



HOLDING OUT FOR DOCTOR PERFECT

TERESA SOUTHWICK



Teresa Southwick

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No-nonsense Avery O'Neill was as by-the-numbers about her love life as she was about the hospital budget she managed. So she vowed to ignore the sparks between her and hotshot surgeon Spencer Stone – until their insatiable passions swept them into an unexpected predicament. Could Mercy General's most eligible bachelor convince Avery that his feelings were real...?

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**“I’ve yet to meet a surgeon who isn’t
full of himself, a total control freak.”**

“So says the hospital controller,” her friend Ryleigh pointed out.

“That’s my job title, not personality.” She got mad every time she thought about the pressure Spencer Stone had put on her. “What part of *no* doesn’t he understand?”

“Now’s not the time—”

“Yeah, it is.” Avery was warming to her subject. Even her friend’s weird eye-rolling and nodding her head toward the doorway didn’t penetrate the tirade. “I swear, if I ever meet a nice doctor, I’d have sex with him at that moment—”

“Avery—” Ryleigh was dragging her hand across her throat, the universal cut-off sign.

She felt her stomach drop and heat spread through her. “He’s behind me, isn’t he?”

About the Author

TERESA SOUTHWICK lives with her husband in Las Vegas, the city that reinvents itself every day. An avid fan of romance novels, she is delighted to be living out her dream of writing for Mills & Boon.

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for Doctor
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Teresa Southwick**



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To Neel V. Dhudshia, MD, the right doctor in the right place at the right time. Thank you from the bottom of my heart for giving it one more try.

Chapter One

Avery O'Neill had guilty secrets, but her attitude toward a certain cardiothoracic surgeon wasn't one of them.

She stopped pacing long enough to look at Ryleigh Evans, her best friend. "It's bad enough that I have to put up with Spencer Stone at your wedding. Far be it from me to question your future husband's taste in a best man. But I just found out I have to go to Dallas with him."

This was Ryleigh's office and she was behind the desk, watching Avery walk back and forth to work off her frustration. Her brown eyes sparkled with more than bridal happiness. She was also rocking a pregnancy glow with a baby due in four months. She was a beautiful brunette and happiness made her more beautiful than ever.

"Why do you have to go with him?" she asked.

"For months I've been telling Stone that the surgical robotic system he's lusting after—just like he lusts after every attractive single female employee at Mercy Medical Center is not in the budget. He went over my head to my boss, who pointed out that Doctor Heartthrob brings patients, publicity and revenue to Mercy Medical Center. In short, he's the golden boy and we need to keep him happy."

"And just how are you going to do that?" Her friend Ryleigh's tone dripped with double entendre.

"Don't go there."

Avery certainly wasn't planning to. Spencer Stone was only interested in casual sex—and that didn't interest her. She knew his type—big man on campus. The guy that girls couldn't say no to. In high school she'd learned the hard way that there were consequences for not saying no and sleeping with that guy. Hers were an unplanned pregnancy and a newborn daughter she'd had to give up for adoption.

Her gaze dropped to her friend's baby bump and the way she absently and protectively rubbed her hand over the swell of the growing child. A familiar envy, longing and sadness rolled through her. Avery covered it the way she always did, by being prickly. Ryleigh teased that it was one of her best qualities, but she'd never confided her guilty secret, not even to her best friend.

"I have to go with Stone to talk to the financial people and find out if this Star Wars technology is fiscally feasible."

"And what will he be doing while you're playing with numbers?"

"He'll be playing with the really expensive Star Wars technology."

Ryleigh nodded sagely. "Well, I can see their point. Hospital administration doesn't want him to contract his considerable skills to another facility. But he's officially really good at fixing hearts."

"Good thing because he breaks so many. He's a pain in the butt."

Ryleigh slid her a look of exaggerated patience. "You'll get to know him better at the wedding. I promise not to say I told you so when you find out you're wrong about Spencer. If he were as bad as you think, Nick wouldn't like him or ask him to be his wingman for vow-taking."

The day after tomorrow her best friend was remarrying Dr. Nick Damian, the love of her life and father of her unborn child. Avery was the maid of honor, which meant she'd have to play nice. But that was two days away and now, she was annoyed. "Stone's a jerk."

"Not true. He's a really nice guy."

"Right." Avery folded her arms over her chest and faced the desk with her back to the open office door. "I've yet to meet a surgeon who isn't full of himself, a total control freak."

"So says the hospital controller," Ryleigh pointed out.

"Job title not personality." She got mad every time she thought about the pressure Spencer Stone had put on her. He buried her in emails with a subject line of 9-1-1, or stat, or Code Red. When

that didn't work he tracked her down in the hospital wherever she happened to be, although so far he hadn't breached the sanctity of the ladies' room. "What part of no doesn't he understand?"

"Now's not the time—"

"Yeah, it is." Avery was warming to her subject. Even her friend's weird eye-rolling and nodding her head toward the doorway didn't penetrate the tirade. "I swear if I ever meet a nice doctor, I'd have sex with him at that moment—"

"Avery—" Ryleigh was dragging her hand across her throat, the universal cutoff sign.

She felt her stomach drop and heat spread through her. "He's behind me, isn't he?"

"I understand we're traveling together. Hello, Avery." Heart-of-Stone himself walked up beside her. His grin was wicked. The expression on his face was full of the devil. "And since I'm a really nice surgeon and dressed appropriately, it looks like we'll be having sex, too."

"Don't be mean, Spencer," Ryleigh scolded. "I defended you. I'd appreciate it if you didn't make a liar out of me."

Avery didn't know what to say. She'd just insulted the brilliant doctor that hospital administration was jumping through hoops to keep happy. They were traveling together because he wanted a robot and she had to crunch the numbers to make it happen. If Stone said take a flying leap, her boss would ask how high and how many times. If Stone said fire Avery O'Neill, they would have her severance ready faster than you could say "may the force be with you."

She looked at her friend because she couldn't look at *him*. "You need to give me a bigger shut-the-heck-up motion next time."

"Next time?" Spencer rested a hip on the corner of Ryleigh's desk. His piercing green eyes snapped with intelligence. Dark blond hair was cut military short and suited his square-jawed face. It just wasn't fair that he made the green scrubs he wore hot as a sexy kiss under a full moon. "You have plans to trash talk me again, Tinker Bell?"

She winced, but didn't say anything. He called her that because she was five feet tall, barely weighed a hundred pounds and her blond hair was cut in a short pixie style. Ryleigh had said the look suited her but the nickname didn't do a whole lot for her professional image.

"Was there something you wanted, Spencer?" Ryleigh asked. She reached into a desk drawer and pulled out her purse before standing.

"Just wanted to double check on the wedding rehearsal time," he said.

"Tomorrow. Six-thirty at the house. We're taking the wedding party to dinner after."

"Who's in the wedding party again?" he asked, the sinful sparkle in his eyes aimed directly at Avery.

"Oh, please, Spencer. You have a mind like a steel trap and never forget anything. You know it's just you and Avery. She's my best friend and maid of honor. Don't pick on her."

They were the only attendants for the small intimate wedding and the next two days were going to be like a never ending double date. Karma was having a good laugh at her expense.

"Okay." He nodded to Ryleigh. "And you're feeling okay?"

"Great." She smiled and rubbed a hand over her belly. "Morning sickness is gone. Although why they call debilitating nausea that lasts twenty-four hours a day 'morning' is beyond me. But currently all is well."

"Good."

"Okay, you two, I have to go meet Nick. But feel free to use my office for restoring diplomatic relations."

"You don't want to play referee?" Spencer asked.

"Not even a little. Be excellent to each other," she added sternly on her way out the door.

When she left Avery and Spencer eyed each other. His expression was challenging but he didn't say anything. The silence was making her nervous and she needed to fill it. Partly because there would

be no massive wedding party to buffer them during the rehearsal festivities and ceremony. And partly because she also had to work with him. And travel with him, which was worse than working with him.

