taking a newbie under your collective wings!

Declan Underwood and Kara Stephens come from two very different worlds, but both have fled to London to start new lives in their chosen field of Burns and Plastic Medicine. Falling in love is definitely not on the cards for either of them, so it's very inconvenient when a mutual attraction starts to sizzle!

Australian Kara was a joy to write: she's funny and confident and shares my love of shoes. Like many of us, she'll live with pain in exchange for a decent heel and the softest of soft suede! But she also has a history of choosing the wrong men, so staying away from Declan is her preferred course of action.

But who can resist a bad-boy Irishman? Farmboy Declan, with his smoulderingly good looks and an accent that purrs as sexily as his motorbike, has no intention of getting involved with Kara; his life is already too full of commitments to his career and providing for his mother and four sisters. But that's where I come in: plotting ways of getting them together even when they don't want to be anywhere near each other ...

I hope you enjoy reading this book as much as I enjoyed writing it.

Drop me a line at louisageorgeauthor@gmail.com or visit me at www.louisageorge.com

Happy reading!

Louisa x

Dedication

To Kamy Chetty, thanks for all your support, positive words and help with the icky medical details (any errors are totally mine). xx

And to Jane Beckenham, without you I just wouldn't be here writing this—thank you so much for all your support, enthusiasm and words of wisdom and for introducing me to the world of romance books ... this one's for you! xx

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CHAPTER ONE

‘MAKE SURE TO get my best side, won’t you now?’ Declan Underwood joked to the army of paparazzi camped on the front steps of Princess Catherine’s Hospital as he parked his motorbike and removed his helmet.

He smiled towards his clicking, whirring audience, who clearly had nothing better to do than chase ambulances on a sunny summer morning, and tried to hide his growing irritation. The last thing he needed was more unwarranted delays, today of all days. He was not in the mood to be polite.

Making his way up the pale stone steps, he batted away questions like a tennis ace.

‘Is Princess Safia here?’ someone shouted from behind a long lens. ‘Is she going to make a full recovery? Will she be scarred for life?’

‘Now, come on, give a guy a break. I can’t hear one for the other.’ Toeing both the clinic’s and his own staunch professional line, Declan exhaled slowly and waited for them to settle. ‘As you know, ladies and gents, my hands are tied. There’s a young girl’s privacy to think of. I just can’t make any comment.’

Note: make sure the blinds are closed at all times. Move her to a higher floor. Increase security.

Sure, both the Hunter Clinic and the hospital affectionately known as Kate’s relied on positive press to further their reach and their work, but this was way too much interest in a young girl fighting for her life, regardless of her background.

Small wonder the Sheikh’s staff had been definitive in their demands to uphold their privacy. If any of Declan’s family had been involved in a tragedy such as this he’d want to protect them too.

He shuddered and damped down the tight squeeze in his chest. *Had* protected them, for all the good that had done.

‘Come on, Declan, it’s no coincidence that you—the country’s foremost burns reconstruction surgeon—are here and there’s a private flight scheduled to arrive from Aljhar any minute.’

Was that Fi ... something—the journalist he’d spent a few dates with not so long ago? Trying to use her inside contacts to get more information? Tut-tut. Declan flashed her a particular smile. Similar to the one he’d given her as he’d left for the last time, whenever it was, that said, *Hey, don’t push it.*

With all the smiling his jaw muscles had begun to ache, but he knew that the Hunter Clinic boss, Leo, wouldn’t want his second-in-command to jeopardise the clinic’s new positive relationship with the media. ‘I’m so sorry, but you all know that I’m in no position to confirm or deny any rumours. You all know too that even if I did have any idea as to the whereabouts or condition of Princess Safia I couldn’t tell you a thing. The Sheikh, quite rightly, is very keen on confidentiality. But I’m sure he and his family appreciate all the concern and will issue a statement as and when appropriate. Now we need to leave the family alone to recover. And I need to go to work. Thank you so much.’

Closing the door behind him to a barrage of more camera flashes, he exhaled deeply and headed towards the burns unit. Two extensive surgeries, an afternoon clinic and an evening meeting amidst a swirl of media frenzy about a royal with devastating facial burns loomed ahead of him.

It was going to be a very long day.

‘You. Yes, you. Stop. Wait.’

A heavily accented raised male voice out in the hospital corridor drew Declan’s attention from the notes he was reviewing at his desk over his hastily snatched lunch break.

‘What’s all that noise on the street? The photographers? Newspapers? His Highness specifically said he wanted Sheikha Safia’s arrival to be discreet. His daughter is suffering and she needs peace and quiet. She is devastated about her injuries ...’

‘Yes, I understand entirely,’ an unfamiliar voice with an Antipodean twang replied. ‘I have already spoken to Security and they are planning to transfer the Princess through the back door.’

Despite the clipped tones the voice was remarkably calm, smoky. Distinctly feminine. Declan put down the papers and listened.

The male voice cut in. 'We understood Mr Underwood himself was going to oversee every detail.'

'Of the surgery and treatment phases, yes, absolutely, but not everything on this list ...'

She paused. Declan heard a rustling of paper.

'He's not responsible for the sheet thread count, or the menus or the quality of the glassware ... I'll get the services manager to check through all of that ...'

'And lilies—we asked for white lilies to decorate her room.'

'Of course. The lilies. Item twenty-two.'

Not an ounce of agitation.

'Unfortunately we don't allow fresh flowers onto the burns unit. It's an infection control issue.'

'No?'

Agitation rippled off the man's voice in streams enough for both of them.

'But for the Sheikha you can do such a thing. She never stays anywhere without lilies. Be warned: His Highness expects high standards and he will get them. His daughter is the very most precious thing to him and he hates her to be upset. I insist you bend the rules.'

'And I insist you leave the medical professionals to *implement* the rules, sir. We have them for a reason. No fresh flowers. The pollen can infect the wounds and make our patients very sick. It's something we're very strict about. No exceptions.'

Declan's interest was piqued. Management had certainly stepped up their game by employing her. He smiled, imagining a stare-off between the mystery woman and the Sheikh's aide.

'Is there anything else? *Sir?*'

'Do not take that tone. The Sheikh is very powerful and can have you removed from your position with just one word.'

The smile was wiped from Declan's face. No one spoke to a member of staff in that way—whatever she was, and however spirited.

He scraped back his chair and walked into the corridor, watching the exchange from a distance, ready to pounce and squash the man if anything got out of hand. He got the feeling the woman wouldn't thank him for interfering and for what that might imply: that she couldn't handle it. When she clearly could. Bringing up his younger sisters had taught him to leave them alone with their arguments and only get involved if things got physical.

'Well, I have a few words I could use too ... but I won't.' With a voice so prickly, he hadn't expected the woman to be so young and soft. She had her back to him, but something about her rang bells in Declan's brain. Familiar bells. Warning bells.

The ponytail of light blonde curls, the neat curves in an ice-pink silk blouse and a straight black skirt that skimmed her knees—just. Sky-high black shoes with a razor-sharp heel that surely no one could feasibly walk in but which made her legs look impossibly long and ... deeply sexy. A back as straight as a blade, and that voice ... smoky ... yes ... Australian ...?

