

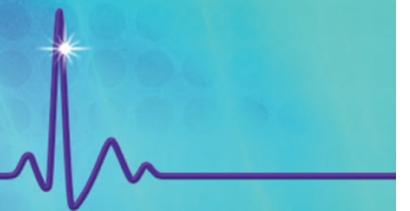


TINA BECKETT

The Dangers of
Dating Dr Carvalho



**MEDICAL
ROMANCE™**



Tina Beckett

The Dangers Of Dating Dr Carvalho

«HarperCollins»

Beckett T.

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«HarperCollins»,

When Lucas Carvalho arrives in hospital with gunshot wounds Sophia recognises him instantly. Lucas is now a drop-dead gorgeous plastic surgeon, but he still has the same dark, soulful eyes she remembers from their childhood orphanage. Sophia's determined to keep her distance – Lucas is dangerous for any woman! But can she resist the lure of this bad-boy surgeon...?

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Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	27

Praise for Tina Beckett:

‘... a tension-filled emotional story with just the right amount of drama. The author’s vivid description of the Brazilian jungle and its people make this story something special.’

—*RT Book Reviews* on DOCTOR’S GUIDE TO DATING IN THE JUNGLE

‘Medical Romance™ lovers will definitely like

NYC ANGELS: FLIRTING WITH DANGER

by Tina Beckett—for who *doesn’t* like a good forbidden romance?’ —*HarlequinJunkie.com*

The Dangers of Dating Dr Carvalho

Tina Beckett



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To those who keep their promises.

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CHAPTER ONE

LUCAS CARVALHO WAS a lucky man.

At least, that was what his doctors told him. If only he could remember why.

It wasn't that he couldn't remember anything. He could. He knew his full name. That he was a plastic surgeon from California. That he'd come to Brazil for a medical conference.

But there were large swathes of empty space that he couldn't seem to fill with information. As if there'd been important data there at one time but it had been wiped clean with a single keystroke. Things like how he'd wound up with a sling around one arm and a surgical incision across the left side of his abdomen—or why he was now lying in a hospital bed without the foggiest notion as to how he got there.

And his brother—the person who'd been standing over him as he'd awoken from surgery three days ago, the person he hadn't seen in almost thirty years—had left the day before yesterday for the United States on important business.

Business that involved a woman.

Lucas's lips twisted. The last time he'd chased down a woman had been... His brain clicked through several files and discarded them.

Nope. Never happened. Never would.

At least he hoped he hadn't done anything crazy in that blank space where most of his recent memories should be.

The cute little nurse who'd come to visit him a couple of times had assured him that he was the one who'd talked his brother into going after that particular woman.

He struggled into a sitting position, wincing as pain sliced through his shoulder, the sling that secured his arm doing little to prevent his stitches from feeling like they were tearing free from his wound.

Not wound...wounds. Two, to be exact.

That's what the police had told him...that he'd been shot. Twice. Right outside the entrance to a nearby slum. And like his doctors, the law enforcement officials insisted he was lucky to be alive.

Today he didn't feel quite so thrilled about that fact. Actually, he didn't feel thrilled about much of anything. The aches and pains, dulled by strong doses of medication a couple of days ago, now bit into his flesh with every movement.

He eyed the IV stand to his left and noted the wheels at its base. They'd had him up and walking soon after his surgery—he remembered the same warm-eyed nurse had hovered in the background, hands twisting as he'd taken his first painful, curse-filled steps. He didn't think she was assigned to his case because she hadn't helped in any way, but he couldn't shake the feeling that she'd wanted to say something to him.

But she hadn't.

Shifting to the side of the bed where his IV bag hung, he let his legs dangle over the edge, hands gripping the mattress as he thought about his best course of action—the first being a much-needed trip to the john.

Which he could manage on his own.

He hoped.

His feet hit the floor, and the world spun for several nauseating seconds, causing him to clutch the pole beside him with a low curse.

Three days.

Surely he should be more ambulatory than this by now. The wave of dizziness passed and he stayed in place another minute or two to get his bearings. Then he leaned on the IV stand as he wheeled it toward the bathroom.

Doing the deed was a marvel in logistics co-ordination, but he somehow made it to the finish line without doing a face plant, and even washed and dried his uninjured hand afterwards.

There. He felt more independent already.

Right.

Judging from the pale face staring at him in the mirror, he might feel independent but he could use a big infusion of some kind of miracle drug. He jabbed his fingers through his hair, pushing it back off his forehead, not that it helped much.

Now that he was up, though, there was no way he was climbing back in that bed and staring at the dull white ceiling for hours on end. He'd done enough of that. So if walking would get him out of this place any faster, he would do just that. In fact, he'd jog if he had to.

All by himself.

He ignored the remote control dangling by its cord off the side of the bed and slogged his way toward the door, feeling like he was pushing through a huge vat of Jell-O. He refused to call for a nurse who would fuss over him like he vaguely remembered his brother doing when they'd been kids. At least until he and Marcos had been separated and grown up on two completely different continents.

His birth country had evidently missed him as much as he'd missed it, judging from the two slugs the doctors had dug out of him. His mouth twisted. Maybe he should have just stayed in the States.

Taking a deep breath and hoping he wouldn't live to regret the move, he pulled the heavy metal lever on the door and stepped into the hallway.

As a testament to how utterly fantastic his last couple of days had been, the door hit him squarely on the ass as it closed, almost sending him and his IV pole spinning to the floor.

He bit back a whole string of English cuss words that could get him into trouble, even here in Brazil, and pulled himself upright.

It's a beautiful day in the neighborhood...

With a heavy sigh of resignation he started down the long corridor in search of some answers. Or a good stiff drink. Whichever he came across first.

* * *

Nossa Senhora do céu!

Sophia Limeira's eyes nearly popped out of their sockets.

As head nurse, she should probably show a little more dignity but, Deus, she couldn't help but stare in awe as every female head—patients and visitors alike—turned in graceful synchronization to watch Lucas Carvalho make his way down the hall.

Long legs showed off the beautiful lithe movements of someone who knew the effect he had on those around him. Even with his left arm in a sling and dragging an IV stand along with him, he could have crooked a finger at any woman in the place and she'd have rushed toward him, snarling and snapping at anyone who dared get in her way. Even eighty-seven-year-old Marta Silva, who was parked in a wheelchair against the south wall, looked like she might slither from her seat and land in a heap at his feet.

Thankfully, Sophia was firmly anchored in her office chair—behind the desk that sat directly in Lucas's path.

It was then she noticed he wasn't making the slightest effort to hold his hospital gown closed at the back.

Maybe that was why all the women were ogling him.

It wasn't entirely his fault, as both his hands were occupied with other things but, still, she was really, really glad he was facing her.

Although that was ridiculous. She was a nurse, for heaven's sake. She'd seen plenty of bare masculine butts over the last ten years.

But none of their owners had looked like Lucas.

She touched the flesh above the right side of her lip with her index finger, self-conscious all of a sudden, although she knew she didn't need to be. The scar was barely visible—the lip margins perfectly aligned. A dot of concealer on a sponge and the flaw almost blended away into nothingness.

Almost.

But Lucas was a plastic surgeon. His knowing eye could cut right through the thin layer of make-up and see the scar for what it was. A remnant from her childhood. She wondered if he ran across many cases like hers in his practice.