“About the jerk comment ...” She took a deep breath and met his gaze without flinching. “I was simply stating an opinion. I’m sorry if it hurt your feelings.”

“You don’t look sorry,” he said.

That’s because she was only sorry he’d overheard. “It’s all on the inside.”

“Unlike your stated viewpoint, which you put right out there. One that didn’t allow for the fact that I *have* any feelings.”

From where she was standing, he didn’t. “Do you?”

“Of course.”

The teasing tone and gleam in his eyes didn’t convince her but the combination made her pulse pick up more than she liked or even wanted to acknowledge. He was too handsome, too sexy, too confident, too smooth. Too much of everything that left her too little peace of mind. Filling the silence had only made her nerves more nervous.

Now what?

“So, it’s good we talked.” Avery slid her hands into the pockets of her black slacks. “I should be going now.”

“It’s quitting time, right? Is there somewhere you have to be? Do you have plans?”

“No.”

“We should go get a drink,” he said.

No, they shouldn’t. “Why would you want to do that?”

The words just popped out of her mouth. She didn’t mean to be rude, but definitely could have been more tactful.

Surprisingly he laughed. “It never occurred to me I needed a reason to ask a woman to go for a drink.”

“Well, you asking just came out of the blue for me. We don’t have what you’d call a going-for-drinks kind of relationship. It sort of took me by surprise.”

“So, you’re saying I *do* need a reason?”

She could feel the skepticism and suspicion on her face, but tried to suppress it. “Not exactly.”

“That’s okay. I can come up with more than one.”

“Such as?”

The way he folded his arms over his broad chest made his shoulders look even wider. Her mouth went dry and there was a hitch in her breathing. It was okay with her if he thought she was unreasonable and not worth the trouble, but that could put a speed bump in her career.

“If we had a drink together, we’d get to know each other better.”

“Good luck with that.” She resisted the urge to put her hand over her mouth and simply mumbled, “Sorry.”

He grinned. “It would ease tension and make the wedding festivities more fun and the trip to Dallas more relaxed.”

On what planet? “Look, Dr. Stone—”

“Call me Spencer. It’ll be easier that way. Especially at the rehearsal dinner.”

Nothing about it was going to be easy. “Whatever I think about you, I’d never do anything to spoil my best friend’s wedding day. And I’m a professional businesswoman. My personal feelings, whatever they are, will not affect my ability to do my job well.”

“So, you’re opposed to getting to know me?”

“It’s not really necessary,” she hedged.

“And that’s a no to a drink?”

“Yes, that’s a no,” she said.

“Okay.” He stood and looked down at her before saying, “See you later, Tinker Bell.”

Avery stared after him for several moments. Over the years she'd spent a lot of time by herself but for some reason *alone* was bigger after sharing space with Spencer Stone. Probably because he'd taken up so much of her space and now it was emptier. Plus, she felt a little guilty for speaking her mind, which was weird. The guilt, not the speaking her mind.

Even though he was the same type as her first love, it wasn't fair to cast him in the same mold as the guy who'd gotten her pregnant and then joined the army to avoid her and any responsibility for his child. She wasn't normally a person who judged someone else based on rumors, hearsay and innuendo. But she had a weakness for guys like Spencer Stone and in her experience it didn't end well. Avoiding him altogether was the wisest course of action.

Fixing hearts might be his medical specialty, and by all accounts he was very good at it. But he was also good at breaking them—and she wasn't about to make hers an easy target.

It was a perfect evening for a wedding, but Spencer Stone was incredibly grateful he wasn't the one getting married. He held beating hearts in his hands and performed life and death procedures every day without breaking a sweat but the pressure of committing to another person forever made him want to poke a sharp stick in his eye.

But if Nick was determined to go through with it at least Mother Nature had given him perfect weather. April in Las Vegas was worth tolerating summer months when the temperature was hotter than the face of the sun. In the groom's backyard the air was somewhere in the low seventies. A sky with wisps of clouds was changing from blue to brilliant shades of orange, pink and purple as day faded to twilight. He supposed it was romantic if one was into that sort of thing.

Not his job right now. He was standing in the groom's backyard doing his best man duties. Several years ago he and Nick had met in the doctors' dining room at Mercy Medical Center and hit it off right away. Spencer had missed the first wedding because it had all happened so fast, but he hadn't missed the changes in his friend when the marriage fell apart. As if Spencer hadn't already been overthinking commitment, the negative impact on Nick from that experience really gave Spencer pause.

But now his buddy was tying the knot again with the same woman. And having a baby. It all looked perfect and Spencer envied them. He wasn't brave enough or dumb enough to take the step unless he knew it was the absolute right thing to do. In his life mistakes, both professional and personal, weren't allowed.

Nick stood beside him under a flower-covered arbor that had been set up and decorated for the festivities. Invited guests were talking quietly, waiting for the ceremony to start.

The bride and groom were having a small service—no tuxes, thank God, just dark, tasteful suits. Fifteen or twenty people he recognized from Mercy Medical Center sat in chairs set up on the patio beside the pool. Nick and Ryleigh had no extended family as far as he knew. Unlike himself, Spencer suspected they were blissfully unaware of how a family could complicate events like this in one's life.

“Do you have the rings?” Nick nervously brushed a hand over his dark, wavy hair.

Spencer felt for the jeweler's box in the pocket of his suit slacks. He faked an omigod expression when he asked, “Was I supposed to bring them?”

“Nice try, Stone. Even if you weren't kidding, nothing could rattle me today.”

“Why?” Spencer was curious because he'd be sweating bullets if he was in Nick's shoes.

“Because no matter what happens, regardless of any technical glitches, Ryleigh is going to be my wife. Again.”

“You're not worried that it won't work out?”

“Been there, done that,” Nick said, blue eyes going intense for a moment. “I screwed up letting her walk out of my life once. It won't happen again.”

“How can you be so sure?”

“Hey, aren't you supposed to be keeping me calm? Questions like that could send a nervous groom sprinting for the nearest exit.”

“That’s the thing.” Spencer shook his head in amazement. “You’re rock solid. This is a life-altering move. I’ve seen you in the E.R. working on a kid with constricted airways and struggling for the next breath and you were nothing but nerves of steel. It’s creeping me out that you’re even more cool now. This is huge, man.”

“And it’s right.”

“But how do you *know*?” Spencer insisted.

“I just do. When you know, you know.” Nick gave him a warning look. “Don’t ask.”

Before Spencer could ignore the warning and ask anyway, the sliding glass door into the family room opened and Reverend White, the hospital chaplain, walked outside. He was a fit man, about sixty years old with a full, thick head of gray hair. Warm brown eyes surveyed the gathering.

“Ladies and gentlemen we’re about to begin. If you’ll all please rise to greet the bride.”

As the chaplain moved up the aisle created by the two groups of separated chairs, everyone stood up. Moments later Avery walked out of the house. She was carrying a bouquet of lavender roses that matched the color of her dress. The full, swirly, sexy silky hem stopped at her knees and the high, matching pumps made her legs look a lot longer than he knew they were.

For just a second he’d have sworn his heart actually stopped. Not a comfortable feeling for a cardiothoracic surgeon, or any guy for that matter.

Then Ryleigh, holding a single white rose, appeared behind her maid of honor. In a floor-length flowing strapless gown she looked gorgeous and radiant, just as cool and collected as her groom. Spencer glanced at Nick’s face and knew his friend was going through the heart-stopping sensation. He didn’t even want to know why he knew that.

Avery stopped, took her place across from him, and for just a moment their eyes met. Probably it was just the spirit of the occasion, but for once she didn’t look like she wanted to choke him.

Speaking of necks, hers drew his full attention in a big way. More specifically the see-through lavender material that covered her arms and the expanse of chest just above her small breasts. There were no visible bra straps, which made him far too curious about the lingerie under her dress, or lack thereof. Technically the skin wasn’t bare, but for the life of him he could not understand why that was about the sexiest thing he’d ever seen.

Then Spencer snapped out of it when Nick moved and held his arm out to his bride. Ryleigh slipped her hand into the crook of his elbow, smiling with the same serene certainty her groom had demonstrated. Behind them everyone sat down again.

