



*Medical
Romance™*

CAROLINE ANDERSON

The Perfect Wife
and Mother?



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«HarperCollins»

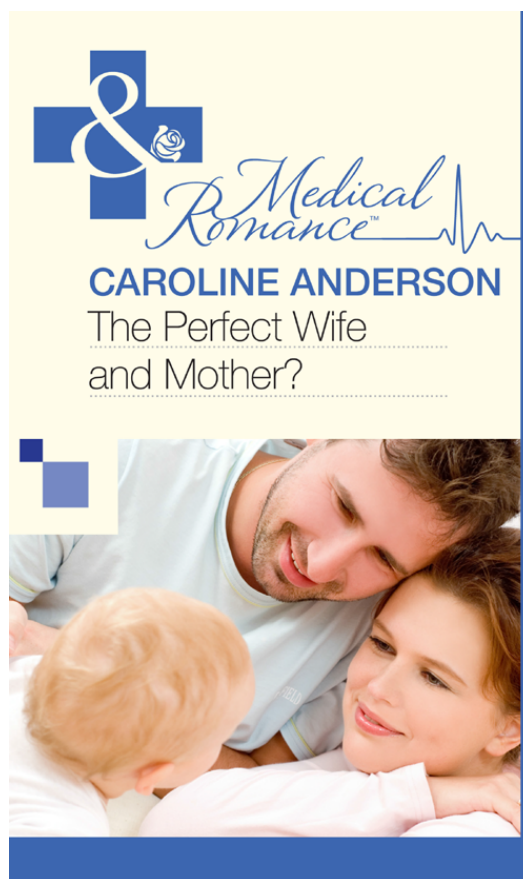
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A MATCH FOR THE SINGLE DAD Since the tragic death of his beloved wife, Dr Ryan O'Connor hasn't considered another woman—until Ginny Jeffries arrives in his Emergency Department. After such heartache, Ginny believes that Ryan can't offer anything more than a fling; yet against her better judgement she agrees to accept Ryan on his own terms. But being his lover means deepening ties with him and his two adorable children. It's the family she so desperately wants, but will she lose everything if Ryan finds out her own heartbreaking secret—that she's not so perfect after all...? **THE AUDLEY**—where love is the best medicine of all...

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The Perfect Wife and Mother?

Caroline Anderson



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CHAPTER ONE

IT HAD been a good wedding.

Ryan was surprised. He'd been dreading it, in a way. Since Ann had died, weddings weren't his favourite thing. He was OK till they got to the 'till death do us part' bit, then he was inclined to go to pieces inside.

Strangely, this time he hadn't. Time healing and all that? Maybe. Maybe it was just because Jill and Zach so obviously belonged together. Maybe it was because this time the children had been with him and had been fidgety and he'd had to entertain them. Maybe it was all sorts of things that he couldn't account for.

Whatever the reason, it had been a lovely wedding. He shrugged into his white coat, peered at his reflection in the little mirror behind the door and finger-combed his hair.

It was too short, really, but it had been so hot and he'd had it cut for the wedding. It sprang back now, tawny and rebellious—streaked paler by the sun—and he gave up. When it was longer he'd be able to make it co-operate. For now, it just stuck up with that wiry kink in it and that was the way it was. Still, it suited him in a way, made him look younger than his thirty-five years. He searched his face thoughtfully. Was he imagining it or were the lines of grief fading?

About time. It had been two years now, just over. Two long, lonely, heartbreaking years. The children had been more accepting of Ann's death, but he'd challenged God at every turn. It hadn't helped. He'd still woken up every morning alone.

Perhaps it was time to change that. A little light flirtation, perhaps? Maybe an affair? Nothing wild, just a discreet liaison with a woman who understood the rules.

A bit of ego-massage.

Yeah.

He grinned at himself—pleased with the idea—and his eyes sparkled back, green light dancing in their depths.

A woman. His gut tightened at the thought, and he chuckled softly. Would he even remember what to do?

Ginny found the accident and emergency department and looked around. Already, at eight-thirty in the morning, it was bustling with life.

Good. She couldn't bear standing around all day with nothing to do. That was why she'd chosen A and E. Now to find her boss.

It wasn't difficult. She sort of fell over him, really. One minute she was walking along the corridor minding her own business and wondering where she should go to find him, the next a door opened and a tall, fair-haired man walked smack into her path.

Literally.

His hands came up and grabbed her shoulders, her breasts bounced off his iron-hard chest, and sensation exploded inside her.

Heat—Lord, yes, such heat! Not body heat but power, coiled energy, sheer sex appeal. And strength, from the hands gripping her shoulders to steady her to the muscles of his chest bunching beneath her flattened palms. Gentleness, too, his hands relaxing instantly but staying there—cupping her shoulders with their long, blunt fingers.

Stunned, confused for a second, and yet unwillingly fascinated, Ginny stepped back and looked up—and found herself transfixed by the most astonishingly green eyes she had ever seen.

Funny, they hadn't seemed so green at her interview. And now, she realised, they were more than green. They were interested.

'Dr O'Connor?' she murmured. 'I'm Virginia Jeffries—your new SHO?'

Ryan felt as if he'd been hit over the head by a rock. One minute he was dreaming of a woman—any woman—to lighten his life, and the next minute—bang!—there was a woman in his arms.

And what a woman! Soft, cloud-grey eyes framed by long black lashes untainted by mascara, dark glossy hair swinging sleekly to her chin, a soft, full mouth curved in a smile of greeting—he might as well die now and go to heaven.

Had she really been so lovely at her interview? He didn't remember. How strange that he could have been unaware of her as a woman. Impossible. Lord, he must have been unconscious at the time!

He remembered himself and let her go, stepping back out of harm's way and sucking in his first breath for almost half a minute. 'Um—hi, there,' he managed inanely, and could have kicked himself. Damn, had it really been so long since he'd chatted up a woman that he couldn't remember how to talk to one?

Yes—but more to the point she was a junior colleague, and he would do well to remember that. No cosying up to this one, no matter how good she might feel squashed up against his chest.

His body was busy disagreeing. He buttoned his coat to allow it a little privacy until he had time to argue about it. Meanwhile he had work to do and an impression to create—if he could just unscramble his tonsils and get the words out!

'Ah—call me Ryan, please? And can I call you Virginia?' Wow, what a smile! He could feel his socks beginning to smoulder.

'Do—or Ginny. Whichever.'

He nodded. He had to. His brain had disconnected from his tongue and gone walkabout. He cleared his throat. 'Ah—right, well, if you'll come with me we'll see what we can do. You'll need a coat—'

'I got one at Reception.'

'—and a stethoscope?'

'Here.'

She wagged it at him and he nodded. Lord, her grin was delicious. 'Fine,' he croaked. 'Right. Let's go and find some patients.'

He was lovely. Dreadfully uncomfortable, fascinated by her, embarrassed by his reaction—what a sweetheart! And she had to admit to a certain fascination herself. What healthy woman wouldn't? He wasn't conventionally handsome, but his craggy good looks and wonderful green eyes had a definite masculine appeal.

And that voice—soft, deep, a little gruff, with a slow drawl that put his origins from across the pond—Canada, perhaps? His speech was quite precise—or would have been if he'd been able to get his tongue off the roof of his mouth! Poor man. Hormones could be quite ruthless.

