



*Medical
Romance™*

SCARLET WILSON

The Maverick Doctor
and Miss Prim



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and Miss Prim

Аннотация

Dr Matt Sawyer isn't afraid to break rules. After losing his wife, he thinks life is too short for red tape. When there's a suspected outbreak in his ER, the last person he wants brought in is someone like Callie 'By the Book' Turner! But soon the sparks are flying between the buttoned-up investigator and this sexy rebel doctor!

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REBELS WITH A CAUSE

A fabulous new linked duet by Scarlet Wilson

Doctors on a mission to eradicate infectious diseases ... Their work is life-changing and often heartbreaking. But for these rebel heroes and bravehearted heroines their work with the DPA (Disease Prevention Agency) isn't just about making a difference and saving lives—because they are all running from something, and facing a crisis together puts their own hearts on the line!

THE MAVERICK DOCTOR AND MISS PRIM

and

ABOUT THAT NIGHT ...

Dear Reader

When I was asked by my editor if I would be interested in writing a duet I was delighted and jumped at the chance. The Center for Disease Control in the US has always fascinated me. I work in public health, and love all the work around infectious diseases and immunisation campaigns. The CDC always features heavily in any plague/outbreak/epidemic films that are made, and I was excited at the prospect of having a story along those lines and set about creating my own fictional organisation, the Disease Prevention Agency, for my *Rebels with a Cause* duet.

But all stories need to have fabulous characters, and I instantly fell in love with my hero in THE MAVERICK DOCTOR AND MISS PRIM—Matt Sawyer, wounded bad boy and very much like his namesake, Sawyer in *Lost*. He's the kind of guy you know deep-down has real good in him. It's just going to take a special

woman to unearth it.

My sassy heroine Callie is a girl out of her depth. She takes the initial call at the DPA and assembles the team, but her mentor is taken unwell on a plane and she's left in charge of a situation that is clearly bigger than any she's coped with before.

Her only option is to turn to Sawyer for help. After all, he worked in the DPA previously and has the expertise she needs. So why doesn't he want to help? It makes quarantine very interesting

...

Both my characters in this story are grieving. And both deal with their grief in their own way. Needless to say I let them get their happy-ever-after. It just takes a while to get there!

Please feel free to contact me via my website: www.scarlet-wilson.com. I love to hear from readers!

Scarlet

About the Author

SCARLET WILSON wrote her first story aged eight and has never stopped. Her family have fond memories of *Shirley and the Magic Purse*, with its army of mice, all with names beginning with the letter 'M'. An avid reader, Scarlet started with every Enid Blyton book, moved on to the *Chalet School* series, and many years later found Mills & Boon®.

She trained and worked as a nurse and health visitor, and currently works in public health. For her, finding Mills & Boon® Medical Romances™ was a match made in heaven. She is delighted to find herself among the authors she has read for many years.

Scarlet lives on the West Coast of Scotland with her fiancé and their two sons.

Recent titles by the same author:

AN INESCAPABLE TEMPTATION

HER CHRISTMAS EVE DIAMOND

A BOND BETWEEN STRANGERS*

WEST WING TO MATERNITY WING!

THE BOY WHO MADE THEM LOVE AGAIN

IT STARTED WITH A PREGNANCY

* *The Most Precious Bundle of All*

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Dedication

This book is dedicated to my two fabulous and entrepreneurial brothers-in-law, who have put up with me for more years than I care to remember. For Sandy Dickson and Robert Glencross, thank you for everything that you've done for me and my family and for taking such good care of my sisters!

CHAPTER ONE

Chicago

“OKAY, BEAUTIFUL, WHAT you got for me?” Sawyer leaned across the reception desk as the clerk glared at him.

Miriam cracked her chewing gum. “You’ve been here too long—you’re getting smart-mouthed.”

“I’ve always been smart-mouthed.”

“And get a haircut.”

He pushed his shaggy light brown hair from his eyes then tossed his head. “The long-haired look is in. Besides—I’m worth it.”

The clerk rolled her eyes and picked up three charts. “You can have two sick kids with chicken pox in room six or a forty-three-year-old female with D&V behind curtain two.” They lifted their heads in unison as the noise of someone retching behind curtain two filled the air.

He shuddered. “Give me the kids.” He grabbed the charts and walked down the corridor. His eyes skimmed the information on the charts. Ben and Jack Keating, aged six and seven, just returned from abroad with chicken pox.

He pushed open the door. Unusually, the lights were dimmed in the room. The two kids—brothers—lay on the beds with a parent at each bedside. Alison, one of the nurses, was taking a temperature. She walked over to him, her pregnancy bump just

starting to emerge from her scrub trousers. “Sickest kids I’ve seen in a while,” she murmured.

He gave her a smile, his natural instinct kicking in. “You safe to be in here?”

She sighed. “After three kids of my own it’s safe to say I’m immune.”

Sawyer crossed the room quickly, leaving the charts at the bottom of the beds. Alison was right. These kids didn’t look good. Chicken pox could be a lot more serious than a few itchy spots.

“Hi, I’m Matt Sawyer, one of the docs. I’m going to take a look at Ben and Jack.” He extended his hand towards the mother then the father, taking in their exhausted expressions before turning to the sink, washing his hands and donning some gloves.

He walked over to Ben. In the dim light it was difficult to see his face, but it looked as if it was covered in red, bumpy spots. “Hi, Ben, I’m just going to have a little look at you.”

The six-year-old barely acknowledged that he’d spoken. He glanced at the cardiac and BP monitor, noting the increased heart rate and low blood pressure. At first touch he could feel the temperature through his gloves. He pressed gently at the sides of Ben’s neck. Unsurprisingly his glands were swollen. There were a number of spots visible on Ben’s face so he peeled back the cover to reveal only a few angry spots across his chest but a whole host across his forearms.

The first thing that struck him was that all of the spots were

at the same stage of development. Not like chicken pox at all—where spots emerged and erupted at different times.

Alarm bells started ringing in his head. *Be methodical.* He heard the old mantra of his mentor echoing around him.

He moved to the bottom of the bed and lifted Ben's foot.

There. The same uniform spots on the soles of his feet. He stretched over, reaching Ben's hand and turning his palm over. Red vesicular spots.

He tasted bile in the back of his throat and glanced across the room to where Alison had switched on her telepathic abilities and had already hung some bags of saline and was running through the IV lines.

“Where were you on vacation?”

The boys' father shook his head. “We weren't on vacation. I was working. We've just come back from three months in Somalia. I work for a commercial water-piping company.”

Somalia. The last known place for a natural outbreak of this disease.

“Were any of the locals you came into contact with sick?” There were a million different questions flying around his head but he didn't want to bombard the parents.