The reverend opened the book in his hands, then looked out at the guests. “Who gives this woman to be married to this man?”

“I give myself to Nick, freely and with love.”

“I give myself to Ryleigh and our child, freely and with love.” Nick put his palm on her stomach and the intensity of the feelings behind the words was there in his eyes.

Spencer knew the personal and profound promises following this public declaration had been written by Nick and Ryleigh. But it was the look on their faces that struck him. They only had eyes for each other. Then the reverend was asking for the rings, which he handed over, after a wink to his friend.

Nick kissed his bride while the guests cheered and clapped. At this point in the festivities it was time for bride and groom, best man and maid of honor to sign the wedding license and take a few minutes for private congratulations. Spencer held out his arm to escort Avery, who almost hid her hesitation. But she put her hand in the crook of his elbow and they walked into the house.

Spencer Stone was normally attracted to tall women with legs that went on forever. Blond, blue-eyed little bits of nothing who looked out of a fairy tale—even if they didn’t act that way—were not his cup of tea. But there was something about Avery O’Neill that unsettled him, maybe because she’d told him no. But that didn’t explain why the scent of her skin slipped inside him and made his head spin like a centrifuge. At least he hid it better than Avery did her aversion to him.

After the legalities were squared away, the four of them gathered around the coffee table where two silver buckets of ice held a bottle of champagne and apple cider—in deference to the bride’s delicate condition.

She held up her flute with the nonalcoholic drink. “You two are welcome to have something stronger. Nick said if I couldn’t drink champagne he wouldn’t, either.”

He slid his arm around his new bride and pulled her close. “In the spirit of solidarity. We’re pregnant.”

Avery laughed. “You’ll be singing a different tune when her ankles swell up.”

“If I could share that, I would,” he declared, laughter in his eyes.

“Right,” Avery and Spencer said together.

He met her astonished gaze, then cleared his throat. “As best man it’s my honor to make a toast to the happy couple.”

“Please,” Ryleigh said.

“First of all, congratulations. To my friend, Nick, health and happiness.” He clinked his glass to the groom’s. “And Ryleigh. You look happier than I’ve ever seen you and more beautiful. All brides should be pregnant.”

Spencer glanced at Avery and saw a frown in her eyes for just a fraction of a second. So quick he wondered if he’d imagined it. Except he’d been on the receiving end of numerous O’Neill frowns and knew he wasn’t mistaken. She’d looked the same way during the ceremony, when Nick and Ryleigh pledged their love to each other and their child. That wasn’t a frown-worthy moment. Which made it another in a growing list of questions about the mysterious, yet intriguing Miss Avery O’Neill.

“Thank you, Spencer. That was lovely.” Ryleigh picked up the single white rose she’d held during the ceremony and handed it to her maid of honor.

Avery looked surprised as she took the flower. “You’re giving this to me?”

“Yes. It’s simple, beautiful and pure. A symbol of my love for Nick. Traditionally whoever catches the bridal bouquet will be the next to get married, but I didn’t want a bouquet.”

“Good, because I don’t want to get married.” But she held the rose to her nose and breathed in the fragrance.

“This represents nothing more than my hope that you’ll find a love as enduring and perfect as Nick’s and mine.”

“Thank you.” Avery’s voice trembled with emotion just before she leaned over and hugged her friend.

“Okay, Mrs. Damian, now it’s time to mingle with the other guests,” Nick said.

“Lead the way, Dr. Damian.”

Hand in hand the newly weds went outside. Avery started to follow and Spencer stopped her with a hand on her arm.

“Wait a second.”

“Why?”

“I’d like to clear the air while we have a minute.”

“There’s no air to clear.”

“Come on,” he said. “This is me. I know you’re not very good at hiding your feelings. And I mean that as a compliment.”

“Look, Dr. . . . Spencer,” she said. “There’s nothing to say. After today, any personal obligations that we have in common are fulfilled.”

“But there’s still our mutual business trip,” he reminded her.

“Mutual, meaning shared. But that’s not the case with us. You’ll do your thing. I’ll do mine. Our paths may be parallel, but won’t necessarily cross. So, again, no air to clear.”

“So, you don’t want to meet my family?”

“Excuse me?”

“My parents live in Dallas. My sister and her family will be there on vacation at the same time.”

“Is that why you were so—” She stopped for a moment, searching for the right adjective. “So *aggressive* in your pursuit of robotic technology?”

“If I wanted to visit, I’m perfectly capable of doing that on my own. Combining objectives is better time management. My schedule is complicated and it can be a challenge to work in a vacation. Surgery can’t always be put on hold. Emergencies happen. You get my point.”

“I do,” she agreed. “But, I have a budget meeting with the regional VP and you’re seeing family. As I said, we won’t be joined at the hip. So, still no air to clear.”

There was no animosity in her expression, just a matter-of-fact resignation. Usually women *wanted* to cross his path. They went out of their way to stand smack in the center of his path so there was no way on earth he could possibly miss them.

Not this woman.

He couldn’t swear that there wasn’t just a little ego involved in his curiosity to figure out how she rolled, what was going on with her. Why she wasn’t interested.

“Why do you dislike me?”

“I don’t.” Her eyes didn’t quite meet his.

“I’m the first to admit that sometimes my determination can be off-putting—”

“Really? That’s the best description you’ve got?” She smiled, but it was brittle around the edges.

“Okay. My standards are high. I can be a real pain.”

“You’ll get no argument from me.”

“I’m told determination is a good quality.”

“Unless you’re going after something you can’t have,” she said.

He had a feeling they were no longer talking about surgical technology.

“So, you don’t like me.”

“Let’s just say you remind me of someone.”

“And you don’t like him?”

“No, I don’t.” That signature O’Neill frown darkened her eyes again. “Now, if that’s it, I’m going to join the celebration on the patio.”

That wasn’t all, but he didn’t stop her from leaving. Spencer knew he was paying the price for whatever the jerk she didn’t like had done to put the twist in her panties. He would be happy to *untwist* and remove said panties, but it was going to take some effort.

He was nothing if not a high achiever, and determination was his middle name. However long it took, he was going to show her that he was a nice doctor who more than met her criteria for having sex.

Chapter Two

Bright and early Monday morning, Avery walked into her office at Mercy Medical Center where her assistant was waiting. Chloe Castillo was a brown-eyed, curly-haired brunette in her mid-twenties. She was pretty, smart, funny and, right now, quivering with anticipation.

“I want to hear all about the wedding,” she said. “Don’t leave anything out.”

“Good morning to you, too.”

“Yeah, yeah. Blah, blah.” She followed from the outer reception area into Avery’s office and rested a hip on the desk.

“The weather was absolutely perfect. There were just enough clouds to put pink, purple and gold in the sky.”

“You just love torturing me, don’t you?” Chloe sighed. “I guess my questions need to be more specific. How did Ryleigh look?”

“If she weren’t my best friend, I could really dislike that woman. She couldn’t look bad after mud wrestling a pig. But a pregnant bride? In a word? Awesome.” Avery smiled at the memory. “She was completely stunning in a simple, strapless, satin floor-length gown. I thought Nick was going to swallow his tongue when he first saw her. And Spencer said—”

Now she’d done it. Opened a can of worms. The last thing she wanted to talk about was *him*, but she knew that gleam in Chloe’s dark eyes. Fat chance her assistant had missed the slip, let alone allow her to slam that particular door shut. Although in a very committed relationship, she had a notorious crush on the hospital’s exceptional heart surgeon.

“What did Doctor Hottie say?” she prompted. “Spill it, girl.”

Avery sighed. “He said he’d never seen Ryleigh look more beautiful.”

“And?”

“How do you know there’s an ‘and’?”

“I can tell by the way your mouth is all pinchy and tight.” Chloe folded her arms over an impressive bosom. “Your body language couldn’t be more closed if you were wearing a straightjacket.”