'Let me assure you, sir,' she continued, 'that Safia will receive the finest care in the world here. And if, instead of dealing with your ... housekeeping requests, I could finish my preparations for her admission and initial medical assessment, and then actually deal with the injuries she has sustained, we could all make Safia's stay a lot more comfortable.'

The aide stared at her as she rallied.

'I'm sure His Highness would not like to hear that the medical team were held up due to lilies? Glassware? I thought not. We are done here?'

Oh, God. The headache that had bloomed after Declan's sister's early morning phone call threatened to return. This woman was on his medical team? Since when? And why had no one

consulted him about it? Declan didn't like surprises. He always liked to know exactly what he was dealing with, and he'd made that damned clear to the powers-that-be.

The Sheikh's aide blanched and bowed slightly. 'Of course. I'm sorry. Of course, Doctor ... You know what's best.'

'Yes. Thank you. We do.'

As she turned to watch the aide scuttle away her eyes locked on to Declan's. Her smile slipped completely, and a tinge of pink hit her cheeks. 'Oh.'

The first time she'd shown any hint of bother. But then, within a nanosecond, she'd regained her composure.

'Kiss me.'

A rush of heat and a swirl of memory shook through him. A gold-coloured ballgown that had complemented the colour of the soft curls falling down her back, those startling green eyes commanding his attention, that infuriatingly cocky mouth drawing him in to the most sensual kiss of his life. Only she'd had a sheen of sadness about her too when he'd met her at the bar, knocking back shots. He'd turned it into a game, just to make her smile, which had then turned into something infinitely more interesting.

When was that? Six months ago? The hospital ball? A kiss he'd never found an equal to since, and a woman he'd caught tantalising glimpses of around the surgical unit, at Drake's Bar, and once, possibly, he thought he might have caught a brief whiff of her perfume at the Hunter Clinic. The woman he'd never quite caught up with.

Or even tried to.

And definitely hadn't wanted to.

Because—well ... because talking to her, laughing with her, kissing her, had made him want something more. And Declan Underwood never did *more*.

'Good afternoon, Mr Underwood. Adding spying to your list of legendary talents?'

'You are standing right outside my office. It's hardly a covert operation.' Had he ever even known her name? 'Why are you frightening the life out of my esteemed visitors and masquerading as a member of my team? And where the hell is Karen?'

Karen. The timid but efficient junior surgeon who didn't have a bewitching mouth and a dangerous sparkle in her eye.

The woman's mouth twitched. 'White lilies, indeed. If they're all like him we're going to have our work cut out. By all accounts Safia's a little diva. Didn't you hear? Karen's been called away to a family emergency and I've been shifted over to assist until she gets back.'

'Whoa! Slow down. To assist *me*?'

She smiled, but it didn't look as if she was very pleased about the scenario either. He wondered if she was thinking about that kiss too, and how she'd suddenly lost her cool, or her nerve or both, and left him standing on the dance floor trying to work out which tornado had just hit.

Just the thought of it set off a burst of inconvenient heat swimming through his veins.

'Yes, the luck fairies have sprinkled dust on us both today. I'm on your team until Karen gets things sorted.'

Judging by his all too regular experiences of family emergencies she could be away for weeks. His stomach hit his boots. Regardless of what his body might want, mixing work with pleasure was something he avoided at all costs. So he'd be sticking to strictly business.

'And which genius came up with this idea?'

'Ethan Hunter. He called me this morning, said he'd had a call from Karen and was going to run the idea by you, but you were unavailable. He left you a message, apparently. So did she.'

No doubt while Declan's oldest sister had been bending his ear about his middle sister's new boyfriend, the youngest's less than satisfactory university grades and his mother's upcoming birthday

plans. He was definitely going to have to set more limits around his personal private time. Sure, hadn't he been trying to do that for the past seventeen years?

'So I miss a call and now I don't get a say about who works with me on one of the most high-profile cases we've had in years?'

'What would you prefer?' Her hands hit her tantalising hips. 'It's me or no one. At least I have a good deal of burns experience. There isn't any other option, with Leo and Lizzie on honeymoon and this place being almost in lockdown with the Sheikh's arrival.'

'No?'

'You could do it all by yourself, but somehow I can't think you'd want to do the junior tasks. Admissions paperwork? Organising bloods?' Her voice rose at the end of every sentence, making it sound as if she was asking an endless list of questions.

'Yes, thank you, I have a full understanding of what is needed. And, it's not that I don't want to do them. I just don't have time.' Stepping up to run the Hunter Clinic in Leo's absence meant he needed more junior staff, not less.

Unbelievable. Declan ran a hand across his neck as he realised he'd been backed into an Antipodean corner. Well, hell, she'd better be as good in surgery as she was at kissing, because he couldn't take any chances—not with his reputation and a young girl's future at stake.

Great. His day had just got a whole lot longer.

'So I hope we don't have a problem here?'

'Absolutely not.'

Oh, but they did. At least Kara did. Declan's Irish lilt curled around her clenched stomach and stroked. Softly. Smoothly. Sexi— *No*. She wasn't allowed to think that. The man was her boss. And an amazing kisser. *Boss*. Kisser. *Boss*. He tipped his chin to one side and gave her the slightest hint of recognition. A nod, perhaps, to their last ... *connection*...?

She felt the blush start at her toes and spread, fast, to the top of her head. If only she'd explained her quick getaway—the reason dancing with him had been such a dumb move. Her surprisingly hot bodily response to the first man to hold her in so long. No—it had been a direct response to him and his strong arms and smooth, deep accent. And then, as reality hit, her suddenly very cold feet.

He leaned against his office doorjamb, folded his arms and eyed her with ill-disguised caution.

Shame, because she'd really, really enjoyed that kiss. However wrong. However badly timed. However just damned stupid. And he clearly hardly even remembered her. But then the man had a following of women who thought they could change his commitment-phobic ways. That kiss was probably not a stand-out for him. Luckily she'd put it far behind her.

She summoned every bit of confidence—or at least the show of confidence she'd learned to wear whenever she was in a difficult situation. Eyes forward, shoulders back. Last time she'd felt the need to summon strength she'd been staring down into a casket. The memory rolled off her in waves.

'It's Kara.'

Just in case he'd forgotten her name. Had she even told him it? She remembered looking up. The sight of him standing there in a tuxedo, his hair a messy nonchalant scruff, had stripped the breath from her lungs. She remembered too the way he'd smelled of something spicy and promising as he'd leaned in, the hot shock of an unexpected desire that had matched hers in his deep brown eyes. The earth tilting slightly as he'd spun her in his arms.

'Kara Stephens?'

'Are you asking me? Because if *you* don't know then we really do have a problem.'

Idiot. She decided to speak slowly just so he could understand. Poor puppy. 'My. Name. Is. Kara. Stephens. Only you don't look very happy about something. And I can only assume it's me.'