Probably not. He was from California, the land of beautiful bouncing breasts and perfect spray-on tans.

She gulped as his eyes met hers, then narrowed slightly, as if trying to place her.

He didn't remember her. Even when she'd slid into his room that first day and introduced herself, there'd been no hint of recognition. Even when she'd stood nearby as he'd taken his first steps.

Marcos had once said no one could forget her.

Ha! Well, someone could. And someone had.

Not that it mattered. It had been ages since she'd seen Lucas. And they'd both been children at the time.

And he'd been so very sad that first week at the orphanage. Within a month, however, they'd become inseparable—the dynamic trio, the workers had dubbed them.

Only Lucas had been one of the lucky ones who'd been adopted, leaving Marcos and her behind for ever.

Deus! He was still headed her way. And the bony hollows of the boy she'd once known were now filled in with muscle and sinew that rippled with every step he took.

Fully man. Fully dangerous.

She knew she should be on her feet, scolding him for getting out of bed and walking unassisted, but she couldn't seem to make her body obey the normal commands. Casting a quick glance around her, she saw there wasn't another nurse in sight. Just her. And Lucas's eagle-eyed gaze was fastened directly on her.

Needing to be the first one to speak for some crazy reason, she arched a brow when he reached the desk. "You do know you're putting on quite a show for the folks behind you, don't you?"

He frowned for a second then gave her a slow smile as if realizing what she meant. "Don't worry. I eventually have to go back the way I came."

Yes, he did.

Holding tight to her impassive "nurse" demeanor when all she wanted to do was keep staring, she forced a shrug. "Don't worry," she parroted. "I'm immune."

"Ah, yes, a sad byproduct of the nursing profession."

"The same can be said of plastic surgeons," she lobbed back.

See? She could be just as suave and sophisticated as he could.

"Ah, but I could never grow immune to the wonders of the female body."

Scratch that last thought. She might be able to put on a pretty good act but she could never be as sophisticated as he was. Inside, there were still remnants of the shy little orphan she'd once been. One who'd latched onto Marcos's hand the day he'd arrived at the orphanage, while shooting his cute little brother surreptitious peeks from beneath childish lashes. She'd been bowled over by Lucas then, and as aggravating as it might be, it appeared she was still flustered by him now.

Tall, at six feet two—at least, according to his chart—with dark wavy hair that hung low on his forehead and even darker eyes, he was mesmerizingly beautiful. Kind of apt for someone in his line of work, but Sophia could swear his good looks owed nothing to plastic surgery. There were faint crinkles radiating from the corners of his eyes and a long line bracketed his left cheek, evidence of a slightly lopsided smile that she could remember even from his childhood.

The times he'd smiled, that was.

Both brothers had seemed strangely grown up, even as young children. Which made sense, considering they'd lived in one of the notorious favelas that dotted the landscape.

And although Lucas still spoke flawless Portuguese, an American accent threaded its way through each and every word, sending shivers over her each time he opened his mouth.

Or she could just be catching the flu.

Realizing she hadn't responded to his outrageous comment, she climbed to her feet, hoping the added height would snap her back to normal.

Mistake. Because her eyes only came up to his neck, where a pulse beat a steady tattoo against his skin.

Time to send him on his way. "Now that you've had your fun, do you need help getting back to your room?"

As nonchalant as he might appear, she couldn't forget he was less than a week out of major surgery to repair damage to his liver. And when she glanced higher, she spied a tell-tale glimmer of moisture across his upper lip, but he held her gaze with a steadiness that surprised her.

He shook his head, his eyes trailing down her face then pausing to retrace their path, a slight pucker appearing between his dark brows. She forced herself to remain still when he reached across the desk, his thumb brushing the area just below her right nostril and sliding to the bottom of her lip. Her heart rate shot through the roof, stomach quivering at the unexpected contact. She should

be furious at his audacity, angry at how quickly he'd noticed what she'd done her best to hide, but the warmth of his skin somehow blotted out everything...except the sensation of flesh sliding against flesh.

She swallowed then answered his unspoken question. "I was born with a cleft lip. It was repaired when I was one."

"I'm sorry, I shouldn't have..." For the first time he looked uncomfortable.

Uncomfortable with what? The image of how she must have looked before her reconstructive surgery?

Surely not. But this was a man who sold beauty for a living...who knew perfection—or imperfection—the second he saw it.

Very few people ever spotted her scar. And she'd had enough attention from the male population to know that her curves tended to be the first thing a man noticed about her. Maybe that was a blessing.

But she couldn't count the number of times she'd wished a man would look into her eyes rather than stare down the front of her shirt.

Yeah? Well, here was one who had, and look what he zeroed in on.

"Don't worry about it. I'm sure in your line of work..." She let the words hang in mid-air.

His brows went up. "Why do I get the feeling the last part of that comment would have been less than flattering?"

"Not unflattering, just realistic. I'm sure your training lends itself to searching for flaws and then fixing them."

"Ah, yes. Well, if that were the case, I have two pretty big flaws right now, don't I?"

She blinked in surprise. "Really? And what would those be?" Because she couldn't see the slightest hint of any defect in the man standing in front of her. In fact, she was kind of looking forward to the moment when he'd turn around and walk away, just so she could get a peek at what all the other people in the wing could still see.

He lifted his bandaged arm. "Bullet holes tend to announce their presence in no uncertain terms."

Yes, they did. And that was her cue to get this man back to bed where he belonged.

Deus! That last thought carried a few more Freudian connotations than she cared to admit.

A laugh bubbled up her throat before she could stop it, and she slapped a hand over her mouth, eyes wide.

"What?" he said.

"Nothing. We just need to get you back in...in your room before you collapse."

His glance tracked to her chest, where her nametag hung, and then back up to her face. "Sophia, right? You were in the hospital after my surgery."

The laughter dried up in a flash. "Yes."

"And when I took my first steps after the surgery."

She nodded. "I work here."

The words sounded ridiculous, even to her, but she did not want to explain that they'd met before. Or ask if he remembered her from when he'd been four years old. Of course he wouldn't. He'd had a brand-new life in a brand-new country. Even his last name was different now than it had been when he'd been at the orphanage.

The weird thing was that seeing him again dredged up that infantile crush she'd had on him way back when—her very first memory from her childhood days. She'd seen that beautiful face and stared at him in awe...right before she'd grabbed hold of Marcos's hand instead—too afraid to say anything to the boy standing next to him. She'd warmed up to him later but it had been a very different warmth from what she was feeling right now.

Those brown eyes touched on her scar once more and then brushed across her lips. Could he sense her thoughts? Deus, she hoped not. With a rough indrawn breath his gaze left her and moved

to his uninjured hand, which was still hanging onto the IV pole, knuckles white as his grip tightened further. “I think you’re right. I’ve had about all I can stand for one day. Would you mind giving me a hand?”

Sophia steadied her emotions and drew on years of training. “Sure.”

Moving around the desk, she commandeered the IV stand and tucked her shoulder beneath his arm. “You ready?”

Even as he gritted out an affirmative, and they started to make their way back down the corridor, she was very aware of the warmth of his body against hers and the fact that her arm was resting across naked skin where his robe parted. Her heart shivered a couple of times then leaped into space, landing at the bottom of her abdominal cavity with a thud. It didn’t quite shatter, but there was definitely a crack or two lining its tough protective surface.