The downside of this woman’s intelligence and friendship was that she didn’t miss anything and wasn’t afraid to ask about what you’d left out. Avery met her gaze. “He told her that all brides should be pregnant.”

“Oh. My. God.” Chloe’s expression was rapturous as she made each individual word a complete sentence. “Silver tongue devil. How sweet is that?”

Avery couldn’t agree more, but didn’t allow the envy she felt for her friend to get in the way of wanting more than anything for her to be happy. Spencer’s lovely words had crossed her mind more than once during Ryleigh and Nick’s reception. Avery had been pregnant once and thought she was going to be a bride, but Fate stepped in and said, not so fast.

“Ryleigh ate it up,” she said to her assistant.

“Of course she did. What woman overflowing with estrogen wouldn’t?”

Avery resisted the urge to raise her hand. Spencer Stone definitely had a way with words, but talk was cheap. Actions spoke louder and nothing he’d done had changed her mind about him being a scalpel-wielding, stethoscope-wearing Lothario.

“So ...” She looked at her assistant. “Nick and Ryleigh are married again. Now we have work ___”

Chloe held up a hand. “That pathetically small amount of information didn’t even begin to take the edge off my curiosity.”

That’s what Avery was afraid of. It was too much to hope she’d get off that easily. Chloe wasn’t the only one fascinated with him. Most of the female population at Mercy Medical Center acted like

twits when the heartthrob heart doctor sashayed down the hall. Avery was the only exception as far as she knew, but maybe she was the only one who'd been so profoundly and personally burned in the past by someone she'd trusted.

Someone just like Spencer.

"What else do you want to know?" Her assistant wouldn't give up until all the pertinent facts were out there. It was best to know what facts she considered pertinent and keep the rest to herself.

"Tell me about your dress."

She smiled, cutting through her tension. "It's gorgeous. Lavender with the most feminine skirt that swirled like silk heaven when I walked. The sleeves and bodice are sheer and—"

"What?" Chloe said eagerly.

"Nothing. Just that I found a pair of four-inch heels that matched perfectly."

There was no point in sharing that Spencer had looked her up and down as if he liked what he saw. His gaze had lingered for a while on her chest and there was a shade of curiosity in his expression as he'd studied her. At that moment she'd been dying to know what was going through his mind, then reality reasserted itself and she let the question go. The saying that curiosity killed the cat was a saying for a reason.

"Tell me what the doc was wearing."

"Nick had on a dark suit and—"

"Not that doc. He's spoken for." Chloe rolled her eyes. "The other doc."

"Also a dark suit. Crisp cream-colored dress shirt and matching satin tie."

Chloe fluttered her hand in front of her chest. "Be still my heart."

No kidding. Avery had seen him in scrubs, jeans and slacks with sports shirt. The wedding was the first time she'd ever seen him in a suit and tie. It was memorable, and that was an understatement. If he wasn't so good at what he did, a career in modeling wasn't out of the question. That was a sentiment Avery would take to her grave and now it was time to change the subject.

"Pretty is as pretty does," she said.

"I don't even know what that means."

"Just that it's not smart to judge a book by its cover."

One of Chloe's dark eyebrows lifted questioningly. "You're just full of clichés today. That man is fine and friendly."

"Does your boyfriend know you have a crush on Dr. Stone?"

"Admiring a good-looking man is not cheating. My heart belongs to Sean, but I'm not blind."

"So he doesn't know your secret?"

"No. And speaking of secrets, I want to know how Dr. Stone somehow manages to stay friends with all of his exes."

"You think that's an admirable quality?"

"Yes. You don't?" Chloe shook her head. "Why do you dislike him, Avery?"

"Think about what you just said. *All* his exes being the key phrase. Doesn't the sheer quantity of women give you any pause at all?"

"Not when a man is that charming," Chloe said. "You could take lessons from him."

Spencer had implied as much when he'd asked why she disliked him. That wasn't a detail she chose to share—or the fact that he'd wanted to clear the air between them. What was that about? Or asking her to meet his family in Dallas? And what was the point? She'd all but told him he was barking up the wrong tree. A personal relationship wasn't a prerequisite for working together.

She looked at her assistant. "Charming is as charming does."

"I cannot even believe you said that to me." Chloe sighed dramatically. "How about this? One picture is worth a thousand words. Throw me a bone here. Tell me you've got at least one."

"Okay. Yes, I've got one." Avery pulled her cell phone from her pocket, pushed some buttons until she found a snapshot of the bride, groom, best man and maid of honor. "Knock yourself out."

“What a beautiful couple.” Chloe took the phone and her dark eyes went dreamy just before that damn gleam returned. “You and Dr. Stone aren’t too bad, either.”

“There is no me and Dr. Stone.”

“Uh-huh. This picture tells a different story.”

“What are you talking about?”

Chloe handed back the phone. “It’s all there in living color. The way he’s looking at you. Like he could just eat you up.”

Avery saw what the other woman meant. It was hard to miss the determination Spencer had been peddling, up to and during the wedding festivities. The intensity in his eyes as he looked at her had tingles dancing up her spine and unleashed the always lurking shivers of awareness. The feeling of not being in control unleashed her inner prickliness.

“He might try to take a bite out of me, Chloe, but I’m awfully tough to chew. Better men than him have tried.” She put her phone in her pocket. “Now, we’ve got work to do.”

Chloe tapped her lip. “Speaking of work, I just got a memo from administration authorizing your trip to Dallas with Doctor Hottie.”

“I wish you wouldn’t call him that.” Even though truer words were never spoken.

“Be that as it may, do you want me to make reservations?”

“Yes. But coordinate with Dr. Stone’s office manager on dates, flight arrangements and hotel rooms. Also, my meeting with the Regional Vice President the Friday before we get into the robotics technology on Monday. And before you ask, that was definitely plural on the room thing.”

“Will do, boss. A lot of women would love to be in your high-heeled pumps.”

“Chloe, it’s business.”

“Just saying—”

She pointed to the doorway. “Back to work before we both get in trouble.”

Her assistant saluted and left without another word.

Avery sat down behind her desk and turned on the computer. She knew Chloe was right about a lot of women who’d like to be walking in her shoes, but a lot of women hadn’t been through hell and had their trust stomped out of them. Spencer Stone was just a little too perfect for someone like her, someone who had a secret she didn’t talk about. And there was a good reason.

It was a painful lesson, but she’d learned it well. When everything looks like it’s falling into place, it’s actually falling apart.

Still in his scrubs after an emergency surgery to open up a blocked vessel in a patient’s heart, Spencer Stone took the elevator to Mercy Medical Center’s administration offices located on the second floor. It had been two weeks since the wedding and that was the last time he’d seen Avery O’Neill. The memory of her in that sexy, see-through lavender dress had never been far from his mind and he was looking forward to seeing her again. No matter what she was wearing.

There was a flash of adrenaline as he wondered what she’d say to get his blood pumping this time. How would she surprise him?

When the elevator opened, he stepped out and walked down the carpeted hall. Her door was the third one on the right and he went inside. Her assistant, Chloe Castillo, was on guard duty behind a desk in the reception area. She did a double take when she recognized him.

“Hi, Dr. Stone.”

“Chloe. How are you?”

“Great. Yourself?”

“Never better.” Couldn’t hurt to get the controller’s assistant on his side. “Have you done something different with your hair?”

She automatically touched the dark curls by her cheek. “No. Same as always.”

“And, as always, you’re looking beautiful.”

“Thanks. It’s not true, but very charming of you to say so.”

“I’m a charming guy.”

“Preaching to the choir, Doctor.” With her thumb, she indicated the closed door of the office behind her. “I’m not the one you have to convince.”

“Yeah. I sort of picked up on the fact that I’m not her favorite person.”

“You want my opinion?” she asked.

“Yes.” He needed all the help possible to loosen the purse strings and this woman knew the crabby controller better than him.

Chloe glanced over her shoulder. “All that cool reserve of hers and that abrasive streak she rocks? It’s a layer of self-protection. I think some guy dumped on her pretty badly and she watches her back.”