She didn't remember his voice from the interview. Perhaps he hadn't said a great deal. She seemed to remember that it had been Jack Lawrence who had done most of the talking. She was sure she would have remembered if Ryan had said much, with that smoky, gravelly voice just made for loving—

A shiver ran down her spine and she sighed. It was a shame he was a colleague. She didn't like muddying the waters with personal matters.

Still, for him perhaps she could make an exception...?

She followed his broad, straight back down the corridor and round into the hub of the treatment area. There were trolleys with patients on, cubicles with people sitting and lying in varying states of undress and distress, and nurses bustling busily from one to the other, quietly efficient.

And once there, of course, they were instantly in demand. A nurse showed her the staffroom where she could stow her bag, and she slipped on her coat, hung her stethoscope round her neck and went back out into the fray.

'Here.' Ryan handed her a badge that said, Dr VIRGINIA JEFFRIES—SHO, and she pinned it to her lapel, grinned at him and looked around.

‘Where do we start?’

‘Over here,’ he said. He sounded better now, more in command of himself, his words precise and yet spoken with that lovely soft transatlantic drawl that made her skin shiver.

He picked up a file from a stack on a table. ‘I think for the morning you’d better stick close to me and see how things work,’ he said, and then turned away—but not before she saw recognition of the double meaning of his words strike home.

She nearly chuckled. The skin on the back of his neck warmed to a delicate shade of brick, and her grin wouldn’t be suppressed. If she’d got much closer to him she would have known exactly how things worked, she thought mischievously. She schooled her face into a businesslike mask and kept her chuckle private.

There would be plenty of time for jokes once she knew him better!

The morning removed the urge to laugh. Instead, she wanted to scream with frustration because, despite the early bustle the work died to a trickle and she was forced to stand around like a fourth-year student and watch the maestro at work.

It would have been a good idea if she’d been able to concentrate on taking in all the technical detail, like where the X-ray request forms were kept and who did the strapping on the sprains and which nurse did the casts and where the vomit bowls were in an emergency!

Instead, she watched his hands, long and strong, the fingers careful but thorough as he explored injuries. She studied his bent head, the hair short-cropped and springy—the ends tipped blond by the sun.

And she listened to his voice, and the warm, melodious flow of it lulled her into a sensuous daze.

But still she did no work, put her hands on no one, wasted a morning.

Ginny didn’t like wasting time—even time spent admiring Ryan O’Connor. She was glad, then, when things started to hot up a little and she actually got to examine a cut for fragments of glass and, wonder of wonders, examine, diagnose and admit an elderly lady with a Colles’ fracture of her wrist.

She was just about to lance an infected abscess on a young woman’s finger when the sister popped her head round the cubicle curtain and told her that there were two coming in on a blue light, and could she stand by in Resus with Ryan as Jack Lawrence, the other consultant, was busy with a cardiac arrest and couldn’t be spared, and Patrick Haddon, the SR, was similarly occupied with a child with severe burns?

‘I think they’re critical,’ she told Ginny. ‘Ryan’s on the phone to the paramedic in the ambulance, giving him instructions about one of them—could you come and talk to the other one?’

There was hardly time, though, because no sooner had she excused herself from the patient she was treating than they heard the sound of sirens entering the hospital grounds.

All hell broke loose then. The doors were held open, the trolleys brought in at a run and Ryan was working on the first casualty before they entered the resuscitation room. Ginny just had time to register masses of frothy blood around the girl’s face before her own patient was there under her nose.

The second trolley was pulled up parallel with the first, and the paramedic gave her a quick breakdown of the findings.

‘Motorbike accident,’ he said unnecessarily, as the lad was still wearing his leathers although his helmet had been removed. ‘Unconscious at the scene, hasn’t regained consciousness. Left leg is splinted—it’s very deformed in the lower third of the femur, but it looks like a closed fracture. Don’t know about spinal injuries but it’s possible. We put a backboard on to make sure, but we couldn’t leave the helmet on because we needed to get an airway in.’

She nodded. ‘OK. Thank you.’

While he was talking she checked the patient’s airway and ensured that it was working, and then frowned. His breathing was laboured and she was concerned about his chest.

‘Can we get these clothes off him, please?’

‘Put him on a sliding plate trolley first so we can X-ray him *in situ*,’ Ryan said from across the room.

So they shifted him with extreme care to support his head and neck in a neutral position, and then the splint was taken off his leg and his clothes were cut away to reveal his injuries.

‘If he lives he’ll complain like mad about this,’ the nurse working alongside Ginny said with a grin as she sliced up the side of the expensive leather gear the man was wearing.

‘Let’s just hope he lives to complain,’ Ginny muttered under her breath, and then ran her eyes over each part of him as it was revealed.

As the paramedic had said, his femur was distorted just above the knee and his right wrist looked very strange, but it was his chest that Ginny was concerned about. The left side was not inflating properly and when she pressed down gently she could feel the crepitations of the bone-ends scraping together.

‘Lower ribs have gone on the left—I think he’s got a punctured lung,’ she told Ryan.

‘Watch him for shock—the spleen might have gone too,’ Ryan mumbled, and then swore as his patient began to shudder and convulse. ‘Damn—I need to get this airway sorted,’ he growled.

Ginny tuned him out and concentrated on her patient. His pupils were equal and reactive to light, which she was grateful for, but he didn’t respond at all to voice and only slightly to pain.

She recorded the information on a neurological observation chart because of the suspected head injury, but she was more concerned for the moment with the immediate problem of his chest and abdomen.

She put in two chest drains—one for air and one for blood—using local anaesthetic in case he could feel it but not react, and asked the nurse for a report on his status as she watched the steady ooze of blood from the lower chest drain. She was glad she’d done it before. Now was not the time to learn!

‘Pulse one-twenty, thready, blood pressure seventy over thirty and falling.’

‘Damn. Let’s get some IV lines in and fill him up a bit. Is the X-ray coming?’

The door opened then and the radiographer came in. They worked round her, Ginny refusing to step back and continuing to put in the IV line into his left arm while the pictures were taken.

‘You shouldn’t do that—you’re a young woman,’ the radiographer scolded gently.

‘Don’t worry about me, I’m fine,’ Ginny said shortly, withdrawing some of the precious blood for cross matching. ‘Can we have the chest results quickly, please?’

‘Sure.’

They were left in peace then, squeezing the plasma expander in fairly rapidly to bulk up his blood volume while they waited for cross-matching. His blood pressure picked up a little, and they inserted another line into his damaged right arm.

‘I don’t want to use his legs because of the femur injury and possible internals,’ she said to Ryan, ‘and the neck I want to avoid until we’re sure he hasn’t got a head injury, so is it OK to use this broken arm?’

‘You’ve got no choice,’ he told her absently. ‘That’s more like it. OK, aspirate, please; get the blood out of her trachea. Can you cope, Virginia?’

‘Yes, I think so.’

‘Get four units of blood into him stat—use O neg while you wait for cross-match. There should be some coming up.’

There was, and she was glad to see it. Her patient’s pulse was very weak and thready, although they had boosted his blood volume, and she wondered how much he was losing into the thigh and how much through what she was beginning to be sure was a ruptured spleen.

‘Should we do a peritoneal lavage to see if he’s haemorrhaging?’ she asked Ryan.

He shook his head. ‘No. Treat as if he is—there should be a general surgeon on his way down to check. If he’s not here in five minutes—or if the lad deteriorates—I’ll stick a needle in and see

what we come up with. Better catheterise him anyway—he's going to have to go to Theatre. Do we have any ID?