Seeing as he was staring right at her. All six-foot-too-much, with his arrogant stance and toned body. Even in scrubs she could see the outline of the sculpted abs she'd pressed against, the biceps

she'd held as he'd slow-danced with her. The shoulders she'd wound her arms around as his mouth had covered hers.

Heat skittered through her abdomen like a lit fuse wire.

Boss.

Oh. Yes. The first kiss she'd had in too long and it had been off-limits in so many ways. Alcohol, guilt and lust were a heady combination she'd done her best to avoid ever since. Along with him—Mr Break-Your-Heart Underwood.

And now he would refuse to allow her to join the team. Not just for her handling of a tense situation but because of that damned kiss.

'There's a lot at stake here.' He exhaled sharply. 'What do we know about you? Where did you train? What burns experience do you have?'

'Med School in Melbourne, then Perth, then a stint at the Croftwood Institute, Sydney.'

'The Croftwood? Impressive.'

'Yes. And I aced every exam.' Even so, just thinking about her last few days there was like a swift punch to her heart.

But she wouldn't look back. London had been a fresh start, and getting onto this rotation had been an absolute dream job—and then the chance to work alongside a world-class reconstructive surgeon. Until one out-of-character misdemeanour came back to bite her.

Well, kissing the boss certainly wouldn't be happening again. Kissing *anyone* wouldn't be happening. Ever.

'So, what *is* this? A corridor interview? I've helped out at the Hunter Clinic before now. If you want a copy of my CV or references just ask.' Irritation tripped up her spine. 'And, besides, Ethan's already arranged everything.'

Declan's eyebrows rose. 'Without consulting me first. Has he ever actually spoken to you? Seen you in full throttle? Because I listened to a lot of that conversation just now, and the way you—'

She jumped in to defend herself. 'Look, I don't believe in taking risks with clients just because someone who has a lot of money or power asks me to. There's not just Safia to think about, but the other patients on the unit too. Money can buy a lot of things, but it won't buy my professional standards.' She studied his face for a reaction but he wore a mask of impartiality. 'Of course I hope I employed more diplomacy than that.'

He nodded and looked at her. Really looked at her, as if trying to work out a puzzle. 'To be honest, I thought you handled him very well—and you stuck to your guns. It's easy to be swayed by people like that and it's rarely for the good.'

Wow, praise from him now? That was surprising. He had a reputation for being a smooth lover and a competent and exacting doctor, leaving his patients satisfied and women always wanting more. Which he steadfastly refused to give.

'If you can handle a skin graft as confidently as you did that aide, then you'll go far.'

The laugh slipped easily from her throat. 'You know, really I just wanted to tell him where to get off.'

'Yes. Me too.' He winked, visibly relaxing. 'But *A*—you didn't. And *B*—you reassured him of your competence and professionalism by not caving in to his demands.'

'I tried my best.'

'Good. I imagine you've more than earned his respect. You need to gain that too when dealing with the Sheikh and the press, which is a necessary role with such a high-profile case. We're a small team with a big responsibility. Are you up to it?'

'Yes. Absolutely.'

'I would suggest you soften a little for the Sheikha, though. Diva or not, she's had a very rough time, she's used to having things her way, and this accident will have knocked her sideways.' Something passed behind those chocolate-coloured eyes and his sharp edges melted away a little.

‘Her life has changed forever. She’s going to be frightened and in pain and will need a lot of help and reassurance. Not just today but ongoing. Gently.’ He eyed her suspiciously. ‘You *can* do gently?’

‘Of course. Of course.’ Hell, she could do roll over and beg if it meant she got to work with someone so talented. Relief flooded through her and she tried to show him her best gentle smile. ‘So I’m in, then?’

‘For now. It seems I have no choice—and we have to attend to Safia. I’ll review your place in my team later.’

‘I come highly recommended. Phone the Croftwood and check. I can assure you, you won’t be disappointed.’

‘No ... I doubt that very much.’ Declan laughed. ‘But, heck, you’re a straight talker.’

The same words he’d used at the ball too, when she’d outright demanded he kiss her, right there on the dance floor, when she hadn’t been able to stop thinking about how those lips would feel against hers. When she’d wanted something ... *him* ... to exorcise the past.

She snapped her eyes closed, hoping to goodness he didn’t remember that. When she opened them again he was looking at her strangely. Strangely *interested*. The ghost of that kiss hovered between them as his eyes fixed on hers. Yes, he remembered. And if the brief flash of heat was anything to go by he remembered how good it had felt too. That warm glow in her abdomen returned.

She doused it with a quick shot of reality as she began to walk along the corridor towards the burns unit High Dependency ward. The last time she’d got carried away by hearts and flowers and physical desires she’d ended up married. Then endured a swift lesson in a run of all the emotions from A to Z.

She’d packed a lifetime of hurt into those few years and she had no intention of making the same mistakes again. So much had sent her reeling, trying to work out how something that had started out so pure had ended so damned soiled. Focusing on her career was a lot less painful—but then, that was what had caused all the trouble in the first place.

‘It comes from my upbringing, I guess.’

‘Oh? What?’ He fell into step beside her.

‘Forthrightness. I’m an army brat. Always moving around. If you don’t say what you think straightaway you’ll be packed up and on the move before you get another chance.’ There’d been a lot of lost chances before she’d learnt that lesson. ‘Although it can get me into trouble.’

‘I imagine it can.’

It already has, his look said. On that dance floor.

His dark pupils flared. ‘Australian army?’

‘Yes. My parents met as new recruits and both followed military careers.’

‘Exciting? Interesting?’

‘Difficult ... for them both, I think. One member of a family in the military is hard enough, but both parents trying to work up the career ladder meant a lot of discussing, juggling, arguing, vying for priority. What their child wanted came at the bottom of the pecking order.’

She’d learnt to speak loudly and fight hard to get heard.

‘Constantly moving and growing up on bases makes you grow a thick skin and a quick mouth. But, hey, I can shoot in a straight line and hit a target at a hundred metres.’

‘Me too.’ At her frown he illuminated, ‘Farm boy.’

Now, *that* was a surprise. He oozed class and rubbed easy broad shoulders with a rich and famous clientele. ‘Irish farm boy to Harley Street surgeon? That must be an interesting story.’

‘Not really.’ His smile disappeared and he looked at her as if she’d stepped over some imaginary line. Shoving his hands in his pockets, he quickened his step. She got the message—working together was okay, even kissing wasn’t a step too close, but sharing intimate details ...? Never. And that suited her just fine. The less she shared about the life she’d left the better too.

As they entered the unit Kara observed an atmosphere of calm chaos—a feeling that matched her stomach. Although being surrounded by busy people was much less intense than being alone with Declan. She knew how to act here. There were protocols and policies, standards and codes. Out there in the real world, the dating world, the rules were far too confusing.

She breathed out and put her professional hat firmly on. ‘So, all the staff are up to speed with privacy requests, and everyone has been told not to comment at all to anyone phoning in, regardless of who they say they are.’