“Avery said that?”

“Not in so many words.” She shrugged. “I just connected the dots from remarks she’s made in passing.”

“I see.”

Normally, it wouldn’t occur to him to ask for details, but in Avery’s case the thought crossed his mind. Since inquiring wasn’t appropriate, he didn’t. Still, he wanted to know more about the mysterious controller and not just because knowledge could help get her on board with the outrageously expensive equipment he wanted.

“Is she free? Can I talk to her for a few minutes?” he asked instead.

“There’s no one in with her now. Let me check her schedule.” Chloe changed screens on the monitor and looked it over. “No more appointments for today and it’s almost quitting time so there shouldn’t be a problem.”

Her boss probably wouldn’t agree because she didn’t try to hide the fact that every time she saw him was a problem. Now he was determined to change that.

“Thanks.”

“Don’t mention it.” She clicked the computer mouse a couple times and shut down her system. “And it’s time for me to go home.”

“Plans tonight?”

“Yes.” Instantly she smiled.

“Someone special?”

“The best guy in the whole world.”

“He’s a lucky guy,” Spencer said.

“There’s that charm again.” She nodded her head toward the closed door. “You shouldn’t be wasting it on me. You’ll need every ounce of it in there.”

“I’ve got some to spare.”

“I just bet you do.” She grabbed her purse, then said, “I’ll let her know you’re here and say goodbye.”

“How about if I announce myself and let her know you’re gone?”

“That works. ’Night, Dr. Stone.”

“Have a good evening.”

Spencer watched her walk out and, for some vague reason, envied the fact that she wouldn’t be alone tonight. He couldn’t say the same.

With a sigh, he walked past the desk, knocked once on the door then opened it and poked his head inside. “You didn’t get the message that it’s time to go home?”

“What are you doing here?” Avery looked first surprised, then annoyed.

He preferred surprised. “Chloe’s gone for the day. I told her I’d let you know.”

“Okay.” She looked down at the papers on her desk, then back at him when he didn’t leave. “Was there something else?”

“We’re leaving tomorrow for Dallas. I thought we should discuss our trip.”

“Thanks, but it’s not necessary. Between your office manager and Chloe, arrangements have been made and I have all the information.”

Spencer moved farther into the room and invaded her space when he parked a hip on the corner of her desk. Avery’s big blue eyes narrowed in disapproval and it felt like he’d stepped into a Deepfreeze. Oddly enough, the look made her even more intriguing. Sort of like a kitten bracing for battle with a pit bull.

Her short blond hair highlighted her killer cheekbones and a mouth that a stronger man than him would have trouble resisting. That thought exposed how he’d been lying to himself. He’d been so sure time and distance would blunt his reaction to the cute-as-a-button controller, but he’d been wrong. On some level he’d believed not seeing her for the past two weeks would mellow her attitude and his fascination, thereby canceling out any feeling. But apparently he’d been wrong about that, too. It was like a force shield went up whenever she saw him and he wanted to bring it down.

And that’s when he realized what it was about her that sucked him in. It was the challenge of melting the ice cube on her ass. You didn’t grow up the first-born son of Catherine and William Stone and ever consider turning your back on a challenge.

“So, why do you dislike me?” he asked. No point in beating around the bush.

“We’ve been through this,” she said, skillfully not answering the question again.

“And yet, I’m not satisfied.”

During that last conversation the implication had been that he reminded her of someone. If Chloe was right, he brought to mind the guy who’d dumped her.

Avery folded her hands on the desk and didn’t look away. “That’s your problem, not mine.”

“You indicated that our wedding obligation was fulfilled and therefore any reason to play nice was over.”

“You disagree?”

“We’ll be spending a lot of time together over the next couple days,” he answered.

“On business,” she clarified.

“Even so, the trip will be easier if we can be cordial.”

“I’m always friendly.” She looked away for just a second. “Mostly.”

“Here’s the thing, Avery. I know I pushed you hard for this equipment.”

“Yes. Determination you said. And it paid off. You got your way.”

The “aha” light went on. “Are you still annoyed that I went over your head to your boss?”

“Among other things.”

The journey of a thousand miles starts with a single step and he’d worry about “other things” later. “It’s cutting edge technology.”

“No pun intended.”

When the corners of her mouth went up his pulse did, too. “Actually that’s part of the appeal. The robot makes a perfect incision every time.”

“I’m sure you make a perfectly fine incision, Spencer, or your reputation wouldn’t be what it is.”

“I do my best and I’m damn good.”

“Modest, too,” she said, smiling.

“Just stating the facts. But this surgery system brings a level of precision that I can’t duplicate. No human can.”

“So you want to be perfect.”

That wasn’t necessary. Not really. He just didn’t want to make a mistake, professionally and personally. In his family nothing short of excellence was tolerated. That’s how he’d been brought up and why he was the best now at what he did.

“I’d like to know why you’re so dead set against this surgery system. All I want,” he said, “is every advantage available to achieve the best outcome for my patients.”

She nodded approvingly and earning the victory of her good opinion was sweet. And short. “My problem is that what you want is a capital expenditure.”

“Robots don’t come cheap.”

“I’m all too aware of that. But there’s only so much money in the budget. Spending it on what you want means that something else equally as important doesn’t get funded.”

“Such as?”

“Ventilators for babies. Don’t you think it’s vital to give children the best possible start in life?”

“That’s a loaded question.”

“It’s my job to ask the hard ones. Make the tough choices. And I wish there was an unlimited supply of funds, but that’s not how it is.”

“You’re right. And a good start for every child is imperative.” He stood and folded his arms over his chest. “In a perfect world there would be enough money for everything. But hearts are my business. With cardiovascular disease on the rise it’s also important to use the latest innovations to improve and prolong the life of parents so they can use the benefit of their experience and wisdom to guide those children into adulthood.”

She sighed. “It doesn’t hurt that this surgery system is flashy and newsworthy. Not unlike yourself, Doctor.”

“You think I’m newsworthy?” He’d take it if that was the best she could do.

“My boss does. I’m still not convinced it’s the best use of money.”

“And we’ll have several days together to debate the pros and cons.” He put his palms flat on her desk and met her gaze. Her eyes went wide and the pulse at the base of her neck fluttered wildly. It made him pretty happy that he affected her that way. “I think when we get back to Las Vegas you will see the fiscal practicality of this expenditure.”

“It’s going to be an uphill battle,” she informed him.

“And that’s not all.”

“What else could there possibly be?” She leaned back in her chair.

“I intend to change your mind about me while we’re gone.”

“In Dallas.” Her tone put it on a par with having a bad case of the flu.

“Yes.” He pointed his finger at her. “You’ve been warned, Miss O’Neill.”

“Good to know. I’ll see you there.”

“Actually, that’s why I stopped by your office in the first place.”

She frowned. “I don’t understand.”

“We should carpool to the airport tomorrow.” When she opened her mouth to argue, he held up his hand. “We’re on the same flight. Going in the same car will save money on transportation and parking. I thought that would appeal to a budget-conscious lady like yourself.”

For the first time since he’d known her Avery O’Neill was speechless and he used the silence to best advantage.

“I’ll pick you up bright and early in the morning.”

Chapter Three

Under normal circumstances Avery loved going to McCarran International Airport, but nothing about this scenario was normal. For one thing, it involved Spencer Stone and he pushed all her buttons. None of them good. She still wasn't sure how he'd talked her into this carpool. That wasn't exactly true—he'd talked and when he stopped there'd been no room to maneuver. A negative response had been impossible so she'd given him her address.

Now she was waiting for him on the front porch of her small, three-bedroom house in the Green Valley Ranch area of Henderson. She'd bought it new a year and a half ago, a symbol of starting with a clean slate. Moving forward. It was important to leave behind her polluted past and the stigma of a pregnant teen who didn't keep her baby.