Mrs Keating nodded. “We were in the highlands. A lot of them were sick. But we didn't think it was anything too serious. We actually wondered if we'd taken a bug to them—we were the first people they'd come into contact with in years.”

His reaction was instinctive. “Step outside, please, Alison.”

“What?” The nurse wrinkled her brow.

He raised his voice, lifting his eyes and fixing them on her, praying she would understand. “Wait outside for me, please, Alison.”

The atmosphere was electric. She was an experienced nurse and could read the expression on his face. She dropped the IV lines and headed for the door.

“Is something wrong?” Mr. Keating started to stand.

Sawyer crossed to the other bed. Jack was lying with his back to him. He wasted no time by pulling the white sheet from across Jack’s chest and tugging gently on his shoulder to pull him round.

Identical. His face was covered. Red, deep-seated round vesicles. All at the same stage of development, a few covering his chest but mainly on his forearms. He opened Jack’s mouth. Inside, his oral mucosa and palate were covered. He checked the soles of his feet and the palms of his hands. More identically formed red spots.

He could feel chills sweeping his body. It couldn’t be. *It couldn’t be.* This disease had been eradicated in the seventies. No one had seen this disease since then.

Then a little light bulb went off in his head. Hadn’t there been a suspected outbreak a few years ago that had turned out to be chicken pox? The very thing that this was presumed to be? He ran the list of other possibilities in his head. He knew them off by heart. Anyone who’d ever worked in the DPA did.

But the more he stared at the spots the more convinced he

became that it was none of the alternatives.

“How long since the spots appeared?”

The mother and father exchanged glances. “A few days? They had a rash at first then the spots developed. They’ve got much worse in the last day. But the boys had been feeling unwell before that—headaches, backaches, vomiting. We just thought they’d picked up a bug.”

Sawyer felt as if he was in a bad movie. Why him? Why did this have to happen while he was on duty?

Would someone else recognize this? Realize the potential risks? Or would they just chalk it up to a bad dose of chicken pox and discover the consequences later? He’d put all this behind him. He’d walked away and vowed never to be involved in any of this again. He was in the middle of Chicago—not in some far-off country. Things like this didn’t happen here. Or they *shouldn’t* happen here.

And right now that was he wanted to do again. To walk out that front door and forget he’d ever seen any of this.

He looked at the long inviting corridor outside. He wasn’t a coward. But he didn’t want this. He didn’t want *any* of this. The kind of thing that sucked you in until it squeezed all the breath from you.

A shadow moved outside the door.

But there was the killer. A pregnant nurse standing outside that door. A nurse who had been working with him and had contact with these children. Could he walk away from her?

He glanced upwards. It was almost as if someone had put her here so he *couldn't* walk away. His conscience would never allow him to do that.

If only he didn't know she was pregnant. If only that little bump hadn't just started to emerge above her scrub trousers. That would make this a whole lot easier.

Then he could walk away.

He took a deep breath and steeled himself. He was a doctor. He had a duty of care. Not just to his colleagues but to these kids. These very sick kids.

He looked back at the parents. "I need you to think very carefully—this is very important. Did you fly home?"

They both nodded.

"When, *exactly*, did you first notice the rash on the boys? Before or after you were on the plane?"

The parents looked at each other, screwing up their foreheads and trying to work it out.

A detailed history could wait. He knew enough already. He wasn't part of the DPA any more. This was their job, not his. The notification part he could handle—setting the wheels in motion so the processes could take over.

Isolation. Containment. Diagnosis. Lab tests. Media furore.

In the meantime he had two sick kids to take care of and staff members to worry about. Let the DPA do their job and he could do his.

He pulled his smart phone from his pocket and took a picture

of Jack's spots and then Ben's. "Wait here."

Alison jumped as he flung the door open. "What on earth's going on?" She matched his steps as he strode down the corridor to Reception. "Don't you think you can get away with speaking to me like that. I want to know what you think is wrong." He watched her as subconsciously her hands went to her stomach. This day was just about to get a whole lot worse.

"Did you touch them?"

"What?" She wrinkled her nose.

"The spots. Did you touch the children's spots?"

She must have read the fear he was trying to hide behind his eyes. "I think I did." She looked as if she might burst into tears. Then realization dawned. "I think I had gloves on." Her voice grew more determined. "No, I'm *sure* I had gloves on."

"And when you took them off, did you touch any other part of your skin?"

Her face crumpled. "I don't think so. But I can't be sure."

His hands landed on her shoulders and he steered her into the nearest free room. He knocked the water on with his elbows and pulled the hand scrub over, opening up a scrub brush for her. "Scrub as if you were going to Theatre and don't stop until I tell you."

She looked pale, as if she might keel over. But her reactions were automatic, pumping the scrub, covering her hands, wrists and forehands and moving them methodically under the running water.

He watched the clock. One minute. Two minutes. Three minutes. Four.

“Sawyer?”

He nodded. “You can stop now.”

“Do you know what it is?” She was drying her hands now.

“I think I do. I’m just praying that I’m wrong. Come with me.”

They reached the desk. Miriam had her back to them and was chatting loudly on the phone.

Sawyer leaned across the desk and cut the call.

She spun around. “What are you doing?”

“We’re closed.”

“What?” Several heads in the surrounding area turned.

“You don’t have any authority—”

“I do. Get me Dr. Simpson, the chief of staff, on the phone.”

He turned to face the rest of the staff. “Listen up, folks. As of now, we have a public health emergency. The department needs to close—right now.” He pointed at Miriam. “Let Dispatch know not to send us any more patients.”

He turned to one of the security staff. “Lock the front doors.”

The noise level around him rose.

He put his hand on Alison’s arm, pulling her to one side. “I’m sorry, honey, but that isn’t chicken pox. I think it’s smallpox. And we need to contact the DPA.”

Atlanta

Callie Turner stowed her bag in her locker and nodded at a few of her colleagues getting changed. She glanced in the mirror and

straightened her skirt, taking a deep breath as she gave herself a nervous smile and pulled at her new haircut—an asymmetric blonde bob.

It was meant to signify a new start—a new beginning for her. It had looked fabulous in the salon yesterday, expertly teased and styled. Today it just looked as if she was halfway through a haircut. This would take a bit of getting used to.

First day at the DPA.

Well, not really. An internship and then a three-year specialist residency training program completed within the DPA. All to be part of the Disease Prevention Agency. Eleven years in total of blood, sweat and lots of tears.

All to fulfil someone else's dreams. All to pay homage to someone else's destiny.

Today was the first day of the rest of her life.

She pushed open the door to the telephone hub. “Hi, Maisey.”

The short curly-haired woman looked up. “Woo-hoo! Well, look who picked the lucky bag on her first day on the job.” She rolled her eyes at Callie. “Go on, then. Who did you upset?”