Get real, Sophia. He’s just one more patient in a long list of patients. He’ll be gone in a matter of days or at the most a few weeks.

Maybe it was better if he never remembered her. If she never mentioned their time together at the orphanage.

She attempted small talk as they shuffled back down the hallway. “It’s really bacana that you and your brother found each other after all these years.”

“Bacana?” Lucas stopped for a second to look down at her.

She searched around for an English word that would get across the meaning. “It’s um...cool. Good.”

“Yes. Very cool.” The way his muscles stiffened at her words made her wonder if he really did think it was. But why wouldn’t he? Marcos was a great guy. Besides, now he could get to know his home country. Get to know someone he’d once been close to.

Unlike her, who had no one. Whose parents, although still alive, had left her at an orphanage when she’d been a baby because they hadn’t had the money to deal with her defect—an unfortunate reality in her country.

They’d reached out to her once, when she’d moved into her teenage years, when her government-funded surgery had been but a distant memory, but things had been strained and neither her parents nor her had particularly wanted to pick up the pieces. They’d moved to another part of Brazil by the time she’d reached adulthood, and although she still had their address, she’d never bothered to get back in touch with them. And they’d never contacted her again.

Her downed heart rolled around, reminding her of its presence. Hmm...maybe those cracks in it weren’t so new after all. Maybe, like her lip, they’d healed with barely a trace. Until a hard knock—or the gentle brush of a thumb—had brought back all the reasons she needed to be on guard.

Especially with a man who’d spied what lay beneath her make-up within the space of a heartbeat but hadn’t been able to see beyond it. Lucas had touched her scar back then as well—when it had been fresher and more noticeable. Before she’d learned how to cover it up with the quick flick of her make-up brush.

Surely she’d be able to do the same with her heart. By the time she was done, no one—not even the plastic surgeon by her side—would be able to see through the carefully applied layers.

And that was just the way she wanted it.

CHAPTER TWO

LUCAS HAD JUST perched on the edge of his bed when a buzzing sound came from the nurse’s pocket.

“Oh, sorry. I was expecting your brother to call me this morning between rounds. He wanted to check on you.”

He waved her away. “Go ahead.”

His legs felt like spaghetti, despite his trash talk a few minutes ago at the nurses’ station. He hated feeling helpless. Hated being at someone else’s mercy.

Something about that fact tickled the back of his subconscious. A memory he couldn't quite grasp no matter how hard he tried.

Sophia pulled the phone from her pocket, her eyes still on his as she checked the readout. "It's Marcos. I'm sure he'll want to say hi."

Answering the phone, her eyes sparkled as she chatted with his brother, asking him about how things were going in the States. Something he said made her laugh. "Well, tell Maggie I send my love."

The way she said those words made a warm current flow through his chest. He hated to admit it, but being back in Brazil wasn't like he'd expected it to be. Friendships here seemed more intimate somehow, not like the superficial relationships he tended to foster. Or maybe it was because Marcos and Sophia knew each other well...maybe they'd worked together for years.

"Sure. He's right here." Sophia pressed the mouthpiece to her shoulder. "He wants to talk to you."

Lucas held out his hand, waiting as she placed the cellphone in his palm. The instrument was still warm from being in her pocket, and he hesitated before lifting it. Something about knowing she'd breathed into the receiver—had held it close to her lips, made the heat in his chest spread to his gut. It had to be the after-effects of the anesthesia and pain pills he'd had during and after his surgery. They hadn't completely cleared his system yet. He took a quick breath and held the phone close to his ear, not quite letting it touch his skin.

"Hi, Marcos. How's it going?" He spoke in English, feeling awkward talking to his brother in Portuguese. After all, he hadn't even been able to understand a simple slang term the nurse had used.

The medical conference had seemed the perfect venue to visit his home country and learn more about his culture. Unfortunately it had only served to show him how little he knew—it was just one more place he didn't belong.

His brother's amused tone brought him back to the present. "Everything's fine. I thought I'd check and see how the hospital was treating you." A female voice murmured in the background, and his brother's response came through muffled, indicating he'd turned his head to answer whoever it was.

He rolled his eyes. Surely Marcos wasn't actually in bed with his new... Searching for a word, he came up blank, as he wasn't quite sure what kind of relationship the two had. All he knew was that when he'd introduced himself to Dr. Maggie Pfeiffer at the medical conference, a glare from across the room had hit him like a fist to the jaw. He hadn't known who Marcos was at the time but he'd recognized that pointed stare. It had said off-limits and mine in no uncertain terms.

He couldn't blame his brother. Maggie was beautiful, her ready smile showing her love of life.

Not like Sophia, whose prickly attitude a few minutes ago seemed strange, seeing as they didn't know each other. Maybe she'd had a bad day or maybe she was just that way with everyone. He glanced at her to find her busy straightening things on his bedside table, her scrubs doing nothing to detract from the generous curves beneath them.

He realized he was staring when Marcos repeated the question about the hospital.

"Everyone's been great," he said. "Thanks. The police still want to depose me in a day or two, and I should probably stick around for a couple of weeks to see if they make an arrest. So I'll take you up on your offer to stay in your apartment, if it's still okay."

"Absolutely. I told the doorman you might be coming. He has a set of keys. So does Sophia. Make yourself at home."

The thought of Sophia having a set of Marcos's house keys made him uneasy. "Thanks. I really appreciate it."

More murmurs sounded in the background, and that was definitely Marcos chuckling at something. Hand tightening on the phone, he realized he now had the thing mashed to his ear. So much for not letting it touch him any more than necessary. The fire in his gut burned just a little bit

hotter when he caught a faint whiff of her scent clinging to the thing. His glance swung back to the nurse, wondering how he knew what she smelled like.

It's your sick imagination, bud.

As soon as he got back to the States, he was going to sink deep into the first willing woman he came across. It had obviously been far too long since he'd gotten any. Maybe he'd even find someone here in Brazil at one of the clubs, if he was here long enough.

"Well, I'll let you go." Lucas was suddenly anxious to get off the phone.

"Okay... Oh, wait. I forgot to ask. How does it feel to see Sophia again after all these years? It's hard for me not to still picture her as a little kid."

Little kid? That was the last thing he'd pictured when he'd looked at Sophia. But Marcos's words made a slight chill come over him, dousing the flames that had begun licking at places he'd rather were left alone.

"I don't follow."

There was a pause. "You don't remember her? I guess it was so long ago that—"

"Remember her from where?" The chill grew. When he glanced to the side, he noted Sophia had turned toward him.

Before Marcos's next words came over the line, he knew he'd somehow missed something. Something big.

"She was at the orphanage with us. Stuck to our sides like glue. O trio dinâmico. Ring a bell?"

The dynamic trio.

Why hadn't she said anything?

"I..." Feeling like an idiot, Lucas stared at the woman in front of him, trying to see something that rang a bell. Instead, he settled for the first lame words that popped into his brain. "I was just a kid."

"Right." The disappointment surrounding that single word cut him to the quick.

How could he be expected to remember something that had happened thirty years ago? It wasn't like he'd spent his whole life in Brazil, the way Marcos had. But it did explain why Sophia had been there each step of the way during his surgery and recovery. He suddenly felt like a first-class heel.

He tried to explain. "There've been things I haven't been able to remember since the shooting. Maybe that's why."