‘Excellent.’ He nodded, walking into the room he’d personally had allocated to Safia. ‘This looks perfect, but keep the bed away from the window.’ He peered through the blinds down to the road outside. ‘No one should be able to see her here on this floor. As soon as she arrives we’ll need to check her pain levels and medication. I don’t want her to be scared we’re going to hurt her when we remove the dressings. Then I’ll need an immediate blood screen to make sure she’s haemodynamically stable. Then ... then we can take a good look and see what we’re dealing with.’

‘No worries.’ She picked up the clipboard on the end of the bed and checked all the correct paperwork was in place.

‘So.’ Declan glanced around. ‘What’s her ETA?’

Kara glanced at her watch. ‘Ten minutes.’

‘Excellent.’

Although this was a devastating case, he looked wired and ready. This was another side of him she’d heard about but hadn’t yet encountered: his infectious enthusiasm for his work. It seemed the man had many sides apart from his infamous charm, and yet—as she’d witnessed—a mysterious unwillingness to open up about anything personal.

Which was fine. Because she would not let that kiss get in the way of her job. Or let that body of his distract her from her purpose. Or those eyes ... Her stomach did a little cartwheel ... Those eyes staring at her with playful teasing.

‘So, Kara Stephens, it looks like we have just enough time to check out the sheets.’

‘What?’ Her pulse rocketed.

The smile he flashed her was nothing less than wicked. ‘Thread count?’

‘Oh. Yes. Of course.’ And she blushed again, because one mention of sheets and their thread count was the furthest thing from her mind.

CHAPTER TWO

‘I SAID, DON’T touch me.’ A pair of dark, frightened eyes, trying desperately hard to be brave, peered out through a face covered in bandages. ‘Go away.’

Kara leaned in to the bed and lowered her voice. This was getting precisely nowhere, but she could not and would not rush her patient. ‘I’m sorry, Safia, but we are going to have to remove the dressings sometime so we can see your burns and then treat them. We just want to help.’

‘What part of *go away* don’t you understand?’ Her muffled voice was thick with the tears the teenager steadfastly refused to allow. ‘Leave me alone.’

‘Does it hurt? I can give you some more medicine to take the pain away. You must tell me if you need more.’

The girl shook her head.

‘I’ll do it slowly and carefully. I promise.’

But Safia raised a heavily bandaged arm and pulled the sheet over her head. The spaghetti of tubes reverberated at the swift move. An alarm rang out.

Kara took a moment to compose herself, checked the drips were patent, reset the machines and tried again. And she would continue trying until the poor girl agreed. However long it took. The theatre was booked from eight tomorrow morning. That gave her about eighteen hours. She hoped it would be enough. ‘Your Highness ...’

‘Let me try.’ Sheikh El-Zayad of Aljhar, the girl’s father, stepped forward. ‘For goodness’ sake, Safia, do as you’re told. We’ve been waiting for twenty-five minutes for your bandages to come off and it’s getting past a joke. The doctors can’t do their job and you won’t get better.’

‘I’m never going to get better. This is it. Scarred for life. So get used to it.’

The Sheikh frowned. ‘Do as the doctor says. Stop behaving like a child.’

She is a child. Kara bit that thought back. He had just endured the worst thing any parent could live through—watching his child suffer—and no doubt wanted her full co-operation to get better. But seventeen was barely mature, and the ramifications of such injuries would surely make anyone scared and fractious.

She shot a look over to Declan as he finished his conversation with the Sheikh’s wife, psychologically prep-ping her for the forthcoming procedures and long-term treatment plan. Throughout the long thirty minutes of cajoling and waiting she’d felt Declan’s eyes on her, assessing, weighing her up, his playful teasing forgotten, cemented now into something much more serious.

‘So to recap—’ He leaned forward to speak to Safia’s parents. ‘We’re planning to do a series of operations over the next few weeks. Because Safia’s wounds are of differing severity and depth each one will be in its own individual recovery phase. Some wounds, I understand from her notes, are ready for closure or grafting tomorrow. Some will have to wait for closure because they need debriding. I’ll keep you fully informed as we proceed.’

Declan’s demeanour was one of total calm and efficiency, yet he commanded an authority that stood him apart as he spoke.

‘Now, it’s getting a bit hot in here. Perhaps Your Highnesses might like a tour of the facility? There’s a particularly nice view out over the river from the roof garden. It’s very private up there and shouldn’t be busy. In fact, I can make sure it isn’t. And I can organise some tea for you both.’

Safia’s mother nodded and wafted in front of her face with her hand. ‘Oh, please. Yes. I need some fresh air.’ Leaning in to her daughter, she whispered, ‘That is, of course, if you don’t mind, darling Safia? We won’t stay away for long.’

The sheets moved a little. ‘Go. All of you. Leave me here. Forever.’

A quick phone call later and Safia, Kara and Declan were alone.

But now what? Even without her parents in the room it was going to be tough convincing Safia to comply.

Kara was just about to broach the dressings conversation again when Declan laughed. ‘Well, would you look at that *eejit*.’

‘What? Where?’ Kara frowned as she looked over to him. His focus was on a pile of magazines on the table. The latest teen heart-throb was emblazoned on the front cover of *BFF!* magazine, which had been covered in pink glitter hand-drawn hearts. ‘Oh, that’s Liam from Oblivion.’

‘I don’t care where he’s from,’ he continued. ‘He looks like he needs a decent feed and a new belt. Are those his granddaddy’s trousers he’s wearing? Because they don’t seem to fit.’

Kara looked up again and noticed he was watching the sheet move down. Just a little.

She joined in. ‘How can you say that? Don’t break my heart. Liam is hot, hot, *hot*. And what do you know, Mr Fuddy-Duddy? Those baggy trousers are all the rage. Maybe you should get a pair.’

‘Maybe I should. D’you think all the girls would come screaming after me then?’ He gave a very poor rendition of Oblivion’s number one hit. “‘That’s what makes me loooooove you ...’”

‘Screaming to get away from you, more like. Save our poor ears and stick to the day job.’ She leaned closer to the sheet that was now making little noises that sounded a lot like hesitant surprised laughter. ‘Great doctor, really, don’t let the singing put you off. I heard that Oblivion’s doing a tour soon—they’re playing in London in a few weeks.’ And going to see her favourite singer might well give Safia the motivation she needed to get better.

The girl sighed. ‘He played at my sixteenth birthday party. He said I was beautiful.’ Safia slowly pulled the sheet back. ‘But he wouldn’t say that now.’

Declan sat next to the bed and looked at her. Kara wondered what on earth he could say to make her feel better. ‘Don’t you know you’ve gorgeous eyes, Safia? Beautiful. A boy could lose himself in there.’

‘Once, maybe. But not now.’

‘Oh, definitely now.’

Safia met Declan’s gaze, still cautious, but she didn’t tell them to leave.

Seizing this moment of calm, Declan reached out and began to remove a dressing with painstaking care. When Safia put her hand out to stop him he gave her a quick shake of his head and a reassuring smile. The girl lay back and closed her eyes.

Kara opened another dressing pack and covered the bed as he kept his focus on his patient and smiled softly and gently, as if she was the most beautiful person in the world, the only person in the world. As if the horrendous discolouration and raw melted skin didn’t make his heart jerk or his professional eye wonder how in hell they could ever restore her back to her previous beauty.