Just then a sporty blue BMW pulled up to the curb. Since she didn't know anyone with a luxury car she assumed it was Spencer. That was confirmed when he got out. Oh, boy, was it confirmed, she thought, as he walked toward her up the stone path. In a navy blazer with gold buttons, tan slacks, white shirt and tasseled loafers with his swagger set on stun, he quite literally stole the breath from her lungs. The dark sunglasses added more dazzle to his dashing look.

"You're early," she managed to say.

"And you're ready."

"Yup." There'd been lots of time to make sure of that, what with not sleeping much. And for good reason. There'd been no way to prepare for the fact that he smelled as good as he looked. She was such a sucker for a good-smelling man, but was doing her best to get over it. "Let's go."

He glanced at her small weekend suitcase on wheels with carry-on bag attached, then met her gaze. "Where's the rest of your stuff?"

"That's all there is."

"You do realize we'll be gone several days. Visiting several hospitals in the Dallas Metroplex?"

She nodded. "It's all business meetings. Coordinate right, travel light."

"Sounds like a marketing slogan." The words were teasing, but his expression was puzzled. He lifted his sunglasses and hung them from his jacket pocket. Piercing green eyes grew intense as he studied her. "You're not like other women, are you?"

"I'm not sure whether to be insulted or flattered, but ... why do you say that?"

"It's definitely a compliment. And I say it because, until now, I've never met a woman who could take a trip of this duration with only one small bag."

"Considering the sheer number of your women—"

"My women?" One light brown eyebrow lifted.

"Hospital talk." She shrugged. "There's no way to stop it."

"Ah." He slid his hands into his slacks pockets. "The rumor network at Mercy Medical Center is as intricate as the capillaries, veins and vessels that comprise the body's complex circulatory system."

"News does travel fast." She couldn't help smiling because the comparison he'd made was accurate but leaned toward the brainy geek side. That was contradictory to his playboy image and oddly endearing.

He stared at her. "Wow."

"What?"

"You smiled."

"I do it quite often." She knew where he was going with this.

"Not with me," he said. "When I'm around, your good humor is as rare as rain in Las Vegas."

And for good reason. He was brash, confident and just her type. The type who promised everything she'd always wanted then left without a word.

He glanced at the Rolex on his wrist. "We better go. There could be traffic."

“Okay.” She pushed the handle of her suitcase down and started to lift it but he brushed her fingers aside.

“I’ll get that.” He settled his sunglasses over his eyes, hiding any expression that might be there. “And for the record ... I do date, but the number of women I go out with is greatly exaggerated by the hospital’s rumor network.”

There was no response she could make to that, which was becoming an annoying pattern where he was concerned.

He opened the car door and handed her into the passenger seat. When he was behind the wheel, that sexy masculine smell surrounded her, even more potent than before. It felt like he’d wrapped her in his arms and overwhelmed her senses. Then he fit the key into the ignition and the car glided forward. It was like riding on a cloud.

Avery knew her best defense was to push back this out-of-control feeling with words but so far that hadn’t worked very well with him. Still, conversation was better than awkward silence. So she came up with a topic as innocuous and close to a man’s heart as she could.

“Nice car.”

“Thanks. It’s a terrific machine.” He glanced her way for a second. “And before you get your panties in a twist about boys and their toys, I’m going to again request that you be as objective as possible when we gather information about the surgery system.”

“I will,” she promised.

Whatever flaws Spencer might have personally, as a doctor he was beyond reproach. Objectivity wasn’t plentiful where his personal life was concerned, but without a doubt she knew that saving lives was profoundly important to him.

Avery remembered their conversation in her office less than twenty-four hours ago. They’d both agreed that kids deserve the best start in life. Part of her wasn’t talking about it in a medical way. She was a product of divorce and didn’t see her father after he left. At seventeen she’d gotten pregnant and her baby’s father disappeared. It broke her heart that her mother had refused to give her a home if she kept her infant daughter. Only with time had she gained the wisdom to realize that the baby was better off in a stable home with two parents. Still, a trauma like that left an indelible mark on the soul.

“You’re uncharacteristically quiet.” Spencer’s voice cut through her dark thoughts.

“I hate flying.” She loved the airport but dreaded getting on a plane. “I can’t wait for technology that can beam us where we want to go.”

“It will no doubt be expensive to demolecularize someone, transport them to another location and remolecularize them.” His tone was wry.

“In a perfect world there will be plenty of money.”

Spencer guided the BMW onto the 215 Beltway going west then took the Sunset exit toward McCarran. In minutes there were signs directing them toward Arriving or Departing flights and short- or long-term parking with blue, green and yellow triangles on the roadway. He went to valet, of course, which was the priciest option. So much for his soapbox stand on sticking to a budget and keeping expenses down.

After unloading their luggage, he handed the keys to the attendant and they wheeled the bags into the building and past the classic red Thunderbird on display, a nod to the fact that it was flashier and more fun in Vegas. After passing shops and slot machines, the escalator was on their right and went down to the next floor for check-in. Preferred, of course, where there was no waiting.

Since the two of them were traveling on the same reservation confirmation number, they walked up together. There was a very attractive blonde behind the high counter who was only too happy to help Spencer.

She looked at the computer printout and her smile grew wider. “So, you’re going to Dallas, Dr. Stone?”

“We both are,” he said.

“May I see your ID?”

“Of course.” He handed over his and Avery’s, which got a cursory look, as compared to a long perusal for his.

“Your flight is on time, Doctor, and leaving from Gate D14. If there’s anything I can do to make it more pleasant, please don’t hesitate to let me know.”

“Thank you.”

They followed signs for their gate and Avery said, “Doctor Awesome strikes again.”

“Oh, please,” he scoffed.

Before she could rebut, they joined the line to pass through security. After again presenting IDs and boarding passes, they fell in with people removing shoes, belts and watches as carry-on luggage went on the conveyor belt and into the screening process.

Spencer was waved through the metal detector by a—what else?—female uniformed agent. Naturally, she gave him a big, flirtatious smile as he went through. After gathering up everything, they proceeded to the waiting area and found seats side by side.

Avery looked at him in awe. “Being you must be extraordinarily wonderful.”

His expression oozed amusement. “What are you talking about?”

“Every woman you encounter falls in worship at your feet.”

“Every woman?” he said, giving her a pointed look. “I can think of one notable exception.”

“Does it ever get old?”

“I think you’re exaggerating.”

“You think wrong. Take the TSA lady.” She folded her hands in her lap. “Normally they’re cold, efficient, abrasive even. Not only was she pleasant, the most vigilance she showed was checking out your butt.”

“As flattering as that is—”

“I could see she was wishing you’d opt out of a scan and give her an excuse to pat you down.”

“I didn’t notice.”

“Of course you didn’t. Why should you? It’s probably always like that.”

He grinned. “Was anyone rude to you? I could beat them up.”

“No. But compared to the way you were treated, I could have been the third asterisk at the bottom of security rules and regulations.”

He laughed. “I think you’re making it up.”

“I swear.” She held up her hand in a solemnly sincere gesture. “Does being perfect ever get old?”

“You wouldn’t say that if you knew me better.”

Clearly she’d been teasing him and it was by far one of the most harmless things she’d ever said to him, but all traces of amusement disappeared from his face. The contrast was so obvious and striking that she wondered what nerve she’d stepped on.

Not even her comment about all his women had made him look like that. Was it possible Doctor Heartthrob actually had a heart? Intriguing and, darn it all, the realization made her want to know more.

Spencer sat on the chrome and black faux-leather connected chair beside Avery and waited for their flight. Since her question about whether or not being perfect ever got old, they hadn’t exchanged any words.

His fault.

Apparently this visit to see his family was stirring up a whole pile of psychological crap, although he shouldn’t be surprised. Trips home usually did that, what with the pressure on the Stone kids to achieve. His sister, Becky, had performed every aspect of her life to William and Catherine Stone’s expectations. Her twin, Adam, was a doctor and didn’t care that the folks disapproved of his area of specialization. But Spencer was the firstborn son and hadn’t been cut any slack, couldn’t

get to a place where he was neutral. He still cared deeply whether or not he made a mistake and disappointed them. His reaction to Avery's teasing words proved that.