Sophia turned away, just as Marcos said, "Don't worry about it. Could you pass the phone back to her, please?"

"Sure."

"Take care, Lucas."

"You too."

Jiggling the phone in his hand and not sure if he should just tap her on the shoulder or say her name, he settled for clearing his throat, even though the last thing he wanted to do was face her again. "He wants to talk to you."

She turned back around and gave him a cheery smile then held out her hand, her eyes skipping away from his almost immediately.

Like a man caught in a riptide and unable to pull free of its deadly grasp, he slowly handed over the phone. Then he did the unthinkable. He took a step closer and cupped her chin, his thumb strumming over the softness of her cheek as he forced her to meet his eyes. "Why didn't you say something about the orphanage?"

* * *

She took a step back, dislodging his hand. "It didn't seem important."

Not wanting to give him a chance to respond, she put the phone to her ear. "Hello?"

And proving they were indeed brothers, the first words out of Marcos's mouth were, "You didn't tell him?"

* * *

This wasn't a conversation she wanted to have in front of Lucas. Turning on her heel, she left the room. Once outside the door, she gulped down a couple of quick breaths, leaning a shoulder against a wall. With a shaky hand she brushed her hair off her forehead. "No. Why would I? Like he said, we were just kids. It's ancient history."

But the tremor in her voice said the same thing her heart did: she'd remembered him. Despite their ages.

What did it matter?

Exactly. She was being ridiculous. Lucas was alive—that was the only important thing. He'd be able to get on with his life as if this little interlude in Brazil had never happened. It was fine.

Her friend's voice came back through. "Well, since it's ancient history, I kind of feel funny asking you to..."

As if at a loss, he didn't finish his sentence.

"Asking me to what?"

"Check in on him every once in a while at the apartment? Make sure he's okay."

She gulped. That was so not a good idea. Lucas already made her pulse race, and he didn't even know who she was. It was one thing to act the part of his nurse at the hospital...but outside of it? "I don't know."

"Please, Soph. I know it's not fair to ask you, but you're the closest thing to family I have. You were practically a sister to us, whether he remembers it or not."

"You and I grew up together. You only remember me because we were at the orphanage longer than he was. He doesn't remember anything about his life here in Brazil."

That wasn't entirely true. She'd heard Marcos talk to Lucas after his surgery, and he'd remembered some things from his childhood. He'd remembered his brother. Remembered the promise he and Marcos had made to their father—those words were tattooed on his arm, in fact, along with his father's name. Lucas even remembered the policeman who'd found the two boys sorting through a pile of garbage at their tiny shack of a house all those years ago.

Despite all that, Lucas probably didn't recall much about his father's sudden death or what had come afterwards.

She tried again. "I'm a complete stranger to him, Marcos."

"Possibly. But you're not a stranger to me."

And there it was. He was calling up the friendship card. It wasn't like she hadn't given him enough grief over the years: Getting into trouble. Nagging. Matchmaking.

The matchmaking bit had worked out pretty well, actually, since it had given him Maggie. Still, in all the years she'd known him Marcos had never really asked anything of her. How could she say no and face herself in the mirror?

Sighing, she tipped her head against the wall and stared at the ceiling. "Fine. I'll try, but only if he lets me."

She brushed off Marcos's thanks and murmured a quick goodbye, more than ready to be done with this particular conversation. Almost as soon as she hit the "end" button, a sudden swish of air brushed her left arm, making her tense.

Her head came off the wall, and she turned to find that Lucas had silently come through the door of his room, with no warning rattle from his IV pole to alert her. She couldn't keep her gaze from tracking over him, pausing at the top of his hand, where a thin trickle of blood marred his tanned skin.

She frowned. "Where's your IV?"

That's why she hadn't heard him. He'd pulled the catheter out of his vein.

"I don't need it any more."

Right. Marcos wanted her to take care of him? Well, they were off to a great start. "That's for your doctor to decide." She motioned to the door. "I'll get you hooked back up."

He pressed the needle puncture against the fabric over his thigh, drawing her attention to the fact that he was still in his hospital gown. Still naked beneath it.

A slow breath hissed between his teeth. “I feel like I should say something here. About what Marcos said about the orphanage—”

“No need to worry about it. Like you said, we were young. You’d just had your whole life torn apart. You would have clung to the one person who was a constant in your life: Marcos.”

The words made perfect sense, but they didn’t take away the tiny ache that lingered inside.

“I think I’ve just blocked some of those memories. The day my father...when he didn’t come home... Things are just a big blur. I don’t remember much more than snatches of sensation here and there.” He gave a lopsided smile that didn’t quite reach his eyes. “I do remember the food at the orphanage leaving something to be desired. I’m still not a big fan of beans and rice.”

And that should remind her, if nothing else did, that although he was Brazilian by birth, in his heart, he was just another rich man who’d left his roots far, far behind.

Her chin went up. “And I still love them.”

Something touched her wrist and then slid lower, wrapping around her index finger. She glanced down in surprise to find he was no longer putting pressure on his IV site but had hooked his finger around hers. A flare of something dangerous kicked to life inside her belly.

“They’re probably going to release me in a day or two. Maybe we could meet somewhere, and you could tell me what you remember from those days. Fill in some blanks. At least until Marcos gets back.”

And have him discover that, unlike him, she remembered quite a bit about their time together? That while Marcos might have been his lifeline, they’d both been hers? “I don’t think—”

“Please. I want to know.”

Deus. As much as she wanted to turn her back on him and forget their paths had ever crossed again, she couldn’t. Not only because of Marcos’s request but because—despite the macho display as he’d swaggered toward her desk earlier—there was a hint of something beneath the knowing smile he’d given her. Something she couldn’t quite put her finger on, but it was enough that she couldn’t just brush off his request.

“Okay. But until the doctor releases you, you can’t go around unhooking yourself from your IV. Deal?”

The smile he gave her was just as lazy as before, but this time it reached all the way up to his eyes, making her stomach do a back flip.

This was a big mistake. She felt it in her bones. But at least if she got him tethered back to his IV pole she could keep him in one spot. And she could remain just out of reach. Far enough away that he couldn’t touch her again without warning, because her finger was painfully aware that he was still holding onto it. And the cheek he’d stroked a few minutes ago still tingled.

Yes, staying out of reach was a good thing. For her own peace of mind.

And if that meant keeping him at the other end of an IV line then the man was going to find himself pumped so full of fluids that he’d inflate like a water balloon.

And that’s how he’d stay. At least until she could get herself—and her out-of-whack emotions—firmly under control.

CHAPTER THREE

“YOU’LL NEED SOMEONE at home to help you for at least a week.” Lucas’s doctor glanced up from his chart. “No driving or lifting anything heavier than a comb, so someone will have to take you to your physical therapy sessions. Is Dr. Pinheiro back from his trip yet?”

No, Dr. Pinheiro is not back yet.

Lucas’s temper flared for a second before cooling down again. He knew the standard protocol. It was just irritating to have it recited to him by another doctor. And as far as his dear brother went,

who knew when he'd blow back into town. Not that he needed Marcos to run behind him and wipe his nose any more. Those days were long gone.

Lucas steadfastly refused to glance at the quiet figure waiting in the far corner of the room and tried to work through his options. If he were in the States, he could call on any number of friends, or simply ask to be moved to a rehab center for a couple of weeks. But here...

"No, he's not back, but—"

"I'll be staying with him." The soft voice made both men look up.