Callie laughed and pulled out the chair next to Maisey. “No one that I know of. This was just my first shift on the rota.” She looked around. “It's kind of empty in here. Where is everyone?”

Maisey gave her a sympathetic glance. “You should have been here two hours ago. They're assembling a team next door. We've got a suspected outbreak of ebola.”

Callie's eyes widened. First day on the job and she was

assigned to the phones. The crazy calls. While next door the disease detectives were preparing to investigate an outbreak. She bit her lip. “Who took the call?”

Maisey smiled again. “Donovan.”

Callie sighed. Typical. The person who took the call usually got to assemble and lead the team. Donovan had a knack of being in the right place at the right time.

Unlike her.

She stared at the wall ahead of her. Someone had stuck a sign up: “NORMAL PEOPLE DON’T PHONE THE DPA.”

Never a truer word was said. The phone next to her started ringing. She bent forward and automatically picked it up. It would be a long day.

Four hours later she’d spoken to three health officials, crazy bat lady—who phoned every day—two over-anxious school teachers, five members of the public, and two teenagers who’d obviously been dared by their friends to ring up. Right now all she could think about was a large cappuccino and a banana and toffee muffin.

Her stomach grumbled loudly as she lifted the phone when it rang again. “DPA, Callie Turner, can I help you?”

“This is Matt Sawyer at Chicago General. I’ve got two kids with suspected smallpox.”

She sat up instantly as her brain scrambled to make sense of the words. All thoughts of the muffin vanishing instantly. This had to be a joke. But the voice didn’t sound like that of a teenager,

it sounded like an adult.

“Well, aren’t you going to say anything?” He sounded angry. Patience obviously wasn’t his strong point.

She took a deep breath. “Smallpox has been eradicated. It’s no longer a naturally occurring disease, Mr. Sawyer.”

“Listen, honey, you can call me Doctor. Dr. Matt Sawyer. Ringing any bells yet?”

She frowned. Matt Sawyer? The name seemed familiar. Who was he? And why was he speaking to her like that? She put her hand over the receiver and hissed at Maisey. “Hey, who’s Matt Sawyer?”

Maisey’s eyes widened instantly, the disbelief on her face obvious. She skidded her wheeled chair across the room next to Callie. “You’re joking, right?”

Callie shook her head and pointed to the phone.

Maisey bent forward and pulled the phone away from her ear, replacing it with her mouth. “Outbreak, dead pregnant wife, disappeared off the map.”

The pieces of the puzzle started to fall into place and become vaguely familiar. Of course. She *had* heard of this guy. In fact, everyone in the DPA had heard of this guy. He was like a dark, looming legend. But it had been way before her time.

Her training and natural instincts kicked in. There was a protocol for this. She pushed her chair under the desk and pulled up a screen on her computer. “Hi, Dr. Sawyer. Let’s go through this.”

The algorithm had appeared in front of her, telling her exactly what questions to ask, why and when. She started to take some notes.

“You said you’re at Chicago General. Whereabouts in the hospital are you?”

She could almost hear him sigh. “The ER.”

“What are the symptoms?”

“Two kids, returned from Somalia a few days ago. Ages six and seven. Very sick. Febrile, uniform red spots mainly on their faces, forearms, palms and soles. A few on their trunks. Low blood pressure, tachycardic, swollen glands.”

She was typing furiously. Somalia. The last known place to have a natural outbreak of smallpox. It did seem coincidental.

But there were a whole host of other diseases this could be. She started to speak. “Dr. Sawyer, have you considered chicken pox, herpes, scabies, impetigo—”

“Stop it.”

“What?”

“I know you’re reading from the list. I’ve considered all those things. It’s none of them. Check your emails.” He sounded exasperated with her.

“What do you mean?”

“Lady, do I have to tell you everything twice? Check your emails. I just sent you some photos. Have you ever seen spots like that?”

She clicked out of the algorithm and into her emails. Sure

enough, there it was. Everyone in the DPA had a generic email address starting with their full name. He was obviously familiar enough with the system to know that. There was no message. She opened the attached photos.

Wow.

The phone was still at her ear and she moved her face closer to the screen to examine the red spots. No. She hadn't seen anything like that before—except in a textbook.

“Show the photo to Callum Ferguson,” the low voice growled in her ear.

Callum Ferguson. The only person in their team who'd actually been through the last smallpox outbreak. The only person who'd seen the spots for real. Only someone who'd worked here would know something like that. This phone call was definitely no hoax.

“Give me two minutes.” She crossed the room in big strides, throwing open the door to the briefing room where the ebola team was assembling.

“Callum, I need you to take a look at something urgently.”

“Kind of busy in here, Callie.” The large Scotsman looked up from the floor, where he was packing things into a backpack. Callum was well past retirement age but nothing seemed to slow him down, and his age and experience made him invaluable on the outbreak team.

She lowered her voice, trying to avoid the glare coming across the room from Donovan.

“It’s Matt Sawyer on the phone. He needs you to look at something.”

Callum looked as though he’d just seen a ghost. His hands froze above his pack. He started to stutter, “Wh-what?”

She nodded and he stood up wordlessly and followed her out of the room.

In the few seconds she had been away from her seat, everything had changed. Her boss, Evan Hunter, was standing in front of her computer, staring at her screen, his two deputies and Maisey at his side. The phone receiver was still lying on the desk.

No one spoke. They just moved out of Callum’s way as he reached the screen. His heavy frame dropped into Callie’s chair and he glided under her desk.

“Well?”

Evan Hunter wasn’t renowned for wasting time. The scowl on his face was fierce and made Callie raise her eyebrows. Hadn’t someone told her there had been no love lost between him and Matt Sawyer in the past?

Callum, normally red faced, looked pale. He turned to Evan Hunter and nodded. “I’m sure. I never thought I’d see this again,” he whispered.

Everything around them erupted.

Evan pressed his hand on Callum’s shoulder. “You’re off the ebola team. This is yours—it couldn’t possibly be anyone else’s, seeing as Matt Sawyer is involved. You’re the only one who’s ever managed to assert any control over that loose cannon. I want you

all over him. Pick your team.” He looked at his watch. “It’ll take ninety minutes to fly to Chicago. I want you packed and ready to go inside four hours.”

He turned and swept out the room, his deputies scurrying after him. Callie was shaken. Had this really just happened?

Callum’s voice continued in low tones on the phone. He wasn’t even looking at the algorithm she’d pulled up on the screen. His eyes were still fixed on the photo.

“You’re sure there’s no possibility that this could be intentional—a biological terrorist attack?” He was scribbling notes as he listened. There were a few more mumbled questions before he replaced the receiver.

“Was it him? Was it definitely Sawyer?” Maisey looked fit to burst.