Just then there was an announcement in the terminal informing everyone waiting for the flight to Dallas that their aircraft would be landing soon. After the passengers deplaned, boarding would begin.

"That's my cue." Avery stood and settled the strap of her purse securely on her shoulder. Then she pulled out the handle of her carry-on to take it with her. "I'm going to the ladies' room."

"I'll watch your bag," he offered.

"That's okay."

"You don't trust me." His eyes narrowed on her, but a smile threatened.

"Not exactly. But I wouldn't put it past you to tell a security guard it was left unattended."

"That would never have crossed my mind," he said. "Thanks for the idea."

"No problem."

He grinned and it felt good. She was a welcome distraction from his dark thoughts. "Seriously, won't it be faster and easier if you don't have to drag it with you? Since I need your cooperation to get my way with the robotic surgery system, would it really be smart to play a practical joke?"

"Now that you mention it ..." She looked thoughtful. "And no one ever said you didn't have a high IQ."

"So it's settled. I'll watch your bag."

She studied him for a moment. "You really don't mind?"

"No."

"Okay. Thanks." She pushed the handle back in and left it beside him.

Spencer studied her as she walked away. No, study was the wrong word. He checked out her butt. Dynamite. The white collar of her silky blouse was neatly folded over the jacket of her black crepe suit. Trim shoulders narrowed to a slim waist and curvy hips covered by the matching skirt. Sheer black pantyhose sheathed her shapely legs and high heels made those legs look longer, sexier. And then he saw it.

Red on the soles of her shoes.

The flash of color was like finding out her secret. A hint that she wasn't as proper as she pretended. That there was a playful and passionate woman beneath that business suit and prim exterior. This was both good news and bad.

The red-soled shoes turned him on in a very big way. But she'd made it clear that trying anything personal was a hanging offense and he really did need her help to convince the powers that be at Mercy Medical Center that what he wanted was a good idea. About ten minutes later, through a break in the airport crowd, he spotted her walking toward him. This time he missed seeing the red-hot soles of her sky-high shoes. But the front view made up for it. Normally he liked a woman's hair long, falling past her shoulders, because running his fingers through it was about the most erotic thing in the world.

But Avery was different. The pixie haircut suited her delicate features and highlighted the slightly tilted shape of her big eyes. And sexy? He could imagine himself cupping that small face in his hands while kissing her until she begged for more. As far as the sexy scale went, that visual buried the needle in the hot zone.

"Hi." She stood in front of him and glanced at the flight information displayed at their gate. "Looks like our plane is here. People are getting off."

Her tone said she'd rather they stay on and go somewhere else so she wouldn't have to.

Spencer stood and looked down at her. "Flying is absolutely the safest way to travel."

"So I've heard."

"But you don't believe it." That wasn't a question.

"I much prefer my feet firmly on the ground, thank you very much."

"Imagine that," he said. "A controller who's a control freak."

“Not with everything.”

Uh-huh, he thought. “Just money and transportation.”

“Possibly a few other things.”

“Well, I appreciate that you stepped out of your comfort zone to come along,” he said.

“Like I had a choice.”

“You did.”

She shook her head. “When my boss got involved there really weren’t a lot of options. Saying no without a better excuse than aversion to being in a flimsy long white tube that climbs to over thirty thousand feet and hurtles through the sky at over five hundred miles an hour could be a career ender.”

“There’s my brave little soldier,” he said.

When she met his gaze, her expression was wry. “If that’s the bedside manner your patients get, you should know it could use work.”

“I can do better.”

Her eyes widened slightly. “Is that a threat?”

“No. A promise.”

Before she could question that further, a voice came over the loudspeaker and said that they were ready to start boarding the flight to Dallas. Anyone needing assistance or flying with small children should step forward. A few minutes later first class passengers were called.

“That’s us,” he said.

She grabbed the handle of her rolling carry-on and fell into step with him. “How did you pull that off? Getting the hospital to cough up a more expensive ticket.”

“I like more leg room. I can afford it. I paid the difference between first class and coach.”

“Then I’ll wait until they announce boarding for the peasants,” she said.

“Not necessary. We’re sitting together.”

“But I didn’t pay—”

“Don’t worry about it. All taken care of.” He carried his briefcase in one hand, then curved his other around her arm and urged her to the opening where the Jetway waited. The airline employee took and scanned their boarding passes and wished them a good flight.

“Fat chance,” she mumbled.

Their seats were in the third row—hers by the window, his on the aisle. He set his briefcase down, then took her bag and stashed it in the overhead bin.

“Thanks,” she said.

“No problem.”

He stepped back so she could precede him into the row, where she sat and immediately secured her lap belt. He slid into the seat beside her and watched her face as all the color disappeared. Anxiety turned her eyes darker blue and her leg moved as her heel tapped a nervous staccato. He wanted to put his fingers on her knee. Partly because he just wanted very much to touch her there, but mostly to soothe the nerves. He was fine with breaching the line between personal and professional to distract her, but was ninety-nine point nine percent sure Avery would have a problem with it.

“So, you’re pretty nervous.”

“What gave me away?” At least she was trying to joke.

“Mostly that woodpecker imitation you’re doing with the heel of your shoe.”

Her leg stopped. “Now you know I didn’t lie. Love the airport, don’t like getting on a plane. I hate flying and officially, I hate you for making me do it.”

“Maybe I can help.”

“You’re going without me?” she asked hopefully.

“No. But I’ll let you ask me anything you want.”

“Professional?”

“Or personal. Nothing is off-limits.”

A gleam stole into her eyes. “That could be more dangerous than a cruising altitude of thirty-nine thousand feet.”

“Maybe.” He rested his elbows on the arms of the seats then linked his fingers. “So, hit me.”

The bustle of passengers boarding had subsided and the flight attendants secured the cabin, then closed the door to the Jetway. As the plane started to move slowly backward, the aircraft safety precautions were reviewed.

Avery gripped the armrests and her knuckles turned as white as her face. When he took her left hand and held it, his only motivation was to make her feel safe. He should feel guilty about taking advantage of the opportunity to touch her, but he couldn’t manage it.

“I’m serious, Tinker Bell. Ask me anything.”

She looked at him and said, “Okay. Did you decide to become a doctor to help people?”

“Of course not. I did it for the women and sex,” he answered without missing a beat.

She laughed as he’d hoped. “So you didn’t choose the profession because all arrogant jerks become doctors?”

“I didn’t really have a choice.”

“How so?” She looked interested instead of anxious.

“My parents are the walking, talking, breathing definition of high achievers. In their eyes I fall short on an annoyingly regular basis.”

“You’re joking.”

“Swear.” He held up his hand just as the pilot announced they’d been cleared for takeoff.

“But you’re a famous and in-demand gifted cardiothoracic surgeon.”

“Tell me about it.” He felt the plane make a turn, then pick up speed.

“What the heck could your mother or father possibly do that’s more prestigious than that?”

“Dad is a Nobel Prize winning economist. Mom is a biomedical engineer whose work has revolutionized diagnostic equipment that helps people all over the world. My younger sister, Becky, is a rocket scientist and works for NASA.”

“Good grief.” Her voice raised to be heard over the whine and noise of the jet engines.

“Actually, in the Stone family, I’m something of a slacker. Only my brother, Adam, takes more heat than me about his career.”

“What does he do?”

“Doctor,” Spencer informed her.

“Of course he is.”

“Family practice. But the folks don’t see that as living up to his potential.”

“And you seriously want me to meet them? They probably won’t let me in the house and if they do, I’ll be politely asked not to touch anything.”

“No way,” he scoffed. “They’re really great people.”

“Who set a very high bar.”

“And speaking of high ...” He looked across her and out the airplane window. “We’re in the air and picking up altitude. The flight attendants are moving about the cabin and preparing for in-flight service. I draw your attention to this because we’ve successfully taken off and you have yet to freak out.”

“You’re right.” She laughed. “Now you can add ‘distracting fearful flyers’ to your impressive resume and list of accomplishments.”