Lucas's jaw clenched until it became a tight ball of muscle. "There's no need."

He somehow got the words out, though he still avoided looking directly at her. He'd already racked his brain during his week of hospitalization, searching for any glimmer of memory that included the slender wraith who always seemed to be hovering nearby. But he'd come up blank, despite what Marcos had said about the three of them sticking together at the orphanage. The guilt over that ate away at him, even though Sophia acted like it didn't matter one way or the other.

Well, it mattered to him. He had very good recall when it came to women—and Sophia was not someone he would have forgotten.

Only she hadn't been a woman back then. She'd been a young girl.

"Would you rather stay at my apartment?"

The wry suggestion finally made his eyes light on her, and they stared at each other for a full minute. She might have been teasing but he wasn't in the mood for games right now. Especially not with the dark thoughts that careened through his head whenever he laid eyes on her. Thoughts that made him do a mental penance dance each time they arose. It had become a vicious cycle, one he'd have no hope of breaking if they were forced to shack up together.

No, it wouldn't be shacking up.

As if aware of his thoughts, Sophia's throat moved in a quick swallow. Maybe she was about to take back her offer.

Yes. Please do.

The doctor spoke up. "Well, I'll leave you two to work out the details. Sophia, if you could free him from that IV? I'm sure he'll be glad not to be dragging it behind him any more."

Something flashed through her eyes and her teeth came down on her lip before she answered, "Of course, Doctor."

Lucas couldn't hold back a small smile. She'd been none too gentle when she'd jabbed the catheter back into his vein the other day. He could have sworn she had been trying to get a wince out of him.

For not remembering her?

There it went again. He really needed to stop dwelling on this.

The doctor left the room, and he was alone with her. His smile widened just a bit. "I could always unhook myself, you know, if it makes you more comfortable. I did it once before."

"No, I'll do it." She moved to the counter with quick, precise motions, snapping on her gloves and getting a cotton ball and sticking plaster.

As soon as she was within reach, he wrapped his fingers around her wrist. "You don't have to do this, you know."

"The doctor said to undo you."

His thumb swept across her hand, grimacing when it met latex rather than the silky skin he knew lay beneath the gloves. "I'm not talking about the IV. I'm talking about you staying with me. I'm sure there are nurses I can hire. A..." He struggled to find the Portuguese equivalent of an LPN. "The kind that come to patients' homes."

Her brows went up in that indignant way he was coming to recognize. "You think I'm not qualified?"

Hell. How did he get himself into situations like this? “No, that’s not it. I just know that you’re busy with your job.”

“I don’t normally work at night. And the hospital is close to Marcos’s apartment.” She tugged her hand free. “Surely you can manage for a few hours here and there while I’m at work.”

Why was she so insistent? They were nothing to each other, and she’d made it pretty clear she didn’t want to have much to do with him. So to spend the night in the next room—at least, he figured it would be the next room. Who knew? Maybe the bedrooms were nowhere near each other. “Don’t you have someone waiting for you at home?”

She sucked in a breath then released it in a slow, steady current of air. “That doesn’t really have anything to do with this situation. You’re Marcos’s brother, and he’s a special friend.”

Exactly how special?

He shook his head clear of that thought. His brother had said he’d had trouble picturing Sophia as an adult so surely... Besides, Marcos and Maggie were evidently an item now. And Sophia didn’t act as if she was jealous. In fact, she seemed genuinely happy for them.

With gloved fingers she took hold of his arm. “You might want to look away.”

This time Lucas was the one who lifted his brows. “I think I can handle it.”

“Okay.” She put the cotton ball over the catheter and slid it free of his vein, then pressed on it lightly. “Hold this for a few seconds.”

He blinked at her then gave the arm in the sling a little wiggle, grimacing when it hurt more than he’d expected. “Kind of hard to do that right now.”

Her face turned pink. “Oh. That’s right. Sorry.” She kept pressure on his wrist with her thumb for a few seconds, fingers curling around his wrist. The contact lasted long enough that Lucas began to wish he’d used his chin or something else to hold onto that cotton ball as the warmth of her skin was quickly cutting through the chill of the room.

At last she eased the compression and lifted the gauze to look. “That should do it.” She dropped the cotton ball into a basin then quickly peeled apart a sticking plaster and applied it over the puncture mark.

Dragging a nearby chair to the bed, she dropped into it and regarded him with serious eyes.

“What?” For the first time he wished he actually had some real clothes on, because if a certain part of him decided to go rogue, it was going to be awfully difficult to conceal it.

“The doctor was right. We need to work out the details.”

“Of?” He decided to play stupid.

“How things between us are going to work.”

Okay, that rogue part was already feeling the heat.

Think of something else.

Should he refuse her offer of help? Or should he suck it up and decide to make the best of a bad situation? He’d asked her to tell him about their shared past, so he could look at it as a way to kill two birds with one stone. “How many bedrooms does Marcos’s apartment have?”

“Two, of course.” She leaned back and crossed her legs. “Otherwise I wouldn’t have offered to stay.”

“Right.” And she’d just made everything worse because now he was picturing a single shared bed and Sophia’s lush figure sprawled across the mattress.

She fiddled with the hem of her top. “Besides, you weren’t worried about the number of bedrooms a few minutes ago when you were talking about hiring a nurse.”

Bingo. But then again he doubted any other nurse was going to mess with his head the way this particular one did. And he had no idea why she affected him so much. He’d love to blame it on the pain meds, but as he’d refused to take anything yesterday or today, that was impossible.

“I wasn’t expecting a hired nurse to actually spend the night.”

“Oh. I think that’s what the doctor intended, though.” She smiled at him, her brow clearing. “I’ve taken the rest of the day off, so whenever you’re ready we can get your discharge papers signed and be on our way.”

Something about that rattled around in his brain for a moment or two before he realized what he was looking for. “You were already going to offer to stay with me, weren’t you, even before the doctor said anything? Why?”

“Because Marcos asked me to.”

Ah, yes. His brother, the saint. Sophia would never have agreed to do it on her own, evidently.

Even though he knew his waspish reaction was childish, he couldn’t help it. Lucas had often felt guilty over the years, wondering if his brother had been adopted as well. Finding out he hadn’t been...that he’d spent most of his childhood in that orphanage...was hard to swallow. He had no idea why his folks hadn’t taken them both, and by the time he’d been old enough to have asked, he’d rarely thought of the life he’d left behind in Brazil. And what memories he’d had weren’t ones that would make him proud.

And yet he’d permanently inscribed his father’s name on his arm, along with a rod of Asclepius and the words “Promises Kept” written beneath it. He did remember both he and his brother promising their father they’d become doctors—that they’d make him feel better. Of course they hadn’t been able to keep the last part of that promise. Their father had died, leaving them orphans.

To take his mind off those morbid thoughts, he slid off the bed and stood. “Well, since you seem determined to stay at the apartment, I do have one rule about this whole setup.”

“And what’s that?” Sophia stood as well.

“I don’t want any help in the bathroom. So if you could leave me to my own devices when I’m in there, I’d appreciate it.”

Her eyes went wide. “Tell me you don’t do drugs.”

What the hell?

“Of course not. Where’d you get that idea?”

“If you don’t want anyone near the bathroom while you’re there...”

“Because I intend to bathe and...” he shrugged “...do whatever else I need to do all by myself. I don’t need your help.”