The sister lifted her head from the catheter she was already inserting. 'Yes. The police are on it, apparently. They're contacting relatives now.'

A man came in then, tall and rangy, his white hair in sharp contrast to the bushy black brows beneath. 'Query abdomen for me?' he said in a soft Scottish burr.

'Oh, hi, Ross. Yeah, Virginia's got it. She'll fill you in.'

She met his eyes and smiled briefly. 'Hi. I think his spleen might have gone. His ribs have penetrated his left lung low down, but he's also got a possible head injury and his left femur and right wrist have gone.'

Ross nodded. 'OK. Can I have a trocar, please?'

He scrubbed quickly while they prepared the abdomen for his incision, then Ginny watched as he carefully pushed the sharp instrument into the abdomen and pressed gently.

Blood welled rapidly out of the little hole, far too much and too fast to be because of the incision.

'Damn. Right, we'd better have him now. Have we got head and spinal X-rays?'

'Just done.' They were snapped up on the light box by the radiographer, and Ross scanned them quickly. 'That looks OK. Right, we can assume his head injury is of secondary importance to his internal haemorrhaging. The spleen looks enlarged and the abdo contents are displaced—aye, I'm sure it's gone. I'll get the orthopaedic boys to sort his leg and arm out after I've finished with the spleen and chest. How stable is he?'

'Not bad,' Ginny replied. 'I think he's improving. He's certainly not getting any worse, but his blood pressure's still a bit low.'

Ross nodded. 'OK. Can you send him up as soon as he's stable enough, please? I'll go and scrub. How about this one?'

Ryan grunted. 'Smashed mandible, lacerated tongue—I'm just suturing it now to stop the bleeding. Apart from that and the coma and the leg fractures, she's fine.'

Ross snorted and left the room.

Ginny's patient's parents arrived at that point, so he was covered with a blanket; Ginny warned them about the breathing tube and the chest drains and IV lines, and then they came in for a few moments.

They were shocked and upset but, as Ryan said later, at least they knew he was still alive and recognisable, which was more than could be said for the girl who had been on the back of his bike. Her facial injuries were extensive and would require the intervention of a plastic surgeon—if she survived the head injury. Ryan thought her helmet must have been too big for her, as it had come off at the scene. Either that or it had been ripped off, thus damaging her jaw.

The boy's parents were distressed by her condition, as well as their son's. It seemed they were going out together and had been for some time.

'Do you know where the police might find her parents?' Ryan asked them.

'Possibly.'

'Would you talk to them? Sister has some forms for you to sign first, then if you could talk to the police?'

'Of course.' With shaking hands they signed the consent form for surgical treatment of their son's various injuries and, as Ginny was happy with his blood pressure and pulse, he went off to Theatre.

Ryan's patient, on the other hand, was still causing concern. The fragments of her fractured lower jaw had penetrated her mouth and tongue and were causing serious problems. Ryan had been unable to get an airway in and had had to do a tracheostomy to allow her to breathe because of the blood in her throat and her swollen tongue, but he had been able to suture the worst cut on the tongue to halt the outpouring of blood into the back of her throat that was threatening to drown her.

Her parents hadn't yet arrived, but she was at least stable now. Ginny went over to Ryan and asked if she could help.

He grinned tiredly. 'No, not really. You could finish off that patient you abandoned. I'll be through here in a minute and she'll be transferred to ITU. I'll come with you if you hang on.'

Ginny had quite forgotten the woman whose infected finger she had been about to lance. 'It seems hours ago,' she murmured.

'Only half an hour.'

He was still working. Ginny watched him as he checked the girl's pupils again. 'How's her head injury?'

'Not good. Her pupils are both equal and reacting, but she's still very deep. She's got multiple fractures in both legs and one arm, but all in all she's got away with it lightly if the head injury isn't anything too sinister. I think she was wrapped round a tree branch, from what I can gather. It may be just whiplash or it may be worse. She's got a nasty cut on her leg as well. She'll need a tetanus jab.'

He did that as they talked, and Ginny was able to see the long, jagged cut up her thigh. 'Are you going to stitch it?' she asked.

He looked horrified. 'No. It's dirty—we'll pack it and leave it for a few days with antibiotics, then it can be sutured on the ward. If you close it now you trap all that road dirt in it and she'd get a nasty infected wound for sure.'

Ginny suddenly felt the yawning void of her ignorance opening up under her feet. 'Sorry,' she mumbled.

Ryan lifted his head and met her eyes over the patient, and grinned. 'Don't apologise. That's why you're working with me—to learn these things. You did really well with that lad, by the way. Well done.'

His eyes glowed with appreciation, and Ginny felt as if the sun had come out from behind the clouds.

All the blood and gore receded and, as she returned his smile, her confidence came back and she straightened up.

'Thanks,' she murmured, and her voice sounded husky and emotional. 'Um—what now?'

'Your lady?' he prodded gently.

She laughed and pulled herself together. 'Oh. Right.'

She was heading out of the door when his pointed cough stopped her in her tracks.

'Try removing some of the blood before you go out there,' he said mildly.

She looked down at her coat, fresh this morning, and her eyes widened in surprise. 'Mmm—I see what you mean.'

Ryan's patient was collected and taken to Theatre while she cleaned herself up, and he joined her at the sink. Their eyes met in the mirror.

'Shall we finish off that poor woman now?' she said.

His grin was worth waiting for.

'She's probably got better on her own by now, but I suppose we ought to check.'

Chuckling, they left the devastation behind, and the team of nursing staff waded in for the clean-up, ready for the next onslaught—whenever that might be. While the nurses checked the instruments and relaid the trolleys and prepared the room Ryan and Ginny discovered that another doctor had taken over and finished treating Ginny's patient, so they went into the staffroom. While a fresh pot of coffee brewed Ryan talked her through the treatment both their biker patients would go on to receive. Then, just as the coffee-machine chugged and spluttered to a halt, they heard a siren again.

Ryan looked at her with those extraordinary green eyes and arched a brow expressively. 'We're on again,' he murmured. 'You stay here and have a coffee, if you like; I'll handle it.'

'Are you being kind or was that a dismissal?'

He grinned. 'Dismissal? You have to be kidding. I tell you what—you go and see to it, I'll have the coffee.'

She got instantly to her feet. 'I tell you what—we'll both go and deal with it and we'll both have a coffee!'

Well, as first days went, it had been a good one, Ginny mused. She kicked off her shoes, dropped tiredly onto her extremely comfortable bed and closed her eyes. Thank God she wasn't on duty that night. She wouldn't have been at her best, although she would have done it as she'd done it countless times over the past couple of years.

She replayed the day—or, at least, she meant to, but she didn't get a great deal further than Ryan.

Ryan's voice, Ryan's laugh, Ryan's hands on her shoulders, Ryan's chest squashed up against hers—well, the other way round to be exact, as Ryan's chest wouldn't squash with anything as trivial as her impact on it. Hers, on the other hand, had squashed most convincingly. She peered down at her bust, full and ripe and overtly feminine, and wondered how Ryan's hands would feel gently cupping that softness.

A dull ache started up behind her eyes. She was tired. She must be, to start imagining things like that about her new boss. After all, after that first initial contact, he'd been very circumspect and had kept his distance both physically and verbally.

No little jokes, no innuendo—nothing to give her any indication that the attraction she thought she'd seen in his eyes had been anything other than her imagination or a fleeting interest dispelled by time and further exposure.

Which was just as well—wasn't it? And, anyway, he was probably married.