Callum nodded. “It was him.” He stood up slowly, obviously still in thought. “I guess that means he’s all right, then.” He touched Callie’s arm. “Get ready, Dr. Turner. This could be the experience of a lifetime.”

“I’m on the team?” She could barely contain her excitement. It was only made slightly better by the look of disgust on Donovan’s face over the other side of the room.

Callum smiled at her. “You know the rules, Callie. You took the call—of course you’re on the team.”

“I’ll be ready in half an hour. Let me get the updated plans.” She rushed off, her heart thumping in her chest.

First official day on the job and she was on the outbreak team

investigating an apparently eradicated disease. Isabel would have loved this.

Callie shoved her bag in the overhead locker and sat down next to Callum. Everything was happening so fast. She hadn't even had time to think.

The doors of the plane were already closed and they were starting to taxi down the runway. The cabin crew was already in their seats—the safety announcement forgotten. The normal rules of aviation didn't seem to apply today.

This was the biggest team she'd ever been part of. There had to be around thirty people on this plane. Other doctors, epidemiologists, case interviewers, contact tracers, admin personnel and, most worrying, security.

Callum had the biggest pile of paperwork she'd ever seen. He was checking things off the list. “Vaccines—check. Protocols—check. N95 filtered masks—check. Symptom list—check. Algorithm—check. Three-hundred-page outbreak plan ...” his thumb flicked the edges of the thick document “... check.”

He leaned back in his seat. “And that's just the beginning.” A few minutes later they felt the plane lift off. Ninety minutes until they reached their destination.

“What have you done about containment plans?”

He nodded at her question. “I've identified a suitable building for a Type-C containment. Arrangements are currently being made to prepare it. In the meantime we've instructed Chicago General to switch their air-conditioning off. We don't want to risk

the spread of the droplets. They don't even have suitable masks right now—only the paper ones, which are practically useless.”

He shook his head. “Those spots were starting to erupt. These kids are at the most infectious stage of this disease.”

Callie shuddered. A potentially deadly disease in an E.R. department. Her mind boggled.

It didn't matter that she was a completely rational person. It didn't matter that she specialized in infectious diseases. There was still that tiny human part in her that wanted to panic.

That wanted to run in the other direction.

The strange thing was that there were colleagues at the DPA who would kill to be in her shoes right now. Her very tight, uncomfortable shoes. Why hadn't she changed them before they'd left? Who knew how long she would be on her feet?

She hesitated. “Who are you relaying the instructions to right now?”

His eyes fixed on the papers in front of him. He didn't look so good. “The chief of staff at Chicago General is Max Simpson. He's following our instructions to the letter. Or rather Matt Sawyer is following our instructions to the letter. He's the only one with any experience down there.”

There were small beads of sweat on his brow. He reached into his top pocket and pulled out some antacids.

“You okay?”

He nodded as he opened the packet and popped three in his mouth.

Callum was the calmest, most knowledgeable doctor she'd ever worked with. She'd worked side by side with him through lots of outbreaks. She couldn't ask for a better mentor. But even he looked a little scared. Maybe it wasn't just her after all?

Or maybe it was something else entirely.

She lowered her voice. "He was your protégé, wasn't he?"

"My what?"

"Matt Sawyer. I heard he was your protégé."

Callum grimaced and shook his head. "Do me a favor. Don't let Sawyer hear you call him that. That would tip him over the edge that I presume he's currently dangling on."

"What do you mean?" During all the frantic preparations Callie hadn't had any time to find out more about Matt Sawyer. Only a few whispers and hurried conversations here and there.

This was her first real mission. She'd been out as a danger detective before—when she'd been completing her specialist residency training. But this was her first real chance to prove herself. To prove that she was a worthy member of the team. To prove to them—and herself—that she deserved to be there.

It didn't sound promising if the doctor who'd made the initial call was unstable.

She looked at the pile of papers on Callum's lap. The outbreak plans, the containment plans, the paperwork to use for contact tracing, the algorithms. A plan for everything. A piece of paper for every eventuality. Just the way she liked it. Just the way she'd learned to function best.

Rules and regulations were her backbone. The thing that kept her focused. The thing that kept everyone safe.

Callum followed her gaze. “This could get messy.”

“What do you mean? With the disease? The casualties?” She hadn’t even stopped to think about that yet. She still had her public health head on, the one that looked at the big picture. She hadn’t even started to consider the individuals.

Callum looked kind of sad. “No.” He gave a little grimace again. “With Sawyer.”

“Sawyer? Aren’t you happy to see him again?” She was confused. Hadn’t they been friends?

“Under any other set of circumstances I would be. But not here. Not like this. This will be his worst nightmare. Sawyer walked away from all this. The last thing he wants to do is be involved in another outbreak. I can’t imagine how he’s feeling.”

“He’s a doctor. He has responsibilities. He has a job to do.” She made it all sound so straightforward. Because in her head that was the way it should be.

He sighed. “Things change, Callie. Life gets in the way. Sawyer doesn’t live by anybody’s rules but his own. He didn’t even follow protocol today. He should have notified the state department first but he didn’t. He just called the DPA. He called *you*.” He emphasized the word as he placed a hand on his chest.

She’d missed that. Miss Rules and Regulations had missed that. In her shock at the nature of the call it hadn’t even occurred to her that Sawyer should have contacted the state department

first and *they* should have contacted the DPA.

How could she have missed that?

She didn't need anyone to remind her that things could change—that life, or lack of it—could get in the way. She was living proof of that.

Seeds of doubt started to creep into her mind. She'd missed the first rule of notification. And if she'd missed that, what else would she miss? Should she even be on this team?

Rules were there for a reason. Rules were there to be followed. Rules were there for everyone's safety.

Then it really hit her. What was happening before her very eyes.

The last thing she needed to do right now was look at the wider picture. She needed to concentrate on the picture right before her.

Callum was turning gray, with the slightest blue tinge around his lips. His skin was waxy and he was still sweating. His hand remained firmly on his chest.

“Callum? Are you okay?” She unfastened her seat belt and stood up, signaling to some of the other members of the team. “That's not heartburn, is it?”

He shook his head as she started barking out orders to the rest of the team. “Get me some oxygen. Find out how soon till we get there. Can we get an earlier landing slot? Speak to the pilot—it's a medical emergency.”

They literally had every piece of equipment known to man on

this plane. Unfortunately, most of it was in the hold. And none of it was to treat a myocardial infarction.

She cracked open their first-aid kit, monitoring his blood pressure and giving him some aspirin. She pasted a smile on her face. “Things will be fine, Callum. We’ll get you picked up at the airport and taken to the nearest cardiac unit.”

His hand gripped her wrist. “I’m sorry, Callie. I shouldn’t be leaving you to deal with this. Not with Sawyer. You two are like oil and water. You won’t mix. Not at all.” His head was shaking.