She’d heard about his slick surgical skills and knew how well respected he was. Heck, the Sheikh had personally requested Declan did the surgery—and judging by his extensive client list both here and at the Hunter Clinic he was well sought after. So she hadn’t expected a doctor as talented as Declan to have such grounded humanity.

‘There. There. Nearly done now. You’re doing grand, sweetheart. Just grand. It’s not nearly so bad as I thought it’d be.’

He spoke in a mesmerising, soothing voice that felt as if he was stroking the raw wounds back together again. Kara didn’t think she’d ever seen anything so touching.

‘I bet you’ve broken a few hearts already, Safia?’

The girl opened her eyes and gave him a sad smile. ‘Yes ... you mustn’t tell my father.’

‘Cross my heart.’

‘But I never will again. Who’s going to love me with a face like this? Skin like this?’ She lifted the arms she’d tried to shield her face with and showed him the skin that had been so damaged. Finally tears began to fall. ‘Don’t tell me that beauty’s skin-deep. Or that scars are sexy. Because they’re not. And please don’t tell me that looks don’t matter—because in my world they do.’

And that was the heart of the matter. A young girl's life was broken and no one could truly fix it. Kara's throat closed tight.

Declan ran his hand over the girl's hair. 'Ah, now, sweetheart. That's it. That's it. I know. Believe me, I know. Let it out. Just let it go.'

'I'm ... so ... tired ... of being brave,' Safia sobbed. 'Of trying to pretend it's okay when it's not. And all they do is make promises that I'll be back to normal soon. How can I?' She looked up at him, eyes pleading but with a glimpse of trust. 'Can you make me better, Dr Underwood?'

'Call me Declan, please. Actually, call me Dec if you like—my sisters call me that.'

'Okay.' Safia nodded and smiled again. 'Dec.'

'Listen, Safia, I will be honest with you because you deserve that at the very least. I can't ever make it go away completely.' His voice caught a little as he thumbed away the girl's tears.

A few months ago Kara had watched him smooth his way across a dance floor, his charm and flirtatious manner catching her in a moment of weakness. But there was a genuine depth to him that she hadn't imagined.

He cleared his throat. 'But I promise I can make it a whole lot better. Will you let me try?'

'At first glance, Safia's burns are a mix of partial and full thickness—some will need further debridement and then grafting,' Declan said to Kara as they grabbed a coffee en route to the media room.

His head was a whirl of the emotions that always shook through him at this stage of assessment—emotions he had a tight hold of and would never allow to interfere with any professional judgement. Flashbacks from seventeen years ago haunted him each time he removed a dressing, but they made him more determined to improve his skills and techniques.

Another woman damaged. It made him sick to his stomach.

His new junior surgeon took a sip of coffee, oblivious to what was going on in his head. Which was a damned fine thing—no one needed to know his motivations, just his achievements. She smiled and his gut tightened. He put it down to stress.

'So, Declan, do you prefer autograft or xenograft?'

'It depends entirely on the situation. We can get a better look at the viability of the skin and the underlying bed tomorrow in Theatre and take it from there.'

Eyebrows peaked. 'We?'

'Yes. Okay, you can scrub in tomorrow. You did well in there. Teenagers are often the most difficult cases to deal with. They don't know how to act—they're kids at heart but trying desperately to be adult. We have to get the next few days right. How we deal with these burns will have a huge effect on the rest of that girl's life. Both physically and psychologically.' From his experience the mental scarring was often the worst and could change the very core of an injured person for life.

Kara nodded, eyes alight, blonde curls shivering. Something unbidden shivered through him too. She'd been damned good at handling Safia, so he was pleased to have her on his team. But ... really it was more than that. She was a weird kind of unsettling—and yet settling at the same time.

Her eyes narrowed. 'I can't believe the admitting hospital staff didn't think of offering her some anxiolytics to help raise her mood. Maybe we could have a chat with her about that too?'

'I guess they were dealing with her immediate issues, like keeping her alive.' He held the door open to let her through. Which was an action he immediately regretted. The barrage of flashing bulbs that had greeted him that morning met them as they stepped into the room, catching her unawares—but he was interested to see just how well she could handle this part of the job.

Is Princess Safia here now?'

'What can you tell us about her condition?'

Next to him Kara stood tall, her shoulders snapped back, confident. Declan held back a smile as he watched her survey the room with a tilt of her chin. She wore her army upbringing in her stance, and he had no doubt she would answer the press's queries with aplomb and professionalism, but he

wasn't game enough to test her with that just yet. In fact he wasn't game enough to do anything that involved any more contact with her than he had to. The woman was mysteriously alluring. So that meant avoiding her at all costs.

No doubt a better man would probably not even allow her to assist him when his hormones were acting as if he was eighteen years old again. But he had stopped being a better man a long time ago—the day he'd lost all faith in love.

Kara's scent wove around him ... something exotic that reminded him of brilliant blue skies and endless heat and the tang of flowers on the breeze. His abdomen tightened as seemingly endless heat rippled through him too.

He took a step away and glanced at the floor, trying to take a moment to focus. But all he could see were those ridiculous but sexy shoes, slender tanned ankles leading up to the hem of her skirt, and farther on up to a place where his imagination ran wild.

He ran a hand through his hair and shook that image from his head. *Damn fool.* Since when had he allowed a woman to distract him at work? Since the second he'd seen her firing back at the Sheikh's aide? Or was it that kiss?

He quieted the audience with a raise of his hands and a smile. Keep them on side and they might actually let him have time free to do his job. 'Thanks for coming to this meeting. We didn't want you getting chilly out there. We're already busy enough without dealing with hypothermic journalists as well. Hope you enjoyed the tea and biscuits.'

Laughter rippled round the room. He waited for it to stop.

'Thank you for your patience, everyone. I have permission from Safia's family to confirm that she is indeed now here at Princess Catherine's Hospital and that I am treating her as an in-patient. I'm sure you are all aware of the car accident she had a few days ago. I can confirm also that, thanks to the great care she received at Aljaha Hospital, she is now in a stable condition, but her injuries mean that she will be under my care for some time. The family again asks for privacy. Thank you.'

'What does the Sheikh think about this?'

'Naturally His Highness is devastated about his daughter's injuries, but he is working with us to get the best possible outcome. Of course we are deeply honoured to have him here.'

'How long will Safia be with you?'

'That depends entirely on her progress and response to treatment. It could be a few weeks.' He paused for effect. 'Okay, I don't think there is anything more we can tell you. Either myself or a member of my team ...' He indicated to Kara and she stepped forward and smiled, self-confidence rippling off her. 'This is Ms Stephens, who will be working with me. Either one of us will be updating you on Safia's progress as and when appropriate.'

'They don't teach you that at medical school.' Kara joked as they walked towards the afternoon out-patient clinic. 'They should have "Dealing with the Press" lessons. Confidentiality is such a thorny issue—especially when you're treating someone famous.'