'Did you have a good day today?'

Evie nodded, her eyes wide and sparkling with mischief. 'Granny took us to the beach again. We had ice cream and went on the little train and Gus was sick from eating too much popcorn.'

Ann's mother smiled apologetically. 'I don't think it's anything to worry about. Children are often sick if they overindulge. I shouldn't have let him have so much, should I, Angus?'

Gus shook his head cheerfully. 'My sick was all full of popcorn and bright green from my lolly —'

'OK, Gus, we don't need the details,' Ryan said wearily. How many times had he told their grandmother not to spoil them so much? They always had too much sun, too much food, too much everything. He hustled them to the car, strapped them in and took them home, tired but happy, and decided he was being too strict. So what if she spoiled them a little? They were kids. God knows, they had little enough fun in their lives.

It was funny how bathtime and bedtime always seemed endless, and yet when it was done and the children were tucked up in bed sound asleep the evening seemed to stretch on into the hereafter.

He showered and changed into old jeans and a scruffy T-shirt, meaning to tackle the garden a little before he went to bed, but it was a gorgeous evening and he found himself sitting down after his solitary meal with a beer in one hand and the local paper in the other, enjoying the last of the evening sun—and thinking about Virginia.

Lord, she was pretty. Her soft, lush curves had squashed up against him most invitingly, and he really hadn't wanted to let her go. He'd forgotten what a real woman felt like—how solid and robust and positively right.

His heart started to thud more heavily, just with the memory, and his jeans tightened to an embarrassing degree. He closed his eyes and tipped his head back against the sun lounger and sighed. Was it wrong to want another woman? It didn't feel wrong. It felt frighteningly normal and right.

It wasn't as if Ann was still alive.

And he was. If he'd had any doubts about that in the past two years, today had dispelled them all. Yes, he was definitely alive—alive, well and in the market for a scorching affair.

Just sex, he promised himself. No commitment. Nothing long term or permanent, just a little diversion to help ease life along a little. After all, the kids needed him and there was very little left over to give anybody else.

But an affair with Virginia—oh, yes. He could handle that.

She's a colleague, his alter ego was nagging gently. He switched it off. She understood the rules. She was a woman of the world—that was obvious from the assessing look she had given him that had thrown him for a loop.

They could work together and play together.

It would be fine. He'd make it fine.

His heart thudded a little faster, the beat heavy and strong under his ribs.

Anticipation.

He'd forgotten the taste of it, it had been so long.

He'd flirt with her a little, draw her out, see if she was interested. Maybe dinner, a play or the movies—something like that.

He wondered how Ann's mother would feel about babysitting for him while he entertained a new woman.

Perhaps he'd ask the girl next door...!

CHAPTER TWO

So MAYBE she'd been mistaken. Maybe Ryan was interested. Either that or she was reading him all wrong, which could be fairly embarrassing!

She wasn't. Every chance he had he made eye contact with her, and his eyes were ultra-expressive. She wasn't sure if he meant them to be or if they just gave him away, but he was certainly interested in her.

She still didn't know anything about him, however, but she was willing to bet from what she'd seen of him at work that he wasn't the sort of man to cheat on his wife. The easy thing, of course, was just to come out and ask him, but she didn't like to.

It was Patrick Haddon, one of the senior registrars, who told her in the end. They'd been working together on a patient and as the trolley was wheeled away to the ward he stripped off his gloves, dropped them in the bin and grinned at her.

'Well done. I can see why Ryan speaks so highly of you—apart from the obvious attraction he feels, of course.'

His eyes were twinkling, and Ginny felt a soft tide of colour brush her throat. She ignored the compliment on her work in favour of the rider he had added. 'Meaning?' she fished.

Patrick laughed softly. 'Don't tell me you haven't noticed the way he looks at you.'

She shrugged, pretending indifference. 'Is it so obvious?'

'It is to me. It makes a change to see him notice the sex of his colleagues. Not that anybody's criticising, Ginny. We're all vulnerable to the right pretty face. Anyway, it's good to see him taking an interest in a woman. Two years is a long time.'

'Two years?' she asked, trying not to let her curiosity be too obvious.

'Since his wife died. I don't think there's been anyone since.'

She felt the shock of his words in a wave of regret for Ryan. How had she died? Slowly, or instantly? Did he know it was going to happen? Did he have time to say goodbye? How much had he been hurt?

So many questions without answers. There was only one Patrick could answer that she was prepared to ask, and even that was a loaded question. 'Did they have children?' she asked slowly.

'Yes—two. A girl and a boy.'

Ginny felt a pang. She wasn't sure which was worse—to have them and die, or live and not have them.

To die. Yes, of course. Her life was full, after all. Her work was demanding, interesting and stimulating. Her private life was about to flourish, if Ryan's eyes were to be believed, and everything in her garden was rosy.

Well, almost. There was that little corner where nothing grew—where nothing would ever grow—but it was engulfed by the glorious mass of busyness that threatened to swamp her on occasions.

Yes, it was good to be alive.

Far better than to be dead.

Or widowed. Poor Ryan. She wondered what and when he would tell her about it. Probably not a lot, as he hadn't yet. She sensed that his private life and work were kept very far apart, and she wondered which slot she would be fitted into if she became his mistress.

A third slot, kept especially for that eventuality? Neither one thing nor the other? Category Three—sex slave.

She gave a short, humourless laugh. 'Don't count your chickens, Patrick,' she warned him. Or Ryan's. Not that it's anybody else's business, but I'm sure if he was that interested he would have done something about it by now.'

But he hadn't, and he didn't, and by the end of that week she was wondering if he ever would.

He was constantly underfoot, though. On the pretext of training her he was there at her side all the time, and by the end of Friday she was ready to hit him. She was off duty at five, much to her great relief, and she went into the staffroom to hang up her coat. As she came out so he came in, and their chests collided just as before.

This time, though, he didn't release her but stared down into her eyes and kept her there, hard against his body, while his eyes smouldered like green coals and her pulse rate rocketed.

She met his hungry gaze frankly, and after a few moments his eyes dropped to her mouth. She thought he was going to kiss her. Most men would have done, but Ryan clearly had more control.

She wished to God he didn't, but it was probably just as well because there were people passing them in the corridor and they were attracting some very strange and interested looks.

'Did you want something?' she asked softly, and under her hands his chest jerked a fraction. A sharp intake of breath?

His eyes flicked up to hers again, and the heat in them made her own breath jerk in response. 'Urn—yeah, actually,' he said hesitantly, 'I was wondering if you were doing anything tomorrow night?'

Someone barged past them and his body was nudged against hers. It felt good—too good to miss.

She smiled slowly. 'What did you have in mind?' She could have sworn his skin coloured, just slightly. Guilt? She suppressed a chuckle.

'Um—dinner? Perhaps the cinema? There's a new film on I've been wanting to see, but I'm easy.'

'Sounds fine,' she said with a smile. 'What time?'

He looked flummoxed for a moment. 'Time? Ah—seven? I'll pick you up—where do you live?'

'Here—at the hospital. I've got one of those poky little rooms, but as I'm only in it for ten minutes at a time it doesn't matter. I'll meet you at the main entrance.'

'Fine. Seven o'clock tomorrow, then.' As if he finally realised that he was standing pressed up against her he backed off a step then, with a slow grin, he released her and turned away. As he walked off down the corridor she heard him whistling softly under his breath, as if he was pleased with himself.