Callie’s stomach was churning. The thought of facing the legendary Sawyer herself was not filling her with confidence. But right now she would do or say anything that would relieve the pressure on Callum. Anything at all.

“Everything will be fine. You’ll see. Don’t worry about a thing, Callum. I can handle Sawyer.”

Famous last words.

CHAPTER TWO

“WHO ARE YOU and where is Callum Ferguson?” Not waiting for an answer, the man with the shaggy hair pushed past her and looked behind her. With his broad frame and pale green eyes, on another occasion she might have looked twice. But she didn’t have time for this.

Great. The welcoming party. And he was obviously delighted to see her.

She struggled to set the box down on the reception desk. There was only one person this could be. And she intended to start the way she meant to continue. This was business.

“Here are the N95 masks. Make sure anyone that goes into the room with those kids wears one. And make sure it’s fitted properly, otherwise it will be useless.”

He hadn’t moved. He was still standing directly in her path. “I asked you a question.”

She almost hesitated but that would do her no good. She needed to establish who was in charge here. And it was her.

“Matt Sawyer? I’m Callie Turner and I’m leading the team.” She turned towards the door as the rest of the team fanned in behind her, carrying their equipment.

It was like an invasion. And the irony of that wasn’t lost on her.

She tilted her head. “I’d shake your hand but you’re already an infection control hazard, so forgive me.”

Did she look confident? She certainly hoped so, because her stomach was churning so much that any minute now she might just throw up all over his Converse.

She walked around behind the desk and started pulling things out of the boxes being deposited next to her. “Lewis, Cheryl, set up here and here.” She pointed to some nearby desks.

“I’m only going to ask you one more time. Where is Callum Ferguson?”

He was practically growling at her now. And that hair of his was going to annoy her. Why didn’t he get a decent haircut? Wouldn’t long hair be an infection control hazard? Maybe she should suggest he find an elastic band and tie it back, though on second thoughts it wasn’t quite long enough for that.

She drew herself up before him. This man was starting to annoy her. *Did he think she was hiding Callum Ferguson in her back pocket?* “I’m sorry to tell you, Dr. Sawyer, that Dr. Ferguson became unwell on the plane en route.”

He actually twitched. As if she’d just said something to shock him. Maybe he was a human being after all.

“What happened?”

“We think he had an MI. He’s been taken to the cardiac unit at St John’s. I heard it’s the best in town.”

She waited for a second while he digested the news. Would he realize she’d checked up on the best place to send her colleague, rather than just send him off to the nearest hospital available? She hoped so. From the expression on Sawyer’s face she might

need to win some points with him.

Why did the thought of being quarantined with this man fill her with impending doom?

Sawyer was about to explode. And Miss Hoity-Toity with her navy-blue suit, pointy shoes and squinty hairdo was first in line to bear the brunt of the impact.

It was bad enough that he was here—but now to find out that the one person in the DPA he absolutely trusted *wasn't* going to be here?

The thought of Callum Ferguson having an MI was sickening. Sawyer had almost fallen into the trap of thinking the man was invincible. He'd spent the last forty years investigating outbreaks and coming home unscathed.

Please let him be okay.

He scowled at Callie Turner as she issued orders to those all around him. Did she realize her hand was trembling ever so slightly? Because he did. And it wasn't instilling him with confidence.

He planted his hand on his hip. "How old are you *exactly*?"

He could see her bristling. Her brain was whirring, obviously trying to think up a smart answer. She walked straight over to him and put both of her hands on her hips, mirroring his stance.

"Exactly how old do you want me to be, Sawyer?"

He couldn't wipe the smile from his face. Smart and sassy—if a little young. The girl showed promise.

"So what happened to the hair?"

He'd already caught her tugging self-consciously at one side of her hair. As if she wasn't quite used to it yet. "Were you halfway through when you took my call?" He took a piece of gum offered by nearby Miriam and started chewing as he watched her. He could tell she was irritated by him. Perfect. Maybe if he annoyed Miss DPA enough, he could get out of here.

Except it didn't work like that and he knew it. Still, he could live in hope.

She dumped a final pile of papers on the desk from her box, which she picked up and kicked under the desk. Yip. She was definitely mad.

She grabbed the heavily clipped document on the top of the pile, strode over and thrust it directly against his chest. It hit him square in the solar plexus, causing him to catch his breath.

"My haircut cost more than you probably make in a month. Now, here—read this. And it isn't from me. It's from Callum. He said to make sure it was the first thing I gave you—along with the instructions to follow it to the letter."

He pulled the document off his chest. The DPA plan for a smallpox outbreak. All three hundred pages of it. He let it go and it skidded across the desk towards her.

"I don't need to read this."

She stepped back in front of him. "Yes. You do. You've already broken protocol once today, Dr. Sawyer. You should have contacted the state department *before* you contacted us. But, then, you know that, don't you? You don't work for the DPA

anymore, Dr. Sawyer.”

He cracked his chewing gum. “Well, that’s at least one thing we agree on.”

She glanced at her watch. “So, that means, that as of right now—five thirty-six p.m.—you work for me. You, and everyone else in here. This is my hospital now, Dr. Sawyer, my jurisdiction, and you will do exactly what I tell you.” She jerked her thumb over her shoulder. “And it’s all in that plan. So memorize it because there’ll be a pop quiz later.”

She kicked her navy-blue platforms beneath the desk and started to undo her shirt. “Where are the scrubs and protective clothing?” she shouted along the corridor.

“In here,” came a reply from one of the nearby rooms.

“Let’s go see these kids,” she barked at Sawyer over her shoulder as she headed to the room.

Organized chaos was continuing around him. Piles upon piles of paper were being pulled from boxes, new phones were appearing and being plugged in all around him. He recognized a couple of the faces—a few of the epidemiologists and contact tracers—standing with their clipboards at the ready.

He could hear the voices of the admin staff around him. “No, put it here. Callie’s very particular about paperwork. Put the algorithms up on the walls, in the treatments rooms and outside the patient rooms. Everyone has to follow them to the letter.”

So, she was a rules-and-regulations girl? This was about to get interesting.

He wandered over to the room. Callie was standing in her bra and pants, opening a clean set of regulation pale pink scrubs. Last time he'd worn them they'd been green. Obviously a new addition to the DPA repertoire.

The sight made him catch his breath. It was amazing what could lurk beneath those stuffy blue suits and pointy shoes. The suit was lying in a crumpled heap on the ground, discarded as if it were worthless when it easily clocked in at over a thousand dollars. He could see the label from here. Maybe Miss Hoity-Toity did have some redeeming features after all.

Her skin was lightly tanned, with some white strap marks on her shoulders barely covered by her bra. She was a matching-set girl. Pale lilac satin. But she didn't have her back to him so from this angle he couldn't tell if she favored briefs or a thong ...