'No one wants to know about you if you're not. But this is a high-profile issue and we have to deal with it—it's just another part of the job. You have to be careful not to give away too much information but just enough to keep the hacks satisfied.'

'It's a bit of a tightrope. I can see I'll have to be careful.'

'I can fix you up with our in-house Head of PR, Lexi, at the Hunter Clinic if you like? She could give you some pointers if you think you might need them.' Why, oh, why was he even thinking of getting further involved in this woman's life? 'But I reckon you'll be fine.'

'Really?' Her smile was genuine. 'Thanks. I'll see how I go.'

That compliment sat between them as they neared the clinic. He'd have to be careful about that—giving her the wrong impression. But something about Kara drew him to her. Even with his internal alarm bells blaring.

As he tried to walk down the narrow corridor without brushing against her and risking an escalation of his already over-excited libido she spoke. ‘So, how many sisters do you have?’

‘What?’ He stopped short, still getting used to her forthrightness. Maybe it was an Aussie thing. No, maybe it was just a Kara thing. ‘Sorry?’

‘You were telling Safia about your sisters. “*They call me Dec,*” you said, or something.’

‘Why do you need to know?’

Her forehead furrowed into a deep V and her eyes sparked with humour and intrigue. ‘I don’t *need* anything. I was just making conversation. It’s what human beings do to fill that very long gap between birth and death. Communication.’

She held his gaze and it felt as if she was throwing down a gauntlet. One he could run with or one he could walk away from.

‘Only, I don’t have any siblings, and I always thought it’d be nice to have some. It’s just a chat, Declan, as we while away the minutes. Not an interrogation.’

She was right. It was just talking. It wasn’t exactly baring his soul. And he’d always been a sucker for gauntlets. ‘Well, if I were you I’d rejoice in your single-child-dom, Kara—because, trust me, you do *not* need four sisters.’

‘Four? Wow.’

‘All younger. All a giant pain in the ass ...’

She laughed. ‘Growing up amongst that must have been busy. But fun, though?’

‘It was messy ... crazy ... loud. Very loud. And awash with wayward hormones.’ Remembering the madcap phone call that morning, he shrugged, smiling to himself. They might well be irritating, but they were his. ‘Still is.’

‘But it explains how you can deal so well with kids like Safia.’

‘I don’t know about *well*. The way I see it, all girls want to be treated like princesses. It just so happens she *is* one. But underneath they’re generally the same. They worry about how they look, who they’re becoming, what they want to do with their lives. Love. Boys ... yeah, boys mostly, if my lot were anything to go by. Trouble all round.’

He’d had the job of being the man of the house thrust upon him way too young and had had to make sure they somehow had the basics, like enough food to eat, even when they hadn’t had the money to buy it. Then as they grew up he’d watched his sisters have their hearts broken and wanted to kill the culprits, but decided not to. He had negotiated conversations about teenage pregnancy and underage sex, about dating rules and bedtimes, had nursed sisters with period pains and migraines and tummy aches of dubious origin. And finally he’d escaped only when he’d known they were all grown up and relatively safe. *Escaped* being a geographical rather than a psychological term.

And yet with all his experience he still couldn’t fathom the workings of a woman’s brain. Except that he definitely knew when it was time to leave—which was around about the time she started talking about a future.

Kara laughed. ‘But I can see the pride in your eyes and hear it in your voice. You love them all, clearly.’

‘Yes, I probably do—but don’t ever let them know that or they’ll take even more advantage. And I chose a job hundreds of miles away from them just to put a good stretch of Irish Sea between us.’ He laughed along with her. ‘Thankfully none of them are any good at swimming, most of them get seasick, and they can’t afford the airfare—otherwise I’m damned sure they’d be here. Making my life hell in England too.’

But in reality he might as well be living back home, seeing as they couldn’t or wouldn’t make a single damned decision without him. Which was why he kept his tiny slice of private time simple. No getting involved on any kind of scale. His life was already too full of responsibilities and women without taking on another one.

Kara smirked as they entered the out-patients' reception. 'I guess you have to go where the work is.'

'Is that what you did? It's a long way from Sydney to London, and you didn't have four sisters dragging at your heels.'

'I needed a change. Coming here was a good move for lots of reasons.'

The way she said that didn't convince him that her move to London had been a positive choice. She rubbed her thumb around the base of her left-hand ring finger as her eyes darted upwards. She seemed to be searching for an answer. Not the truth, just an answer.

Seemed everyone had their demons. And he was inexplicably intrigued, even though he'd made it his life's purpose never to be drawn into a woman's dramas unless he had a failsafe get-out plan.

She peered up at him and his world tilted a little. He wasn't used to scrutiny, or to someone pushing him for more—or wanting to give it. So why would she have this effect on him?

'And you, Declan? Why choose burns reconstruction when you could have the glory and financial reward of cosmetic surgery? Breast augmentation? Tattoo removal? Enhancement of the rich and famous? Why specialise in burns?'

The way she adeptly deflected the conversation told him she didn't want to delve deeper into her reasons for coming here and he could respect that.

But, hell ... His chest tightened by degrees. The questions she was asking. Questions people asked him periodically, but not usually straight after a conversation about his family. Or after a consultation with a badly scarred woman. Questions that he didn't want to answer. Wouldn't answer. Wouldn't no matter how much her sharp green eyes reached down into his soul and tugged.

'Ah, you know ... it's just how it worked out.'

And with that he turned and walked away.

CHAPTER THREE

SO THE GREAT Declan Underwood had walls so high even a simple conversation couldn't penetrate them, Kara mused as she scrubbed up the next morning. She would do well to remember that.

She should have remembered it last night too as she lay in the dark and thought about the way she'd fitted so neatly into his arms on the ballroom floor all those months ago. And the way he'd tasted—of something fresh and new, of an experienced man. Not like the previous kisses she'd experienced from the kid she'd known her whole life. The way Declan's big broad shoulders—a match for any Aussie rugby league player's—looked as if they could carry the weight of a million problems. But she hadn't wanted to share hers. No, she'd had other things on her mind. Nice other things. Naughty other things.

And she should have remembered it too when Declan's face had been the last thing she'd thought of before she'd fallen asleep. Almost the first thing to flash through her brain as her alarm clock blared. The very first thing, as always, had been the thick thud of loss. The reality of how much her life had changed. The tiny slash of almost white skin where her wedding ring used to be.

But this morning the sharp sting of regret hadn't been quite so harsh.

Even so, she still hadn't thought about the barriers Declan had erected, or the way he'd turned his back on her. She'd simply remembered how sweet it had felt when he'd hammered against her barriers with one scorching touch of his mouth.

The same mouth that was now grinning at her as he walked into the scrub room. She put the little heart jig down to excitement at the forthcoming surgery and nothing to do with the sudden scent of soap and spice, or the soft brown eyes, or the way his biceps muscles lengthened as he reached for the tap.

The V neck of his top bared a tantalising amount of suntanned chest and she imagined what might be underneath the navy cotton scrubs ... Sometimes a working knowledge of anatomy did a girl nothing but harm. Especially first thing in the morning.