Smiling, she made her way back to her little room, flung the window open to let in some fresh air and examined the sparse contents of her wardrobe.

Nothing. She needed a shopping trip. Excellent!

Ryan thought he must have lost his marbles. First of all he'd grabbed her like a sex-starved adolescent, then he'd hung on and forgotten to let go of her because the feel of those soft breasts had been enough to curdle the remaining fragments of his mind. And, as if that wasn't bad enough, he'd gone and done what he'd spent all week trying to stop himself from doing, and invited her out tonight.

He yanked the tie off in exasperation. It was too hot to wear a tie. It was too hot to wear anything. It was certainly too hot for the sort of frenzied activity his body had in mind.

He yanked off the rest of his clothes, took a deep breath and got back into the cold shower. That would settle his little friend down, he thought viciously. He was *not* going to jump her bones on the first date. He was *not*! No, sir. Or the second.

Maybe not even the third.

Well, OK, the third. Damn. His body had cheered up again, despite the cold water.

He swore as he wrenched the curtain back again and grabbed a towel, just as Evie wandered into the bathroom. 'I thought you were in bed, sweetheart?' he said to her, rapidly covering the evidence of his outrageously optimistic libido.

T was. I'm too hot. Daddy, you said a bad word.'

He closed his eyes. 'I know. I'm sorry, honey. I'm feeling hot too.' Well, at least it wasn't a lie. He crouched down and took her hands in his. 'Want me to read you a story?'

She nodded. 'Gus is asleep already.'

'I thought he would be. He was tired after our walk. What shall we read?'

'*Black Beauty*,' she said without hesitation.

He sighed. She was going to be into horses whether he encouraged her or not, he realised. Oh, well, there were worse things. He'd grown up around horses—heck, his brother was a Mountie. It was safer than drugs. 'OK, *Black Beauty*,' he agreed, and they settled down on her bed and he started to read.

Ten minutes later, as her eyes began to droop, the doorbell rang.

'That'll be the babysitter. You look at the pictures and I'll get her to read to you some more.'

'Why couldn't Granny come?' Evie asked as he headed for the door, still clad in just the towel.

'Ah—I just thought we'd give her the night off.'

'Are you going out with a lady?'

What the hell did he say to that? 'Um—in a way,' he flannelled. 'I work with her—we're going to talk about work.'

And he ran downstairs, waiting for a thunderbolt to strike him down for lying to his six-year-old daughter.

The neighbour's seventeen-year-old daughter eyed his naked chest with interest. 'Am I early, or are you just late?' she asked frankly.

He coloured a little. 'I'm just late. I was reading to Evie. Come in, Suzannah. Would you go up and finish reading the chapter to her while I throw on some things? Thanks.'

He led her upstairs, ushered her into Evie's room and then shot into his room and grabbed his clothes. There was no time to be selective now. Taupe chinos, cream cotton shirt without tie, blazer, tie in pocket just in case. Wallet. Comb hair—for what it was worth. Shoes—no, not work shoes. Neutral suede desert boots. It was too hot for anything else. Right.

He kissed Evie, checked Gus, told Suzannah he would be back about eleven, gave her his mobile number and ran.

He was late. Ginny checked her watch, glanced once more down the drive towards the main vehicular entrance and went and sat down on a low wall by the door.

Her skirt was fortunately multicoloured and wouldn't show the marks, but after shopping all day in the hideous heat the last thing she wanted was to stand.

She plucked at the soft, crinkle-pleated cotton of the skirt and wondered if it was as transparent as she suspected with the light behind it. Not that there'd be any light behind it if he was much later.

Oh, well. It was delicate and feminine and made her feel good, and she had a snug vest-top on under a wispy blouse that matched the skirt, the tails tied at her waist. It exaggerated her bust a little too much, but so what? It was her best asset. She might as well use it.

Her fingers plucked at the skirt again. She hoped it looked as good as it felt, and that it would be formal enough for whatever he had in mind.

Whatever it was, she hoped that it included food early in the programme because she hadn't eaten since breakfast and that had been a rather scratch affair.

A dark blue estate car came into view, doing horrible things to the site speed limit of ten miles an hour, and pulled up right beside her. Ryan jumped out and came over to her, looking rueful and good enough to eat.

'Sorry I'm late—domestic hiccup. All set?'

She nodded and stood up, and judged her money wisely spent. His reaction was a peach. His jaw sagged a little, his eyes widened and fastened like limpets on her exaggerated bust, and with a conscious effort he dragged his gaze up to her face and cleared his throat slightly.

'You look—very—um...' he managed. He closed his eyes and gave a rueful laugh. 'Sorry. That white coat covers up a lot. You look stunning. I'm stunned. Really.'

She chuckled softly. 'You're no slouch yourself, O'Connor.'

He grinned, his equilibrium under control again, opened the car door for her, tucked her skirt in and closed it before striding round and sliding behind the wheel. 'Right—what would you like to do? Movies or dinner first?'

She pulled an apologetic face. 'Dinner? I'm starving.'

'So am I. Formal or informal?'

'Informal.'

'Inside or out?'

She laughed. 'Out, for preference.'

'Done. There's a pub that serves excellent food and they've got a riverside garden with willow trees. It's really beautiful and cool too, which has to be a plus.'

'Just lead the way,' she said with a smile, and leant back against her seat. He liked the clothes. Good. And he was going to feed her. Life was wonderful.

The pub garden was busy, but as they went outside with their drinks a couple sitting under one of the trees got up to leave and vacated the secluded little spot.

Glad that her skirt wouldn't show the grass stains, Ginny sat down, wrapped her arms round her legs and propped her chin on her knees. The willow branches hung like a curtain around them, whispering in the slight evening breeze, and although they were surrounded by people it was as if they were alone.

They were close to the water's edge, and there were ducks lazily holding their position against the current and waiting hopefully for a crust or the odd chip. Ginny watched them for a moment then with a chuckle turned to Ryan, to find him watching her again with a strange intensity.

She expected him to flush or turn away, but he didn't. Instead, his eyes burned into hers. 'You're beautiful, Virginia,' he murmured, and she was the one who blushed. 'Beautiful and feminine and very, very tempting. I made myself a promise tonight.'

She waited and eventually he continued, his voice strained, 'I promised myself I wasn't going to jump your bones. Not on the first date, at least, or the second.'

'When's the third?' she asked brazenly, shocked at herself but unable to help the words.

His eyes darkened and his breath caught in his throat. 'Dammit, woman, you aren't supposed to say things like that!' he choked out on a laugh.

She laughed with him, caught up in the sensual cocoon of their living hideaway, and he moved closer, turning sideways so that he was sitting on one hip with his leg drawn up and leaning on his outstretched hand—leaving the other hand free to give her its undivided attention.

His knuckles grazed her cheek, just softly, then down over the hollow of her throat until the backs of his fingers rested against the swell of her breast, just visible over the scooped neck of the little top.

Then his hand turned over, skimming across her breast and up, so that his fingers lay against the pulse at the side of her neck and his thumb dragged sensuously over her waiting lips. He caught her chin to steady her, and then his mouth was descending slowly, closing with hers inch by tormenting inch.

That first touch of his mouth was like the brush of an angel's wing—light, delicate, almost her imagination.

And then he kissed her, and the world outside their shimmering curtain disappeared in a haze of sensation. He was still gentle, but there was no part of her that felt untouched by him in the course of that one sweet kiss. Her lips parted for his tongue, and it seemed to caress her soul. No one had ever kissed her like that—ever.