Her stomach wasn't washboard flat like some women he'd known. It was gently rounded, proving to him that she wasn't a woman who lived on salad alone. But the most intriguing thing about her was the pale white scar trailing down the outside of her leg. Where had that come from? It might be interesting to find out. His eyes lifted a little higher. And as for her breasts ...

"Quit staring at me." She pulled on her scrub trousers. "You're a doctor. Apparently you've seen it all before." She tossed him a hat. "And get that mop of yours hidden."

She pulled her scrub top over her head and knelt in the corner next to her bag. She seemed completely unaffected by his gawping. Just as well really.

Sawyer reluctantly pulled on the hat and a disposable pale yellow isolation gown over his scrubs. She appeared at his side a few seconds later as he struggled to tuck his hair inside the slightly too big cap.

“Want one of these?” She waved a bobby pin under his nose with a twinkle in her eye. She was laughing at him.

“Won’t you need all of them to pull back that one side of your bad haircut?”

She flung a regulation mask at him. “Ha. Ha. Now, let’s go.”

They walked down the corridor where the lights were still dimmed. She paused outside the door, her hand resting lightly on his arm.

“Let’s clarify before we go in. How many staff have been in contact with these kids?”

He nodded. He would probably answer these questions a dozen times today. “Main contact has been myself and Alison, one of our nurses. We’re estimating they were only in the waiting room around ten minutes. One of the triage nurses moved them through to a room quickly as the kids were pretty sick.”

Her eyebrows rose above her mask. “I take it that you’ve continued to limit the contact to yourselves?”

“Ah, about that.”

“What?” Her expression had changed in an instant. Her eyes had narrowed and her glare hardened.

“There’s a problem.”

“What kind of problem?”

“Alison’s pregnant. Eighteen weeks.”

She let out an expression that wasn’t at all ladylike. He hadn’t known she had it in her.

“Exactly. I haven’t let her go back in. She’s adamant. Says there’s no point exposing anyone else to something she’s already breathed in anyway. But I wasn’t having any of it.”

He could see her brain racing. There was the tiniest flicker of panic under that mask. “But the vaccine ...”

He touched her shoulder. “I know. We don’t know the effects it could have on a fetus.” He shrugged. “I don’t know if you’ve come up with any new research in the last six years, but I wouldn’t want to be the doctor to give it to her.”

She nodded. “Leave it with me. I’ll take it up with the team.” She turned back to the room. “We need to get some samples.”

“It’s already done.”

“What?” She whipped around. “Why didn’t you say so?”

He sighed. “What do you think I’ve been doing these last few hours? I’m not that far out of the loop that I don’t know how to take samples. Besides, the kids were used to me. It was better that I did it.”

She nodded, albeit reluctantly. “And the parents?”

“I’ve taken samples from them too. They’re all packaged and ready to go. Let’s find out what we’re dealing with.”

“I want to see the kids first.”

Now she was annoying him. “You think I made their spots up? Drew them on their faces and arms?”

“Of course I don’t. But, like or not, I’m the doctor in charge here. I need to see the spots for myself. Get some better pictures than the ones snapped on your phone. I need to be clear that you’ve ruled out everything.”

She was only saying what he would have said himself a few years ago. She was doing things by the book. But in his eyes, doing things by the book was wasting time. That was why he hadn’t bothered with the call to the state department. Best to go right to the source.

And this family might not have that time to waste. Just like his hadn’t.

It made him mad. Irrationally mad. And it didn’t matter that the voices in his head were telling him that. Because he wasn’t listening.

“For goodness’ sake. Don’t you have any confidence in my abilities? I’ve been doing this job since you were in kindergarten. I could run rings around you!”

She pushed her face up next to his. If it weren’t for the masks, their noses would be practically touching. “You’re not quite that old, Matt Sawyer. And it doesn’t matter what I think about your doctoring abilities. I’m in charge here. Not you. We’ve already established you don’t work for the DPA any more and I do. You know how things work. You know the procedures and protocols. You might not have followed them but I do. To the letter.” She put her hand on the door. “Now, do your job, Dr. Sawyer. Take me in there and introduce me to the parents.”

Callie leaned back against the wall in the sluice room. She'd just pulled off her disposable clothing and mask and dispensed with them in line with all the infection control protocols.

She let the temperature of the cool concrete seep through her thin scrub top. Thank goodness. With the air-conditioning turned off this place was getting warm. Too warm. Why couldn't this outbreak have happened in the middle of the winter, when Chicago was knee deep in snow, instead of when it was the height of summer? It could have made things a whole lot simpler for them. It could also have made the E.R. a whole lot quieter.

Those kids were sick. Sawyer hadn't been kidding. They were *really* sick. She'd really prefer it if they could be in a pediatric intensive care unit, but right now that was out of the question.

And even though it seemed like madness, in a few minutes' time she was going to have to inoculate them and their parents with the smallpox vaccine.

Then she was going to have to deal with the staff, herself included.

There wasn't time to waste. The laboratory samples were just away. It could be anything up to forty-eight hours before they had even a partial diagnosis and seven days before a definitive diagnosis. She didn't want to wait that long.

She knew that would cause problems with Sawyer. He would want to wait—to be sure before they inflicted a vaccine with known side-effects on people who might not be at risk. But she'd already had that conversation with her boss, Evan Hunter. He'd

told her to make the decision on the best information available. And she had.

She wrinkled her nose, trying to picture the relationship between the man she'd just met and Callum Ferguson, a doctor for whom she had the utmost respect. How on earth had these two ever gotten along? It just didn't seem feasible.

She knew that Sawyer had lost his pregnant wife on a mission. That must have been devastating. But to walk away from his life and his career? Why would anyone do that? Had he been grief stricken? Had he been depressed?

And more to the point, how was he now? Was he reliable enough to trust his judgment on how best to proceed? Because right now what she really needed was partner in crime, not an outright enemy.

If only Callum were here. He knew how to handle Sawyer. She wouldn't have needed to have dealt with any of this.

Her fingers fell to her leg—to her scar. It had started to itch. Just as it always did when she was under stress. She took a deep breath.

She'd made a decision. Now it was time to face the fallout.

“Are you crazy?”

“No. I'm not crazy. I've already spoke to my boss at the DPA. Funnily enough, he didn't want you sitting in on that conference call. It seems your reputation has preceded you.”

“I don't care about my reputation—”

“Obviously.”

“I care about these staff.”

He spun around as the crates were wheeled into the treatment room and the vaccine started to be unloaded. One of the contact tracers came up and mumbled in her ear, “We’re going to start with a limited number of people affected. The kids, their parents, Dr. Sawyer, yourself and these other four members of staff who’ve had limited contact.”

“What about Alison?”

The contact tracer hesitated, looking from one to the other. “That’s not my decision,” he said as he spun away.