He opened a sterile pack and laid it on a trolley, put on the surgical cap and mask and began washing with the nailbrush, rubbing small circles over his fingers, hands, up his arms.

'Good morning, Ms Stephens. Sleep well?'

'Hi. Um ... Yes, thanks.' *Liar.* Sleeping and thoughts of Declan Underwood were not satisfactory bedfellows.

She dried her hands, pulled on her gown and snapped on her gloves. Took a quick check in the mirror and relaxed. There was no way there would be any kind of sexual vibes happening today—hair in a cap and body in oversized scrubs really didn't scream goddess or available. Or any kind of *hot-for-you*. Thank God.

'And shouldn't it be top of the mornin'?''

'A whole millennia of culture reduced to the diddly-diddy. Sure, and we're all leprechauns.' He laughed, his eyes crinkling at the corners.

That tall, broad body was the furthest thing from a leprechaun she could imagine.

'And shouldn't it be g'day?'

'Cobber. If you're going the whole reductive stereotype, it should be g'day, cobber. Or sheila. And don't forget the cork hat.'

'Same language but not a lot of commonality, eh? That's a shame. A real shame.' He dried his hands, gowned up and smiled. 'Perhaps we should try to forge some middle ground, Kara? There's a whole lot more I could teach you about Irish culture ... In the interests of international relations. Obviously.'

'Obviously.' Was that a come on? Or just a joke?

Aaargh. Having been a one-man woman for so long, she didn't understand the language of flirting.

No matter. She didn't have time to compute. At that moment he stepped back, catching her unawares in the tiny airless room. His hip brushed against hers and she turned too quickly, slamming body to body against him. Tingles ran the length of her spine as her heart continued a jig that was *all* diddly-diddly.

'Oh. I'm sorry.'

His gaze met hers and for a split second, maybe two, he watched her. Some weird connection tugged between them. His eyes misted with something akin to confusion, along with an unmistakable heat that seemed to whoosh all the oxygen from her lungs.

His arms were splayed high in front of him, so as not to desterilise them, but that made his face closer to hers. Damn lucky he was wearing a mask or his mouth would have been in frank kissing range.

The heat coming off him was electric, almost palpable. He smiled. Or at least she thought he did—hard to tell under that mask, but his forehead crinkled and laughter lines creased at his temples.

'Nothing to apologise for, Kara. No harm done. In fact ... I like it.'

So did she. And, oh, if it wasn't enough just to have that soft accent tug on her heartstrings.

She swallowed through a dry throat, pushed the Theatre door open with her hip and gestured for him to walk through in front of her. How the hell would she spend a morning in surgery staring at those eyes, listening to that voice, looking at that body, and get out whole? He was going to reduce her to a hot mess of unruly hormones.

So she would take a leaf out of his book and refuse to engage in conversation about anything other than the task at hand.

Forcing words out was harder than she'd expected. 'So. How's Safia doing? When I popped up to see her an hour or so ago she didn't say much. I got the impression she was hanging out for you to visit.'

He shrugged. 'She's okay, I suppose. She's scared about the operation. Actually, she's scared about the pain. I did warn her about the initial sting of the graft sites, but we talked about pain relief and I've discussed it with Paul, the anaesthetist, so she should be well covered when she wakes up. I've warned her we can't fix it all today, and that she'll have negative pressure dressings on and to expect lots of tubes.'

'Great. And the parents? They seemed to think you were going to restore her to her former beauty.'

His left shoulder hiked. 'I had a long and honest meeting with them last night and showed them the digital blueprint we mocked up of how we hope Safia will look after the surgeries. They understand that we can only do so much, and that a lot is dependent on how Safia heals, the kind of scarring we get, whether she complies with physio. Although I still think they're a little unrealistic. My main concern is that she maintains function in those hands. But she's here and agreeing to treatment and that's the best we can hope for right now.'

He turned as the technician wheeled Safia in.

'Okay. Let's go. Hands first and then her face. We'll start with debriding.'

It was like watching an artist at work. A study in concentration, he was efficient but thorough. Instead of the brash rock music favoured by a lot of surgeons she'd worked with Declan chose something that was uplifting but gentle. There was a positivity to it, something that soothed yet entranced.

Or was that just him? Kara couldn't tell.

Even though he was the senior member of staff he treated everyone in the room with the same respect and took his time to explain his procedures.

‘See here?’ He gestured to Safia’s damaged cheek. ‘If we want to get a good result we have to consider the whole area as a unit, not just the part that’s damaged, otherwise the scarring will be ridged. It’s a multi-thickness burn—only second degree here, but here, where her face hit the dashboard, it’s deeper. So I’m going to have to use a split thickness graft.’

‘And attach it with absorbent stitches? Or glue?’ She passed him some gauze just as he reached out for it. The third time she’d anticipated his next move.

‘In this case, I’d say stitches.’ He shook his head, as if trying to get rid of a wayward thought. ‘What did you do in Sydney?’

‘Oh, this and that. Music concerts, swimming, going out with friends. My husband was away a lot so I was able ... to ... study ...’ She slowed right down and noticed all eyes were on her.

Surgery.

That deep, luscious voice was asking about the Croft-wood’s choice of surgical closure techniques—not about her private life. Her chest tightened. *Duh.* There went her credibility.

‘Er ... usually stitches. But glue if we thought the dressing wouldn’t be knocked or slip easily. Really it depended on the patient and the damaged area.’

She flatly refused to look him in the eye. Flatly. But she knew she was the single beacon of bright red in an otherwise white and sterile environment.

‘Husband?’

The accusation hung in the air along with the ghost of that kiss. As she turned to look at him his eyebrows rose.

God. She focused instead on the tube of antibiotic ointment in a dish to her left. Did he really think she’d have kissed him if she’d had a husband? When she’d entered her marriage it had been with an innocent and pure belief in forever. Too bad forever couldn’t happen.

‘Not any more.’

‘Okay.’ Declan’s voice was impassive. ‘Great work, team. Thanks for your help. She’s good to go to recovery. I’ll head up to have a chat with Mum and Dad after the next surgery.’

The technicians got busy taking Safia out and preparing for the next patient, leaving Kara alone for snatched minutes with Declan. Goddamn, the man stirred a smorgasbord of emotions in her. Right now it was a huge dose of embarrassment.

‘Er ... About before ...’

‘Kara ...’

He glanced up from the surgery list he was reading. *About what?* his look said. *The kiss? The husband?*

He removed his surgical mask, his mouth tipping up halfway to a wry smile. ‘Your life is your life. You don’t have to explain.’

‘I shouldn’t have rabbited on.’

‘Oh, no, to the contrary, we were all riveted. Concerts? Swimming?’

The omission of *husband* made her faux pas even more mortifying.

She shrugged. ‘What can I say? We’re a nation of water babies. Sydney’s by the ocean.’

‘And it gets very hot and there are snakes and spiders and lots of things that could kill you. I know.’ His voice had developed a harder tone now. ‘It’s also a very long way from here and people can get lonely.’

Was that what he thought? That she’d hooked up with him because she was homesick? Because she missed her husband? Because she regretted everything that had happened?