She didn't want it to end, but of course it did. Good things always did—and this one with a muttered oath.

'Number thirty-seven?' a girl was calling.

'Damn,' he said again. 'That's our supper. Virginia, would you? I can't go out there like this.'

He looked embarrassed, but he didn't need to. She was every bit as aroused. It was just more subtle. She stood up, ducked under the willow curtain and retrieved their food from the waitress.

When she went back under the tree he was sitting with his leg hitched up, one arm resting on his knee and the other wrapped round his shin. He looked awkward, as if the kiss had been an accident, and she couldn't bear to see him flagellate himself for the most beautiful experience of her life.

She sat down, passed him his supper and met his rueful eyes. 'Don't, O'Connor,' she said softly. 'That was a beautiful kiss. I won't let you regret it.'

He laughed without humour. 'I was out of line.'

'No, you weren't. You got there just before I did.'

He met her eyes, his startled, and then he chuckled. 'I do believe you're telling the truth.'

'Oh, I am,' she said round a mouthful of prawns in mayonnaise. 'I was beginning to think you'd never get round to it without a little help.'

He choked on his first forkful of salad and Ginny slapped him on the back and then eyed him as he swallowed and wiped his streaming eyes.

'Are you all right?'

'Fine,' he croaked. 'Just don't say things like that.'

'Like what? That I want you, too?'

He dropped his fork and pushed his plate away. 'Virginia, you're playing with fire here.'

'I certainly hope so.'

His eyes searched her face. 'I'm a widower,' he told her bluntly. 'I've got two kids who take all my time and energy. This is going nowhere. It's just an affair.'

'That's fine,' she said. 'That's all I want too.'

She could see the tension in him escalate. He swallowed. 'There's no happy ever after, Ginny. Not for me. Not any more.'

She wanted to cry for him, but she was all cried out for herself. 'That's fine,' she whispered. 'Where shall we go?'

'Now?' he said, his voice strangled.

'Why not?'

He stared at her for long seconds then, standing up, he pulled her to her feet. 'Friends of mine are away. They've given me the keys of their barn in case of emergencies. I think this qualifies.'

She laughed softly and followed him out of the sheltering cocoon. It seemed miles to the car, even further to the barn set high up on the side of a valley with a wood behind it and rolling fields in front.

They went in without a word, and upstairs to the only room that was furnished.

Then he turned to her, his eyes serious. 'Are you sure?' he murmured.

She nodded. 'Yes. Yes, I'm sure.'

His hands on her body were tender, almost reverent. He untied her blouse, spreading the sides and looking down at the full swell of her breasts under the skimpy T-shirt. 'So much woman,' he whispered.

Her breath caught as his hands slid under the hem of the T-shirt and cupped her breasts. They were naked under the soft cotton, ready for his touch, and he lifted the hem and brought his mouth to them in turn. She cried out, clinging to his shoulders, and he dragged her closer—his control ragged now—and buried his face in the side of her neck.

'This is probably going to be a disaster the first time, Virginia. It's been so damn long for me, but I'll make it up to you next time, I promise.' His lips pressed against the leaping pulse in the hollow of her throat and her head fell back, sensation swamping her.

He lowered her to the bed, bunching her skirt around her waist, his hands finding and stripping away the tiny scrap of lace which was all she wore beneath the skirt.

His face was a mask now, taut with need and desire, and kneeling between her thighs he tore open his trousers with shaking hands and reached for her.

‘Help me,’ he muttered tightly. ‘Virginia, help me—’

Then he was there, sliding home in the sweet nectar that her body wept for him, and tears welled in her eyes. She cradled him in her arms, her body arching to meet his, and he drove deeply into her—again and again and again—until with a harsh cry he shuddered against her and was still.

She was unfulfilled, but it didn’t matter. He needed her, and she needed to be needed. OK, it was only physical and only fleeting, but she took what she could get.

The tears that filled her eyes overflowed and ran down into her hair, but she ignored them. Her attention was all on Ryan—his body slumped in her arms, his precious weight so welcome as he lay against her.

She felt the moment when he started to withdraw back into himself in a slight tension that invaded his shoulders. She let him go. There was no purpose to be served by trapping him against her.

She lay and watched as he swung away from her and fastened his clothes, then ran down the stairs and out into the fresh air.

She let him go. There would be time enough to talk to him. Mechanically she dried her tears and found her underwear, tugging it back on. He hadn’t used a condom—probably hadn’t even thought about it, she realised. Not that it mattered. She wasn’t going to get pregnant as a result of his carelessness.

She tidied the bed and went downstairs. He was standing on a little terrace outside the French doors, staring out blindly across the valley. She left him to it, busying herself in the kitchen making coffee.

She took him a cup when it was done, putting it in his hand without a word.

He took it, looking surprised, and turned and met her eyes, his own remorseful. ‘Virginia, I’m sorry. I behaved like an animal in there.’

‘No, you didn’t. You behaved like a man.’

‘Was that as bitter as it sounded?’

She laughed without humour. ‘It wasn’t meant to be. Do you want to talk about it?’

He stared down the valley again, then started speaking. ‘Ann died two years ago—nearly two and a half. There hasn’t been anybody since—that was the first time.’

‘And you feel guilty?’

He gave a grunt of laughter. ‘I feel guilty because I didn’t feel guilty—not about Ann, at least. I didn’t give her a moment’s thought. She was worth more than that, Virginia, and so are you.’ He let out his breath on a shaky sigh and stared up at the heavens. ‘I behaved appallingly.’

‘No, you didn’t—’

‘I used you.’

Her heart contracted, and she closed her eyes against the tears and turned away. ‘You had a good reason. Just don’t do it again—not like that. Please?’

His hand on her shoulder was tender as he turned her into his arms, the soft sigh of regret as he saw her tears whispering over her skin like a caress.

‘Forgive me,’ he said unsteadily. ‘I never meant to hurt you.’

She looked up and met his eyes. ‘I forgive you. O’Connor?’

‘Yes?’

‘Make love to me.’

There was an endless pause and she held her breath, sure that he would turn and walk away—but he didn’t. Slowly, softly, his mouth came down and covered hers, and he kissed her as he had done in the shelter of the willow tree.

They made love outside this time, under the night sky with the strange cries and rustlings of the night in the wood behind them, and their cries mingled with those of the animals and faded with the whispering breeze.

Then Ryan lifted his head and brushed the damp hair from her brow. 'OK?' he murmured.

She smiled, the damn tears threatening again in the safety of the darkness. 'Wonderful,' she lied.

Physically, it had been. Emotionally, though, it was a wasteland because she had committed the unpardonable folly of falling in love with him, and nothing would ever be quite the same again...

CHAPTER THREE

RYAN was swamped with emotion. Regret, remorse, excitement, passion, anticipation of their next meeting—but above all regret.

It was her tears that had done it. Those soft, cloud-grey eyes shimmering with disappointment—and that remark about him not behaving like an animal but like a man.

Was that what she expected from a lover? Disappointment? Haste? No finesse, no thought, no consideration?

She should be married with children of her own, he thought in confusion, not so desperate for affection that she would allow him access to her body with so little regard for her own physical and emotional wellbeing. His throat closed with a nameless emotion. Oh, Virginia, he thought. So tough, so worldly, so cool on the surface—and yet, deep down, so vulnerable and easily hurt.

Of all the girls to choose, he'd had to choose her. Still, the second time had been better. He'd made sure of that.