Callie swallowed. She could do with something cool to drink, her throat was dry and scratchy. “Alison will have to make her own decision on the vaccine. There isn’t enough data for us to give her reliable information.”

She saw the look on his face. He looked haunted. As if he’d just seen a ghost from the past. Was this what had happened to his wife? Had she been exposed to something that couldn’t be treated because of her pregnancy? This might all be too close to home for Matt Sawyer.

“Okay.” He ran his fingers through his hair. It hadn’t got any better now it had been released from the cap. In fact, it seemed to have grown even longer. “Do me a favor?”

She lifted her head from the clipboard she was scribbling on. “What?”

“Let me be the one to talk to Alison about it. If there hasn’t been any more research in the last six years, then I’m as up to

date as you are.”

She took a deep breath. She didn't know this guy well enough to know how he would handle this. He was obviously worried about his colleague. But was that all? And would his past experience affect his professional judgment?

“You can't recommend it one way or the other, you understand that, don't you?”

She could tell he wanted to snap at her. To tell her where to go. But something made him bite his tongue. “I can be impartial. I'll give her all the facts and let her make her own decision. It will come better from someone she knows.”

Callie nodded. He was right. The smallpox vaccine came with a whole host of issues. She was already questioning some of the decisions that she'd made.

Alison was at the end of the corridor in a room on her own, partly for her own protection and partly for the protection of others. She'd been in direct contact with the disease—without any mask to limit the spread of the infection. In theory, because she hadn't had prolonged exposure in a confined space, she should be at low risk. But she'd also been exposed to—and had touched—the erupting spots. The most infectious element of the disease. Pregnant or not, she had to be assessed as being at risk. “You know I have to do this, right?”

He was glaring at her, his head shaking almost imperceptibly—as if it was an involuntary act.

“We have the three major diagnostic criteria for smallpox.

This is a high-risk category. Those parents look sick already. They're probably in the prodromal stage of the disease."

The implication in the air was there, hanging between them. If they waited, it could result in more casualties and the DPA being slaughtered by the media for wasting time. That was the last thing anyone wanted.

"Callie? We have a problem."

Both heads turned to the DPA contact tracer standing at the door. "What is it, Hugo?"

She stepped forward and took the clipboard from his hand.

"It's the parents. They can't say for sure if the rash came out during or after the plane trip home."

"You're joking, right?" Callie felt the hackles rise on the back of her neck. This was one of the most crucial pieces of information they needed. Once the rash was out, the person was infectious. This was the difference between three hundred passengers on a plane being at risk or not.

Hugo looked pale. "Mrs. Keating is sure they didn't have a rash before they got on the plane. And she's almost sure they didn't have it on the plane, because the kids slept most of the journey. They went straight home and put the kids to bed—she didn't even get them changed. It wasn't until the next day she noticed the rash, but it could have been there on the plane."

Callie cringed, as Sawyer read her mind. "Prodromal stage. Did they sleep because they were developing the disease or did they sleep because it was a long flight?" He put a hand on Hugo's

shoulder. “You have to establish if she noticed either of the kids having a fever during the journey.” He paused, then added, “And make sure they didn’t change planes anywhere.” Sawyer rolled his eyes to the ceiling, “Or our contact tracing will become a nightmare.”

Hugo nodded and disappeared back through the door.

Sawyer watched her as she fiddled with the clips in her hair. She was consulting the plan again. There seemed to be one in every room he entered. A list of procedures. A multitude of flow charts.

She didn’t like it when things weren’t exactly to plan. Then again, she’d never been in charge of an epidemic before.

He could be doing so much more for her. He could be talking her through all this, helping her out. Liaising more with the team back at the DPA—even if that did mean dealing with Evan Hunter.

He knew all this stuff inside out and back to front.

But he just couldn’t.

It didn’t matter that he was stuck in the middle of all this. There was a line he didn’t want to cross. He had to take a step back. He had to focus on the sick children.

He picked up another disposable gown and mask. “The IV fluids on the kids probably need changing. I’m going to go and check on them.” He paused and turned his head just as he left. “You need to go and make an announcement to all the staff. You need to bring them up to date on the information that you have.”

He hesitated, then added something else.

“It’s not only the natives that will be getting restless. We’ve got patients here who’ve been quarantined. They won’t understand what’s going on. They won’t know what to tell their relatives.”

She gave the slightest nod, as if the thought of what she was going to say was pressing down on her shoulders. He almost withered. “There’s a public address system at the front desk—use that.”

His phone beeped and he headed out of the room and down the corridor, pulling the phone from his pocket.

Violet.

He should have known.

No, he should have texted her first. She must be frantic.

He flicked the switch to silent and pushed it back into his pocket. She would just have to wait. He would deal with her later.

Callie could hear the raised voices as she strode down the corridor. “Why can’t I leave? I’m fine. If I stay here, I’ll get sick. You can’t make me stay!”

It was inevitable. People always reacted like this when there was an outbreak. It was human nature.

The hard part was that Callie didn’t want to be here any more than they did. But she couldn’t exactly say that, could she?

The reality check was starting to sink in. She was in a strange city, in the middle of a possible outbreak of a disease that had supposedly been eradicated. She wasn’t ready for this. If she closed her eyes for just a second, she could see Isabel in the

middle of all this. This had been her dream from childhood—to work at the DPA at the cutting edge of infectious disease. She wouldn't be feeling like this. She wouldn't be feeling sick to her stomach and wanting to go and hide in a corner. Isabel would be center stage, running everything with a precise touch.

But Isabel wasn't here.

And that was Callie's fault. Her beautiful older sister had died six years earlier. Callie had been behind the wheel of their old car, taking a corner too fast—straight into the path of someone on the wrong side of the road. If only she hadn't been distracted—been fighting with her sister. Over something and nothing.

That was the thing that twisted the most. It was the same argument they'd had for years. Pizza or burgers. Something ridiculous. Something meaningless. How pathetic.

She fixed her gaze on the scene ahead. Isabel would know exactly how to handle a man like Sawyer. She would have had him eating out of her hand in five minutes flat.

Okay, maybe not five minutes.

Sawyer probably wasn't the type.

But, then, Isabel had been a people person. She'd known how to respond to people, she'd known how to work a crowd. All the things that Callie didn't have a clue about.

The voices were rising. Things were reaching a crescendo.

It was time to step up. Whether she liked it or not, it was time to take charge.

She pushed her way through the crowd around the desk and

jumped up onto the reception area desk. “Is this the PA system?”

The clerk gave her a nod as she picked up the microphone and held it to her mouth. Adrenaline was starting to course through her system. All eyes were on her. She could do this. She pressed the button on the microphone and it let out a squeal from automatic feedback. Anyone who hadn’t been listening before was certainly listening now.