A little scoffing sound came from her lips. “You might surprise yourself and actually ask for my help.”

That rogue part of him began stirring right on cue, forcing him to shift his stance.

She’s not helping you with anything, you idiot. The doctor—and Marcos—want her there in the event you have an aneurism or something.

Which might be now, actually, because he was desperately trying to keep his mind off the tightening sensation in his groin that just wouldn’t let up.

If she didn’t hurry and get him some pants, he was going to embarrass both of them. “Let’s just agree to play it by ear for the next couple of days. Now, if you could send me in the general direction of my clothes...”

“Oh, about that...”

She seemed flustered all of a sudden. Or maybe it was just his imagination.

“Is there a problem?”

“Yes. Kind of.” She made a production of sliding the chair back against the wall. When she faced him again, her face was back to that delicious pink color he was beginning to enjoy. “You don’t actually have any clothes.”

CHAPTER FOUR

“WHAT DO YOU mean, I don’t have any clothes?”

Lucas's narrowed eyes made her want to take a step back but she forced herself to hold her ground. "You were shot, remember? Twice. You were bleeding profusely when you arrived, and we had to...cut them off."

She expected him to focus in on the last part of her sentence, but instead his gaze sharpened. "We had to?"

Licking her lips, she tried to explain. "I don't mean we, literally. I mean the team who worked on you."

"I see."

Did he? Because he sure didn't act like it. She didn't understand why he was so upset all of a sudden. He acted like they'd done something obscene to him while he'd been lying helpless on that table. "I assure you everyone acted professionally."

"Were you there?"

"Well, no, but—"

"You weren't?" The line of his jaw relaxed so suddenly that she found her own muscles untensing as well.

"No. None of us knew who you were when you arrived." She hurried to add, "That 'us' is also figurative."

"It's okay." He gave a half-shake of his head that seemed self-deprecating, his mouth twisting into a half-smile. And just like that his mood shifted back toward that of the charmingly flippant man who'd strolled toward her desk less than a week ago. The man whose ass she'd never quite got a good look at. "But I don't think I should leave the hospital like this, do you?"

Her own lips curved. "It didn't seem to bother you before. You're lucky we didn't have any cardiac patients milling around."

Just then, the sound of some kind of commotion made its way through the heavy metal door, along with a shout. Sophia straightened, her head turning toward the noise.

"Socorro!"

The desperate cry for help grabbed her.

She threw a glance at Lucas. "Wait here."

Pulling the door open in a rush, she saw a man standing at the nurses' station wearing a gown just like Lucas's, only he was holding something...waving it around. She couldn't tell what it was. But what she did see turned her blood to ice. He'd grabbed the nurse on the other side of the desk by her wrist and looked like he was physically trying to drag her over the barrier. Then Sophia caught a glint from the thing he held in his other hand. A scalpel!

Deus!

She rushed forward, yelling at one of the other patients who'd peeked out of his room, "Dial 111! Tell Security we need someone up here now."

It was lunchtime and most of the doctors had already done their rounds so there weren't a lot of people on the floor at the moment. She shouted at the crazed patient, "Let her go."

Judging by the yelp that came from the other nurse, the man squeezed even tighter. "Stay back! This one's infected. I can see it in her face."

What?

Her eyes went to Paulina, whose skin was as white as a sheet, her free hand digging at the man's fingers, trying to get him off her. Luckily the scalpel was waving aimlessly in the air, the patient didn't seem to be actively trying to cut her.

Yet. Who knew what he might do next?

This man had to be disturbed...or high. In fact, there was a long line of stitches over his right eye and in spite of the clean hospital gown he wore, his socks were filthy and crusted with blood. Had he been in a fight? Was he drunk?

She took a few more steps, circling around the man, only to hear him growl low in his throat when she ventured too close. "It's okay," she said, deciding to play along. "We know all about the infection. She's taking medication for it."

"You're lying!" A few drops of spittle flew from between his lips.

Out of the corner of her eye she spied Lucas, who'd somehow come down the hallway on silent feet and was easing toward them. One turn of the crazed man's head and he'd see him as well. Sophia didn't dare gesture for him to get back. Besides, she was damned glad to see him, even though she'd told him to stay put. And although it seemed like hours, less than a minute had passed since she'd asked the patient to call for help.

Lucas was now about twenty feet away.

Trying to maintain eye contact with the patient, she eased further to the left, glad when the man's unblinking gaze followed her movement. It reminded her of a cobra, ready to strike at the first hint of weakness.

"I'm not lying," she murmured in as soothing a voice as she could manage. "Her hair has light streaks of color in it. It means the treatments are working."

Are you insane, Sophia? What are you trying to do?

Keep him busy. Until someone could get to them. Anything to stop that scalpel from slicing through the air and hurting Paulina.

The patient's lips thinned as his feverish gaze tripped from her to Paulina and then back again. The fingers holding the deadly weapon trembled for a second or two. "I don't see anything."

"Because you're not a doctor. You're not trained to."

Just then, Lucas succeeded in covering the last few feet that separated them and grabbed the man's knife hand. An enormous roar came up from the patient's chest. He released Paulina and pivoted with lightning speed toward Lucas. Sophia lunged forward and caught the guy's other hand to keep him from twisting the rest of the way round. The man was as strong as an ox. He threw her backwards, sending her skidding across the floor, where she flailed as she tried to maintain her balance—only to fail miserably and land on her butt.

She scrambled back up just as the sound of tinkling metal hit her ears, along with Lucas's grunt of pain when the man's fingers closed around a fistful of his hair and hung on. Before she could run toward them again, two men in uniforms stepped out of the elevator, took one look at the scene and charged, each man grabbing a gowned figure and wrestling them apart.

"Dammit! Let me go!"

The oath came from Lucas, who was now pinned securely in front of one of the guards, one elbow locked behind him, while the injured arm dangled awkwardly, the sling bunched along his forearm. Amazingly, the troublemaker had gone totally limp once subdued, moaning as if mortally wounded. He looked like the victim, rather than the guilty party.

As she put a hand to her throat and struggled to catch her breath, one of the guards glanced expectantly at her. "Which one did you call us about?"

"The one on the left."

Poor Lucas looked like he'd been through the wringer. His hair stood straight up where the other man had grabbed it and his gown had twisted sideways, revealing quite a bit of one taut thigh.

Releasing him, the guard said, "What happened?"

"That man attacked Paulina, yelling about some kind of infection."

Just then a woman exited a second elevator and rushed toward them, followed by one of the emergency room doctors.

"Please don't hurt him. I'm his sister," she said. "He's schizophrenic. I didn't realize he was off his meds until this morning when I found him covered in blood, saying someone was after him. I lost track of him in the emergency room."

The doctor nodded. "He wasn't particularly agitated when he arrived. I stepped out to call his psychiatrist, who's on his way. It'll take him about ten minutes to get here."

His sister spoke up. "I'm so sorry about all of this. My mother called and I left the room for just a second to talk to her." She glanced at Lucas and then evidently spied the scalpel on the floor. "Oh, no. Did he hurt someone?"

"No, we stopped him in time," Sophia said. The woman seemed so genuinely upset that she didn't have the heart to tell her just how serious the situation had been. And from the look of the man now, you'd never guess he'd just gone on a rampage. She could understand why they'd let their guard down.