Well, wasn’t it? She didn’t know any more.

Four days later Declan was sitting at his desk making a poor show of doing the paperwork, checking staffing levels for the Hunter Clinic and keeping track of patients’ results.

He exhaled long and hard as the paper stack wobbled. It had been a very long week so far and tomorrow promised no let up. There were more surgeries booked, no doubt a scuffle through the media camped outside and a report due for Leo when he returned from honeymoon.

So why the hell, when he was supposed to be working, was he daydreaming about soft lips and green eyes? About a junior surgeon who anticipated his every move in Theatre, whose scent he could recognise at fifty paces, who seemed to have a direct line to his brain.

And his groin.

And was married. Or had been. Still, she wore no ring, and she'd been adamant that it was over.

He smiled at the thought of her ill-concealed blushes. She had a cool exterior, and could handle herself very well, but there was an unexpected softness about her too. A vulnerability that she hid, or tried to hide.

So he'd stayed out of her way as much as possible, because she was a heady mix of things that seemed to attract him more than they should. But avoiding contact with her hadn't worked; he couldn't get the damned woman out of his head.

'Hey. Just passing by en route to an emergency surgery. All good here?'

Friend and colleague Ethan Hunter stood in the doorway, his usual reluctant smile playing hooky. Dressed in scrubs, he looked primed for action. And Ethan always took that very seriously.

He'd been offered the position of Hunter Clinic head in his brother's absence but had somehow managed to persuade Declan to take that particular mantle, talking up Declan's silky PR skills. Declan had agreed—it was all good management experience. And, given the trauma Ethan had been through and his fight back to health, Declan hadn't wanted to refuse.

But this was also the guy responsible for Kara invading his thoughts. Declan could either tell him the truth—that she was quietly driving him mad—or get on with it. The very private Ethan wasn't exactly the kind of guy to confide 'deep and meaningful' to.

Declan shuffled some paper. 'All good, I suppose. Trying to get to grips with the accounts for when Leo gets back.'

At the mention of his brother's name Ethan stiffened. 'I'm sure you'll manage fine. Hey, how's Kara fitting in? I've heard good reports.'

Declan shrugged, trying not to give too much away. If he was struggling with anything he wouldn't let anyone know. And surely Ethan knew about their kiss at the ball? It was public knowledge.

'Okay. But I'll be happy when Karen gets back. She knows the routine—how I like things.' And she didn't pre-empt everything he did.

But the way Kara's eyes had swirled with a zillion different emotions—none of them warm and fuzzy ones—when she'd spoken about her husband had drawn him to her even more. Having nursed his sisters through enough broken hearts to add more than a few grey hairs to his head, he knew better than even to ask Kara what her story was ... but for some reason he was beyond intrigued.

'Hmm. I did wonder about allocating her to you, but short-staffed is short-staffed ...'

So Ethan must know about the kiss. It was Declan's own stupid fault for mixing work with fun.

Ethan frowned. 'It's not like you to not gel with someone ...'

Oh, yes. He gelled okay. Too damned much. Gelling wasn't the problem. *Un*-gelling was. 'Ah, well, you know ...'

'I presume you've had the setting the guidelines talk? Taken the "this is how I do things" approach?'

'We've been busy. You know what it's like with a media circus on your doorstep.'

'So demarcate some time—take her for a quick coffee, a drink. There's nothing wrong with her medical practice, though?'

'Hell, no. She's an excellent surgeon. But as it's probably only a short rotation with me I don't think we need bother with all that *getting to know you* stuff.'

‘No?’ Ethan ran a hand over his jaw. He looked tired. And hassled. ‘Try to get on with her, Declan. There’s been too much bad blood running through this place for too long.’ He checked his watch. ‘A drink. A coffee. I don’t care what you do. Just do it. I want to hear things are going smoothly, right? I could do without the stress of more work-related worries.’

Declan guessed Ethan was referring to the complicated relationship between the Hunter brothers.

‘Okay, boss.’

The man must have been a force to be reckoned with in the army. Fighting the urge to salute, Declan slammed the laptop shut and shoved it into his backpack, made his way to the hospital exit and breathed deeply, filling his lungs with disappointingly stuffy city air. What he needed was a good long ride on his bike to clear the cobwebs. A cosy chat be damned. What he needed was a Kara-free life.

Thankfully the car park was devoid of journalists, leaving him a clear path towards his motorbike. He strode ahead, helmet in hand, the evening sunshine glinting off the chrome handlebars.

Out of the corner of his eye he caught a movement. Someone else leaving the hospital, heading quickly—or as quickly as she could in a pair of red satin stilettos that made his heart stutter—towards the bus stop. Not quick enough, though, as the bus sailed past, leaving her stamping her pretty shoes against the tarmac.

At closer inspection he confirmed it was Kara, her hair loose down her back, which drew his eye to her slim waist, nipped in by a fitted cardigan and then lower, to her perfectly shaped backside encased in skinny black trousers. A shot of heat fizzed through him as if someone had flicked a switch in his body.

So he should have just ridden away. But before he knew what he was doing he’d strolled right on up to her.

Ethan’s orders, right? Taking one for the team for the sake of no bad blood. ‘Hey. Dr Down-Under.’

‘Watch it!’ She jumped round to face him, at the same time lunging at his throat in a well-practised self-defence karate chop move, her palm almost connecting to his chin.

In a knee-jerk reaction he took a step back and grabbed her palm. He didn’t think for one minute she’d have a qualm about trying to floor him and using her stiletto as a weapon. ‘Hey! Overreaction, much?’

‘Oh. It’s you. You nearly gave me a heart attack.’ She shook her hand free from his grip and frowned.

‘Lucky we’re outside a hospital, then.’ A short, hot kiss of life sprang to the forefront of his mind.

‘Do you often jump out at women from dark corners, wearing ...’

Her eyes widened as her gaze travelled over his dark grey T-shirt and jeans. A suit and tie were all well and good for an office day, or a riding the underground day, but not for a bike to work day.

Her throat bobbed up and down as she swallowed. ‘Wearing ... a leather jacket ...’

‘Only on special occasions.’ When she’d stopped staring and had seemed to gather her wits again he grinned. ‘You missed the bus.’

‘Thank you, Einstein.’ A deep V formed along her forehead. ‘He must have been blind not to see me. I was waving enough.’

‘Blind, indeed. Any man worth his salt would have stopped just for those shoes. But you were quite a distance from the bus stop—maybe trainers might be a better choice for running next time.’

She looked down, raised an ankle and turned it this way and that to look at her shoes. He followed her every movement, mesmerised. She had damned fine legs.

Purely an objective observation. Obviously.

An eyebrow peaked. ‘Ah, come on—never, *ever* compromise fashion for practicality. Oh ...’ Her eyes toured his body again and landed on his jacket. ‘You just did.’

But he could tell from the hunger in those startling green pupils that she liked what she saw. 'Steady, now. This jacket saved me from a skin-to-tarmac pebble-dashing after a collision with a drunk driver. It's my favourite.'

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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