And the way she'd come apart in his arms—it was flattering, to say the least, and so easy to give her pleasure. A little more care and control the first time and he could have done it then—except that he couldn't have done.

He had to be realistic. The first time he had been totally out of control. She was just so lush, so soft, so feminine—all woman. After two and a half years he wasn't strong enough to hold on in the face of such exquisite temptation.

He lay in his bed alone, staring up at the ceiling and wondering what Ann would have thought of his behaviour. Their courtship had been slow and leisurely and humorous, and their love-making had never had the tempestuous quality he knew he would have with Virginia. Would Ann have understood the overwhelming urges he was feeling now?

Probably not. She had been soft and sweet and open, without a trace of guile. She would have been shocked, both at him and Virginia. Probably especially Virginia.

He was too, but he sensed that there was more to it than he understood. Beneath the bravado and sassy front she put on he felt a deep hurt—something too raw to talk about, too deep to probe and bring out into the cruel light of day.

Maybe one day she'd feel brave enough to tell him about it.

And that really tied in with a no-strings, sex-for-the-sake-of-it affair, O'Connor, he thought drily.

Oh, damn.

He rolled onto his front, smashed the pillow into submission and shut his eyes. He'd deal with it on Monday.

Ginny wasn't sure how to face Ryan on Monday morning. She was sure that her feelings for him were written all over her face in letters ten feet high, and she had no intention of revealing her stupidity to him. It was hardly his fault, after all, that she had managed to fall in love with the man.

She had a choice, of course. End the affair before she was hurt, or let it run its course. She was there for a year. Ryan had made it clear that he wanted no emotional involvement with her, so the choice was hers, really, so long as she could keep her feelings secret.

So, what was the choice? Hurt now, or have a lot of fun and hurt later? Some choice.

So she dressed for power, in a practical but ultra-feminine dress with a scooped neckline and button-through front, and had to spend the day fighting off all the conscious male patients between fifteen and eighty-five.

And Ryan.

He found her during a lull and called her into his office, and without preamble he pulled her into his arms and kissed her thoroughly. Then he buttoned her coat shut.

‘It’s too hot,’ she protested, and one brow arched in comment.

‘You don’t say,’ he drawled softly. ‘That’s why I did it up.’

She laughed, a little breathlessly, and his fingers cupped her jaw with infinite tenderness and he kissed her again.

‘I want you,’ he murmured.

‘Mmm. Lunchtime?’

His eyes widened. ‘Where?’

‘My room?’

He looked tempted. ‘There won’t be time,’ he said regretfully.

‘Tonight?’

He shook his head and she was conscious of a hideous disappointment. ‘I’ve got the kids to think about. I have to pick them up from their babysitter. Don’t worry, we’ll find time somehow—soon.’

His bleeper squawked and he picked up the phone, his eyes still on hers. ‘O’Connor. Yes, I’m in the department. I’ll come now.’

He put the phone down. ‘Duty calls,’ he said with a wry grin. ‘Keep the coat done up.’

She grinned and let him go, then followed him out.

She did as he said for a while, but then it got too hot and she was too busy and the buttons gave way to comfort. By lunchtime the coat was off too, and she was wearing just the dress with her stethoscope round her neck.

Ryan walked past the cubicle where she was treating a patient, stopped dead and reversed and looked pointedly at her chest.

She threw him a sassy grin and carried on, and as he walked away she could have sworn she heard a little growl erupting from his chest.

She stifled the chuckle and drew her attention back to her patient. ‘Now, Mrs Robson, how did you say you cut yourself?’

He was right about lunchtime. They were rushed off their feet, and any plans they might have made to creep away for a quiet interlude would have been abandoned anyway.

Things were still fairly hectic when a woman was brought in who had fallen onto her outstretched hand and broken her arm. She was brought in in a wheelchair, obviously in a great deal of pain and suffering from shock.

Ginny examined her arm quickly and found that there was a very weak pulse in her wrist and the area over the back of her thumb felt dead.

That indicated damage to the nerve and blood supply down her arm, and would need surgical intervention. Ginny ordered an immediate X-ray, and as soon as the plate was in front of her she could see the damage caused by the fall. The humerus had split lengthwise in a nasty spiral fracture, and the sharp end of the lower part had rammed up into the nerves and blood vessels with the force of the fall. The woman would need an operation very quickly to sort out the blood supply and avoid potentially horrendous problems resulting from the disrupted circulation.

She called the orthopaedic registrar on take, and a few minutes later a good-looking young man appeared in the corridor.

‘Who wants me?’ he said with a grin, and the nurses ribbed him mercilessly.

‘You’re married, Zach, behave,’ they teased.

The sister sent him in to Ginny, and she showed him the plate.

‘Ow. That’s quite a break. Is this your arm?’ he said to the patient, squatting down to bring himself to her eye level.

‘Yes—oh, it’s so sore.’

‘I’m sure. Don’t worry. We’ll have you sorted out in no time. When did you last eat?’

‘Breakfast. I’m on a diet so I skipped lunch.’

‘What about a drink? Can you remember when you had the last one?’

‘About eleven o’clock. I was on my way home after doing the shopping when I fell off the bus.’

‘Is that how you did this?’ His fingers were gently examining her hand, which also showed signs of cuts and bruises. ‘Poor you. That was a nasty fall. Let’s get you up to Theatre, then, and sort you out. Any allergies or problems with anaesthetics?’

She shook her head, and Zach stood up.

‘OK. Let’s have her on a trolley, I think, and with that arm supported on a pillow like it is, and we’ll get her fixed up as soon as Theatre’s free—about ten minutes, Robert said.’

Ginny nodded. ‘Do you want her up there for the anaesthetist now?’

‘Yes, I think so. We’ll get that pain sorted out first. I’ll ring Theatre, if I may?’

‘Of course.’

She filled in the paperwork while he went off to the office to phone, and then she put the notes on the trolley with the patient and went along to the office to find out what was happening.

Ryan was there, lounging in the doorway and chatting to Zach.

‘So, no emergencies over the weekend?’ Zach said with a grin. ‘No fires or floods or burglars?’

Ryan looked a little uncomfortable. ‘No, no emergencies. We went over there on Saturday evening and checked it out.’

Ginny’s eyes widened. Zach owned the barn? Oh, Lord.

She felt hot colour creeping up her neck, and turned away so that Ryan didn’t catch her eye because, as sure as eggs, if he did she’d start to giggle.

She thought Zach would latch onto the ‘we’ like a limpet, but he didn’t, and Ginny realised that he must have thought Ryan was referring to the children. She let her breath ease out, and turned back again.

‘Your patient’s all ready for you, Zach,’ she murmured, and slipped away before she could become embroiled in any further conversation about the barn.

Ryan came and found her a few minutes later. There was a lull and she was in the staffroom with her feet up, grabbing a cup of coffee. For the moment, at least, they were alone.

He poured a cup of coffee and came and sat at right angles to her, next to her feet.

‘You could have told me the barn was his,’ she said softly. ‘I nearly died.’

He chuckled. ‘I didn’t think of it. I forgot you’d meet him around the department. Yes, it was a bit tricky, wasn’t it?’

‘Would they mind?’

He shook his head. ‘No—I’d just rather keep it more discreet.’

Category Three again, she thought to herself. Oh, well, beggars couldn’t be choosers.

‘So,’ he was saying, ‘what are you doing this evening?’

‘I thought you had to pick your children up?’

‘I do. I meant later. You could come round.’