Besides, even with all the precautions in the world, you couldn't always stop bad things from happening. She knew that for a fact. Look at Marcos and Lucas. Or even her own childhood, for that matter.

The doctor turned to the guard who'd been holding Lucas. "Could you accompany us back to the emergency wing? I'd appreciate it."

Within minutes they'd bundled the patient, whose name was evidently Ronaldo, into a wheelchair and got back into the elevator, his sister holding his hand.

Sophia sent Paulina a shaky smile. "Are you okay?"

The nurse chuckled and pressed a hand to her chest. "Other than wondering if he was going to carve out my heart and eat it, yes. Thank you for coming when you did." Her gaze went to Lucas, who leaned against the counter. "And thank you for wrestling that scalpel away from him."

Sophia realized Lucas wasn't just leaning against the nurses' station, he was propped against it as if he'd fall to the floor if he let go. "Hey. Are you hurt?"

"You mean besides my pride?"

His pride. What did that have to do with anything?

"You made him let go of the knife."

"And if those guards hadn't gotten here when they had, that's about all I would have done."

Shock whistled through her. He acted like he'd just let the opposing team score the winning goal of the season.

She moved over to him and laid a hand on his arm. "What are you talking about? You disarmed him, Lucas. You saw how he threw me across the room like a toy. If you hadn't stepped in to help, who knows what damage he could have caused?" She frowned. "Speaking of damage, how are your stitches?"

"They're not happy, but they're still there. I'll be glad when the damned things come out."

Paulina wheeled an office chair around the desk and put it behind him. "Sit, before you fall down."

"I'm fine." Despite his words, he carefully lowered himself into the chair. Was he really okay? Or just saying that for her and Paulina's benefit?

"How about your side? Did he get you?"

"No. Believe me, I was keeping everything of value as far out of the reach of that scalpel as I could."

Paulina giggled at the words, although it took Sophia a second or two to get his meaning. Then her face heated in a rush, and her glance instinctively dropped to his lap. "Oh."

"Yeah. As it was, no harm done." He dragged a hand through his hair, pausing to rub the area of his scalp where the patient had pulled his hair. "I'll give you this, Nurse Limeira, you sure do run an exciting ward here."

She laughed. "All in a day's work, Dr. Carvalho."

He sighed and leaned back in the chair, closing his eyes for a second or two.

Hmm, the man really did look a bit shaky. Maybe it was time to get him out of there. "Are you still feeling well enough to be discharged today? Or do you want to stick around for one more night?"

“And risk another scene like that one?” He shook his head. “I think I’m more than ready to leave. A nice—quiet—apartment is sounding better and better.”

She glanced at Paulina, who seemed positively starstruck by Lucas, even going as far as to twirl a strand of her bleached-blond hair around her index finger as she watched him.

Even injured, he had the same effect on other women that he’d had on her when she’d been little. A tiny part of her wondered if she was the only one he’d forgotten. Maybe he didn’t remember any woman he’d had contact with. He was handsome enough that he could have his pick—just look at Paulina. And maybe he did just that. Maybe he went through them so fast that none of them made a lasting impression.

Her mood took a sudden nosedive. She needed to remember her earlier admonition to steer clear of him as much as possible. Not that it was going to be possible as she’d volunteered to sleep over. If it weren’t for her longstanding friendship with Marcos, she wouldn’t have offered in the first place. But she had, and she felt obligated to go through with it.

Well, just because she had to sleep near him, it didn’t mean she was going to sleep with him.

She blinked. Why had that thought even come up?

Maybe because she’d gotten a good glimpse of rock-hard thighs and a nice tight tushie during the struggle with Ronaldo.

Yep, visions of sponge baths were now dancing through her head.

Well, there’d be none of that. Not here. Not at Marcos’s apartment. She was simply there to make sure the man didn’t fall and suffer a concussion.

Although if he didn’t wipe that knowing smirk off his face, a concussion wasn’t out of the realm of possibilities. And she’d be the one inflicting it.

She stepped in front of Paulina in an effort to snap the woman back to reality. “Well, I guess that’s settled. Before we have any more mishaps, maybe we should find you something to wear and get you out of here.”

CHAPTER FIVE

AT LEAST HE didn’t have to wear his brother’s clothes.

Lucas knew it was a strange thing to be thankful for, but he was borrowing his brother’s apartment, sleeping in his brother’s bed, and making use of his brother’s friend.

No. She was their friend. At least, from what Marcos had told him.

Damn, if only he could remember.

Right now, Sophia was brewing coffee in his brother’s kitchen as if she’d done it a million times. That thought made him uneasy and he wasn’t sure why.

He should be grateful for all she was doing for him. And he was. After all, she’d gone to his hotel and arranged for his things to be taken to Marcos’s place. And he hadn’t had to watch her actually carry his stuff into the building while he’d trailed along behind.

Unlike her own suitcase. Which he’d been painfully aware he couldn’t offer to carry. It made him feel useless, something he wasn’t used to.

Perched on his brother’s couch, the scent of coffee hit his nose, and he breathed deeply as he surveyed his surroundings. Modern furnishings, almost painfully so, were strategically placed, from the black leather sofa and swivel recliner to the low black cabinet where a flatscreen television sat at eye level. A photo to the left of the set caught his attention.

Struggling to his feet while trying to ignore the fierce burning in his shoulder—a direct result of the scuffle at the hospital—he moved toward the picture.

“Do you want café com leite? Or do you take your coffee black?” Sophia’s voice came from behind him, distracting him for a second, and when he turned his head he found her peeking around the corner, a few locks of sleek black hair sliding over one bare shoulder as she leaned to the side. She flipped the strands back with a quick shake of her head, leaving a long line of tanned skin that seemed to call out to him.

Damn. He knew she had a shirt on, he'd seen it—some kind of fluttery green thing that wrapped around her just above the swell of her breasts. There were no straps, though, so right now all he could think about was how she'd look if she stood in that exact pose without the shirt. And, boy, could his imagination drum up a pretty good set of possibilities.

"Lucas?" she said. "What do you want in your coffee?"

Besides you?

He shook himself back to reality. "Just a couple of drops of sweetener, if Marcos has any." Artificial sweetener in Brazil came in plastic bottles, he'd found, although some of the higher-end coffee shops carried packets of the stuff, along with sugar.

"Okay, I'll be out in a minute." A quick smile accompanied the words, and she popped back into the kitchen.

Lucas braced a hand on the television stand, swearing softly. He probably should have suggested that he hole up in his hotel room for another couple of weeks. Had suggested it, in fact, once his discharge papers had been written up, but Sophia had held him to his promise of letting her help—compliments of his brother. Again. The tattoo on his arm was a constant reminder that he kept his word when at all possible. He hadn't been able to keep much of anything else in his life—not even his real last name—so it was the one thing he'd felt he had control over.

So he was stuck with her. For now.

Brazilian women tended to dress to accentuate their curves, and Sophia was no exception. There was no way he was going to tell her to change for his benefit. But he also hadn't expected to be knocked for a loop by seeing her out of her customary scrubs either.

The slim white jeans she wore hugged her body, cupping her curves in all the right places. Then there was that blouse, the deep green fabric snug on top before floating down around her hips, the silky fabric molding to her form whenever she moved. It was almost long enough to be a dress—a teeny-tiny one. And those heels...

Whew.