“Hi, everyone. I’m sure you know I’m Callie Turner from the DPA. Let me bring you up to speed.”

The anxiety in the room was palpable. The eyes staring at her were full of fear.

“You all know that we’re dealing with two suspected cases of smallpox. That’s the reason why the E.R. has been closed and we’ve enforced a quarantine. The samples have been collected and sent to the DPA lab for identification. The laboratory tests for smallpox are complicated and time-consuming. We should hear back in around forty-eight hours what type of virus it is—whether it’s a type of pox or not—but it takes longer to identify what strain of virus it is. That can take anything up to seven days. So, until we know if it’s a pox or not, we need to stay here. We need to try and contain this virus.”

“I don’t want to be in isolation,” one of the men shouted.

“You’re not,” Callie said quickly. “You’re quarantined—there’s a difference. Isolation means separating people who are ill with a contagious disease from healthy people. The children who are affected have been isolated. Quarantine restricts the

movement of people who have been exposed to someone or something, to see if they will become ill. That's what we're doing with all of you." Her hand stretched out across the room.

She could still feel the tension. Anxious glances being exchanged between staff and patients. She could see the questions forming on their lips. Best to keep going.

She tried to keep her voice calm. "The incubation period for smallpox is around twelve days but it can range from seven to seventeen days. Smallpox is spread person to person by droplet transmission. It can also be spread by contact with pustules or rash lesions or contaminated clothing or bedding.

"A person with smallpox is considered infectious when the rash appears, but at the moment we're going to consider any affected person infectious from the onset of fever. This should help us control any outbreak. It's important to remember that only close contacts—those who were within six or seven feet of the infectious person should be at risk."

She was talking too quickly, trying to put out too much information at once. She was hoping and praying that someone wouldn't pick up on the fact that they could be quarantined together for seventeen days.

"Should? What do you mean, 'should'? Don't you know?"

Callie took a deep breath. She didn't blame people for being angry. She would be angry too. But as she opened her mouth to speak, Sawyer got in there first. He'd appeared out of nowhere, stepping up alongside her, his hand closing over hers as he took

the PA microphone from her.

“This isn’t like some disaster movie, folks. A person with smallpox doesn’t walk, coughing and spluttering, through a crowd and infect everyone around them. For a start, most people infected with smallpox don’t cough anyway. And the last data available from the DPA shows that the average person affected can infect around five to seven people. And those would only be the close contacts around them. Let’s not panic. Let’s keep this in perspective.”

She was watching him, her breath caught her in throat. He was doing what *she* should be doing. He was keeping calm and giving them clear and easy-to-understand information.

Part of her felt angry. And part of her felt relief.

She was out of her depth and she knew it.

The DPA was a big place. And she was a good doctor—when she was part of a team. But as a leader? Not so much.

Put her in a room with a pile of paperwork and she was the best. Methodical, good at interpreting the practical applications of a plan.

She could do the patient stuff—she could, obviously, or she wouldn’t have made it through medical school or her residency. Actually, some of it she had loved. But she’d enjoyed the one-to-one patient contacts, patients a physician could take time with, understand their condition and give them long-term advice. Not the hurried, rushed, wide perspective of the DPA.

But, then, the DPA had been Isabel’s dream, not hers. She’d

never wanted this for herself.

And now? She was stuck with it.

“So, that’s it folks. We’ll let you know as soon as we hear back from the labs. In the meantime, we’ll have arrangements in place to make everyone more comfortable with the facilities we have here.” He raised his eyebrows at her. “It could be that in a few hours we move to somewhere more suitable?”

She nodded wordlessly. He must have known that Callum would already have put the wheels in motion to set up a category C facility for containment.

“In the meantime, follow the infection control procedures on the walls around you. Take a deep breath and show a little patience. We’re all scared.” He pointed at the figures lining the walls with their clipboards, “It’s important we help these guys out. Tell them everything you know.” He looked back at Callie. She was sure that right now she must resemble a deer caught in a set of headlights. “And if you have any questions, Dr. Turner is in charge. That’s it for now.”

He jumped off the table and headed back down the corridor.

The room was quieter now, the shouting had stopped. Her legs were trembling and she grabbed hold of a hand offered to her as she climbed down off the table. Heads were down, people working away, going about their business. One of the security guards was helping one of the nursing aides carry linen through to another room to help set up some beds.

Callie knew she couldn’t leave this. She knew she had to talk

to him. Even though he was trying to put some space between them.

“Sawyer.” She was breathless, running down the corridor after him. “I just wanted to say thank you. For back there.”

His green eyes fixed on hers, just for a second, before they flitted away and he ran his fingers through that hair again. Her heart clenched, even though she couldn’t understand why. He was exasperated with her. “That was a one-off, Callie. Don’t count on me to help you again.” He turned and strode back down the corridor, leaving her standing there.

Alone.

CHAPTER THREE

“YOU NEED TO manage things better.” He couldn’t help it. There were probably a million other ways to put this more delicately, but Sawyer didn’t have time to think about nicer words.

Her head shot upwards. There it was—that rabbit-in-the-headlights look again from her.

He hated it. Because it made his stomach churn. He didn’t know whether to be irritated by it or whether he really wanted to go over and give her a quick hug.

“What on earth do you mean, *‘manage things better’*?” She made quote marks in the air with her fingers as she repeated his words back to him. He could see the lines across her brow. She was tired and she was stressed. And he understood that. It was part and parcel of the job at the DPA.

He could feel his lips turn upwards. She looked even prettier when she was cross.

“What are you smirking at?” She stood up from behind the desk. A desk lost under a multitude of piles of papers—no doubt more copies of plans and protocols. A few sheets scattered as she stood.

His smile broadened. He could tell she really wanted to stop and pick them up.

She was in front of him now, her hands on her hips. “What?”

He liked that. Sometimes she just got straight to the point. No skirting around the edge of things.

He gestured to the door behind him. “You need to clarify some things about the vaccination. There are still a lot of questions out there.”

She sighed and ran her fingers through the short side of her hair. “I know. I’ll get to it. I’ve got a million and one things to deal with.” Her eyes flickered in the direction of the hidden desk.

“Then delegate.”

She started, as if the thought of actually delegating horrified her.

“But I’m responsible—”

“And you need to be visible. You need to be seen. You have to be on the floor—not stuck in some office. You can make your decisions out there, not from behind a desk.”

He could see her brain ticking, thinking over his suggestions. Truth be told, she’d been delegating from the minute she’d walked in the door—just not the important stuff.

“And you need to do something about Alison.”

Her eyes narrowed. “I thought you wanted to deal with Alison.”

“And I have—we’ve had the discussion about the vaccine. She hasn’t decided what to do yet, but I think she’ll opt on the side of caution and say no.”

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