‘To the house?’

‘No. Bad idea, they might wake up.’

‘You could get a babysitter.’

He swallowed and nodded. ‘There’s the problem of where we go,’ he said quietly. ‘Your hospital room is too public, Zach and Jilly are back, my house is out of the question and I’m just too old to mess about in parked cars.’

‘I’ll have to get a flat,’ she said.

He snorted softly. ‘That doesn’t help us tonight, does it?’

‘No. Not really.’

He grinned and stood up. ‘I have an idea. Don’t go away.’

He was gone for three minutes and came back with a wide smile. ‘Jilly’s flat’s still vacant. It’s just behind the hospital, very easy for you to get to work, it has a phone—and it’s available now.’

‘Now?’

‘As of this minute. The hospital has it on a long lease. The accommodations officer will give you the keys.’

‘Just like that?’

‘Just like that.’

She was sceptical. ‘What if I don’t like it?’

‘You’ll like it,’ he said confidently. ‘It’s a nice flat. It’s even got a little garden.’

‘So how come it’s available?’

He grinned. ‘Jilly handed the keys back this morning. She’s been a bit forgetful—rather a lot on their minds. They only got married two weeks ago.’ His grin widened. ‘Want a hand to move in tonight?’

‘There’s not a lot to move in,’ she told him. ‘Two suitcases, a box of books, a few bits and pieces. Certainly no furniture.’

‘It’s furnished.’

‘Oh.’

‘Well—go on, then, go and see the accommodations officer and get the keys. If you don’t like it you can tell him so tomorrow.’

‘What about work? I can’t just walk out,’ she protested.

He laughed. ‘Who’s going to tell the boss on you, Virginia?’

She smiled ruefully. ‘OK, I’m going. Sure you can cope?’

‘Oh, I’ll find a way,’ he said softly.

‘Of course there are one or two things we didn’t consider,’ Ginny said later as they looked around the flat.

‘Such as?’

‘Sheets, towels, food—nothing important!’

He glanced at his watch. It was a quarter to eight. The supermarket might still be open if they hurried. ‘I can lend you sheets and towels, and we can get food now,’ he told her.

So they did a two-minute trolley dash in the supermarket, and then dropped by his house to pick up some linen. She sat in the car outside and looked around the neighbourhood at the neat little houses, all set back from the road with pretty front gardens and lots of trees and smart cars on the drives, and wondered how the frustrated sex fiend she had discovered in him fitted into suburbia.

They went back to the flat, but they didn’t get very far. The shopping was put away—more or less—and the sheets were put on the bed, but only in a manner of speaking. Ginny put the pile down on the corner of the mattress and Ryan took her in his arms and looked down into her eyes and she caught fire again.

His mouth brushed hers, his lids fluttering down as sensation washed over them, and she closed her eyes and gave herself up to his kiss. He was hungry for her, she could tell, but he held back, slowing the pace deliberately—kissing her with lingering intent until her knees threatened to buckle.

Then he laid her down on the bed in amongst the folded blankets and tired pillows, and his fingers walked down her throat and stopped at the top button of her dress. ‘I’ve been wanting to do this all day,’ he murmured.

He slipped the first button free, pushed back the edge of her dress and kissed the pale swell of her breasts. Then the next button gave way, and the next, and with each one he kissed the skin he revealed.

She hardly dared to breathe as he reached her waist and started down her abdomen. What would he say? Would he be repulsed? It had been dark before and he’d been too blinded by urgency to notice trivia.

Sure enough, he paused, a frown pleating his brows. ‘What happened?’ he asked, his fingers tracing the savage network of scars that spanned the area between her hipbones.

‘I had a car accident when I was seventeen. I had internal injuries. We hit a bridge and the railings came through the bodywork.’

Ouch.’ His fingers were gentle. ‘Poor baby.’

She closed her eyes as he bent and kissed the jagged lines. His fingers resumed their work with the buttons, her thighs and then her calves receiving his attention, and then he raised himself on one elbow and looked at her.

Her dress was gone, pushed aside in his slow exploration, and only her underwear remained. Her bra was front-fastening and, with his eyes fixed on hers, he slipped the catch and let her breasts spill into his waiting hands.

‘So much woman,’ he murmured, and she closed her eyes and bit down on the little cry that rose in her throat as his mouth fastened hotly over one nipple and suckled hard. She writhed under him, sensation ripping through her as he bit and sucked and licked and blew cold air over her sensitive skin, until she couldn’t stand it any more.

Then, shedding her clothes, she knelt on the bed and reached for his shirt buttons.

‘Your turn,’ she told him, and with slow deliberation she slipped each button in turn through its buttonhole, and when she reached his waistband she pulled the tails out and undid the last button, then pushed the shirt over his shoulders. He rolled over—shedding the sleeves one at a time—then rolled back, his eyes fixed hungrily on hers as she reached for the buckle of his belt.

The only sound in the room was the harsh rasp of his breath, and in the near-silence the scrape of the zip was almost deafening.

She caught her fingers in the waistband of his trousers and briefs, and he lifted his hips and she peeled the clothes away. As she reached his ankles he kicked his shoes off and lifted his feet, and she grabbed his socks in passing and pulled them off too.

Then he was naked, all hers, and she thought her heart would stop beating she wanted him so much. Emotion clawed at her—love, despair, emptiness, need—and when he reached for her she fell into his arms with a little sob and buried her face in his shoulder.

‘Virginia?’ he murmured, and the soft drawl was her undoing.

‘Please, O’Connor,’ she whimpered. ‘Please...’

‘Do I need to use anything? I forgot to ask the other night.’

‘No, it’s OK,’ she said. O’Connor, please—’

‘You’re sure? I’d hate to get you pregnant.’

Her heart splintered in her chest. ‘I’m sure,’ she whispered rawly. Her eyes closed over the tears that she wouldn’t shed. He’d never promised her happy ever after, so what was the point of grieving for what she could never have?

She concentrated on what she could have—the feel of his body on hers, in hers, and as his mouth found hers and fastened on it he started to move, slowly at first and then faster, and she matched his rhythm and reached the pinnacle with him, her body contracting around his as he spilled deep within her.

And if the cry that was torn from her wasn’t one of ecstasy but of pain, he was unaware. Only Ginny knew, and she smiled through her tears and kissed him back and hid the anguish as she had so many times before...

It was a lovely little flat, she discovered after Ryan had gone and she’d had time to explore it sensibly.

The entrance to the flat was off the main hall, near the front door, and there was an inner hall leading to the living-room and kitchen. The bedroom was at the front, accessed from the living-room which had a tired but comfortable three-piece suite and a casement door out into the walled garden. It was more of a yard, really, with a gravelled area and a few beds and some pots and tubs, the contents of which looked a little the worse for wear. Still, it was a little oasis and with a bit of effort would be lovely. Much better than her little room at the hospital.

The kitchen had a door out to the garden too, and there was a bench seat with a late honeysuckle tangling over the wall above it and scenting the night air with a sweet perfume that spoke of love and stolen moments. She made a cup of coffee and took it outside, sitting on the bench and resting her head back against the wall and thinking about Ryan.

He had gone back to his children, back to his duties and responsibilities and the world that he belonged to and from which she would always be excluded.

‘I love you,’ she whispered to the night air, and a cat came out of nowhere and helped itself to her lap, and she stroked it and rubbed its ears and was grateful for the company. Perhaps she should get a cat—or perhaps she just had.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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