Despite the sexy clothes, there was a youthful innocence to Sophia, although he couldn't quite put his finger on why she gave off that vibe. It wasn't that she was a child—he shifted his aching shoulder as he turned back toward the framed photo on the television table—far from it. But there was a certain *joie de vivre* that clung to her as tightly as her narrow slacks. Strange that she would give off that kind of glow, despite growing up in a bare bones orphanage. Or after what she must have gone through with her facial surgery.

The narrow scar on her lip had made something contract inside him. Maybe because he spent almost all of his vacation time treating children in developing countries with just that type of deformity. The fact that Sophia bore the telltale mark of a surgeon's tools made his heart cramp.

There was something about the scar that struck a chord deep inside him. And touching it as she'd stood behind the desk at the nurses' station had triggered a visceral reaction that had been both foreign and familiar. Those two sensations had warred within him for several seconds. Had he remembered the scar from their time together at the orphanage?

Possibly.

It wasn't a real memory, *per se*, more a remembered emotion. Curiosity, maybe? It hadn't been disgust. Far from it. But it seemed to mesh with his reasons for choosing pediatric reconstructive surgeries over the more lucrative types.

Pulling his focus back to the picture, he picked it up. Two adults and two children were grouped around a rickety handcart. The image was real. Not one of those staged, stick-your-head-through-the-cardboard-figure kind of thing he saw from time to time. He narrowed his eyes and tried to see the details past the sepia tones and the midline crack where the picture had evidently been folded at one time. A man stood at the metal bar across the front of the contraption and held the cart level,

while a woman and baby perched on the flat bed, and the older child with a grubby T-shirt and worn flip-flops stood with his hands on his hips, legs braced apart.

Lucas swallowed. It was them—his birth family—he knew it even without being told. His mom held him close in a protective gesture, while his brother dared the world to mess with any of them.

His father already looked broken down, even back then. Staring at the picture, he tried to sense some kind of emotional connection with the figures, but felt only a vague sense of shame, which was probably left over from days gone by. His brother's feet were the only thing that elicited a strong reaction in him. He had shoes on, while his own feet were bare. He did remember snatches of arguments he and his brother had had—with Marcos constantly railing at him for not wearing shoes in the yard.

He still preferred his feet bare, not that he got much of a chance any more with his busy lifestyle.

A soft click sounded behind him and then Sophia's voice came again. "That's you and Marcos with your parents."

The fact that Sophia didn't expect him to know what he was looking at sent another wave of shame washing over him. His adoptive parents had said they'd chosen him because the day they'd visited he'd been curled in a corner, sucking his thumb. He'd been skin and bones, and had seemed hopeless, they'd said...so much so that it had frightened them. They'd never thought about having kids of their own—although they'd worked with several children's charities—until they'd seen him.

They'd given him opportunities that few kids in his situation would have ever dreamed of having. And that just compounded his guilt, even though Marcos and Sophia seemed to be doing just fine, judging by the high-end furniture in his brother's apartment. In fact, the picture was the only shabby-looking thing in sight.

He set the frame back in its spot and turned toward her. "I'll have to ask Marcos to make a copy for me."

"Do you remember them at all?"

He hesitated. "I think I remember my father and Marcos, but not my birth mother."

"She died when you were still a baby." She reached back and bunched her long hair in her hand, then twisted it and tied it somehow so that it stayed up off her neck. "Your parents loved you very much, from what Marcos says. Your adoptive family must have as well."

"They did. I guess I was lucky."

He'd called them, in fact, after the shooting. They'd been worried sick, had wanted to come down immediately, but he'd assured them he was fine and would be back in the States soon.

Sophia turned away and walked to the glossy coffee table. "I brought the bottle of sweetener and a spoon. I wasn't sure how much you wanted."

Her words were tight, and he got the feeling he'd said something wrong. Was she upset because he'd been adopted and she hadn't? Surely not. He'd had no choice in the matter. Looking back, though, he could certainly see how hard it must've been for Marcos to be the one left behind. But he was glad his brother had been there for Sophia.

"Thank you for the coffee." Following her, he noted one of the clear glass mugs was filled almost to the brim, while the other was only half-full. He found out why when Sophia tipped a white pitcher of milk into the one with less coffee. He smiled. "When you say *café com leite*, you mean it."

"Brazilian coffee is stronger than what you serve in the States, at least from what I've heard."

A barista at a local coffee shop had jokingly referred to American coffee as "*água suja*" or dirty water. And compared to the dark, full brew that most Brazilians preferred, he could see why.

Sophia settled onto the sofa and took a sip of her drink with a sigh.

You could tell the apartment belonged to a bachelor by the lack of seating options. It was either sit beside her or try to perch on the low-slung easy chair to the right of it. And his side still bothered him enough that he chose the sofa over his sense of self-preservation. So once he'd doctored his coffee, he sat next to her, waiting for the surgical sites to settle down before he took his first slug.

The dark liquid was smooth, with a slightly bitter aftertaste that lingered on his palate the way good coffee should. He closed his eyes and let the scent and taste fill his senses. “I’m glad I didn’t drink the hospital’s coffee before I left. This was worth the wait.”

She smiled at him and bumped his uninjured shoulder with hers before kicking off her heels and curling deeper into the sofa. “I’m glad you like it. And thanks again for your help with that patient. I was worried you’d ripped your stitches.”

“Does that kind of thing happen often?”

“No more than at any other hospital, I suppose. You’ve never had a patient go berserk on you?”

“My patients are generally a lot smaller than that one.”

Her lips twisted. “That’s right, most of yours are probably women who are looking for a tune-up.”

“Actually, no. I work with children. I’m a pediatric plastic surgeon. I deal with...” He swallowed at what he’d been about to say and changed the words slightly. “Facial reconstructive surgery, usually after a traumatic injury.”

Her finger went to her lip, the way it had a number of other times. Surely she wasn’t self-conscious about it. No one but a surgeon who dealt with cleft lips on a regular basis would be aware of her scar. “Why do you do that?”

She didn’t ask what he meant. “Maybe because you noticed it right away.”

“I didn’t. Only after you touched it that first day.” He wasn’t about to tell her he hadn’t been looking at her lip when he’d seen her at the desk. Or that there’d been something about her that had drawn him toward her, as it did even now.

He’d thought it had been because he’d recognized her from her earlier visits, but who knew? His head had still been pretty foggy about the shooting and what had happened afterwards. Maybe he could tackle that. Get her talking so he could keep his mind off the fact that he was seated beside a beautiful woman—all alone in his brother’s house. And that he couldn’t seem to stop staring at her lips—not because of her scar but because they were pink and inviting and...

And he had to put a stop to this right now.

“Did the police tell you anything else about what happened?”

She shook her head. “Marcos said you were standing in front of the favela where you both lived as kids. The police were involved in a drug raid, and a couple of the dealers’ shots hit you as they tried to evade capture.”

He should remember something more about that time—like how he’d even known where he’d once lived—but it was still a blank for the most part. “That’s what the police told me as well. I just can’t remember.”

“It happened fast, from what I understand. Didn’t the doctor say your memories should come back after a while? You banged your head pretty hard on the pavement when you went down. Unfortunately the taxi driver took off once he heard the shots, so the police had to step in. Maybe they’ll find the driver and you can ask him how you ended up there.” She shifted on the couch so she faced him.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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