“When are you going to admit I’m a nice man who happens to be a doctor?”

The look on her face told him she remembered her words that day in Ryleigh’s office.

If I ever meet a nice doctor, I’d have sex with him at that moment.

A red-hot memory of the scarlet soles of her sky-high shoes made him even more acutely aware of how much he hoped that she’d sincerely meant those words.

Chapter Four

Avery was amazed that she forgot to be afraid at a cruising altitude of twenty-nine thousand feet. The flight to Texas took just under three hours and she chatted the whole way with Spencer. Who'd have thought such a thing was possible?

Spencer was so charming and funny and interesting that when she remembered her feet were not on the ground, it had very little to do with the fact that she was in an airplane and a whole lot to do with her traveling companion.

As if that weren't bad enough, he was also a gentleman. He'd put her carry-on bag up and he took it down. Then he carried it off the plane. She wasn't used to this kind of treatment from a man, which kind of made sense since she pretty much avoided men. But for the next few days she couldn't avoid this one, not completely. At least she'd have her own space at the hotel. After checking in she'd spend the afternoon preparing for her meeting with the regional VP of the Mercy Medical Corporation.

Spencer walked up the Jetway beside her. "Have you ever been to Texas before?"

"No."

"I'll have to show you the sights."

"That's okay. There probably won't be time." Not if she was lucky.

For the first time, keeping her distance from Spencer Stone didn't come easily. Apparently he'd weakened her emotional defense system as easily as he'd managed her fear of flying.

They exited the Jetway and walked through the waiting area at the gate, then followed the signs to baggage claim. There was a revolving door and after negotiating it, the next step was to find the carousel that corresponded to their flight number. That didn't take long, but the little elves who unloaded the luggage from the plane took their sweet time. Finally, the warning buzzer and light signaled that the conveyor belt was starting up and spit out suitcases, backpacks and boxes.

Spencer grabbed her bag and before she could process the fact that he'd recognized it, he snagged his own.

"We have to catch the shuttle for the rental car lot," he said.

"Is it that far?"

He laughed ruefully. "Like everything else in the Lone Star state, DFW airport is big. There's a centrally located rental car facility about ten minutes away, not counting stops at the other four terminals to pick up passengers."

"Okay, then." She connected her carry-on bag to the bigger suitcase, leaving just one handle to pull. "I'll follow you."

They went down the escalator to the first floor where ground transportation was located. Their shuttle was waiting, which was lucky. As it turned out, that was all the luck she got for the rest of the day. She turned on her cell phone and listened to a message from Chloe. Her Friday meeting had been canceled.

When they were settled the van moved forward, out into the sunlight, as it negotiated the curving and intricate roads onto the main highway. That's when Avery could see the airport and signs directing cars to terminals A, B, C, D and E.

She could only see out one side of the vehicle, but it was enough to get an impression. "Texas is really flat."

"Around here," he agreed. "There are hilly parts that we natives call—wait for it—Hill Country."

"No way," she teased. "How original. Must be named by a man."

"Are you saying that men have no imagination?"

"Yes. And a distinct lack of poetry. They just name it what it is."

“And that’s bad—why?” he asked. “There’s nothing wrong with straightforward.”

She couldn’t argue with that. The problem was that in her experience men weren’t always up front and honest, her first lesson being when she was a pregnant seventeen-year-old. It was a good thing she didn’t have to meet Spencer’s folks. Apparently they had no tolerance for flaws and she had too many to count. One look at her and she’d be outted as unworthy.

“What’s wrong?” Spencer’s deep voice snapped her to attention.

“Nothing.” She had to figure out what she was doing tomorrow. “I’m just trying to take it all in.”

“Don’t bother. There’s not much to see until we get out of the airport.”

She nodded and just watched buildings go by. There were planes parked here and there, which indicated maintenance facilities. Then the shuttle exited the highway, turned left and followed the road for a few miles where it pulled into a lot. After grabbing their luggage, they walked into the air-conditioned building and found a spot in the line that formed.

“Since the reservation’s in my name,” Spencer said, “I can handle the paperwork.”

“Okay. I’ll keep an eye on your bag.”

She stood out of the way and watched him work his way closer to the counter. More than one woman did a double-take after noticing tall, handsome, hunky Spencer Stone. So, the women in Texas weren’t immune to his charisma any more than the females in Las Vegas. It wasn’t a comforting thought. He had the trifecta of temptation—above average good looks, charm and sense of humor.

After a brief exchange with a rental car representative, he was lacking the last of the three. The expression on his face as he walked toward her was distinctly annoyed, if not downright angry.

“What’s wrong?” she asked.

“The reservation’s screwed up. They’re not expecting us until Sunday.”

“But today is Thursday.”

“That’s what I said,” he told her grimly. “It’s not like Laura to make a mistake like this.”

“Is that your office manager?” Stupid question, but she wasn’t at her best when thrown a curve.

He nodded. “She’s been a little distracted lately. A rebellious teenager and she’s a single mom. Personal problems.”

And now they had problems. “Can we take a taxi to the hotel?”

“Not necessary. There was a car available. I just wanted to fill you in.”

She nodded. What was there to say? Then something occurred to her. “Laura made all the arrangements, right?”

“Yeah.”

“Maybe I should check on the hotel. If one date was wrong that might be, too.”

“Good idea.”

After he walked back to the counter, Avery pulled the file with paperwork from her carry-on bag, then used her cell phone to make the call to the number listed. Her stomach dropped when the worst was confirmed. They were in Texas three days before the hotel expected them and had nowhere to stay.

When Spencer returned with car keys in hand she broke the news. “The hotel has us coming in on Sunday, too.”

“So, did you tell them we’re here now?”

“Yes. And, we’ve got a problem.”

“Oh, good. Another one.”

“There’s a convention in town and no rooms available,” she informed him.

“Great.” He rested his hands on lean hips.

“We need to find another hotel. Maybe we can ask the car rental agent for a recommendation. I can make some calls and find rooms.”

“No.” He shook his head. “I’ve got a better idea.”

“Better than a room?” She didn’t like the sound of that. “I hope you’re not planning to pitch a tent somewhere. If so, you should know that I’ve become pretty attached to things like beds, running water and that lovely little thing called electricity.”

“Not to worry.”

A gleam stole into his eyes and his mouth curved into a mischievous smile that snarled her senses and stole her breath. That reaction gave her a really bad feeling about his better idea.

“Worrying is what I do best,” she said.

“The place I have in mind has beds, indoor plumbing and juice for your blow dryer.”

“What do you have in mind?” she asked warily.

“My family will put us up.”

His parents? The people who set such a high bar that being a doctor wasn’t good enough?

“I couldn’t possibly impose on them,” she said quickly. “But you go ahead. I’ll find a room somewhere. It will be fine.”

“You won’t be imposing. They’d love it.”

“You can’t just drop in and bring a friend.” A Nobel Prize winning economist and biomedical engineer didn’t sound like your average go-with-the-flow couple. “It’s too much trouble. They’d have to make room—”

“My parents’ house is like Buckingham Palace.”

“Really?” The comparison to royalty did nothing to anesthetize her nerves.

“Not quite the palace, but it’s got more square footage than they know what do with.”

“Spencer, I can’t.”

“Sure you can. Live dangerously.”

“That’s not my style.” Not anymore. The one time she’d done that her life had fallen apart.

“Then your style needs to loosen up.”

“I like my style just fine, thank you very much. Fending for myself isn’t a problem. We don’t have to be joined at the hip. I’ve got your number.”

And how. This was probably a blessing in disguise. Alternative housing would give her even more distance and that would be a good thing after he’d been so nice to her on the plane.

“Really, you go see your family,” she urged him.

“Not without you. Come on.” He curved his fingers around her upper arm and tugged her along.

Her head was spinning. That was the only reason she didn’t put up more protest. So, not only was she going to meet the overachievers, she’d be staying with them.

Wouldn’t that be fun?

About as much as a root canal without pain meds.

Spencer loved his folks, but visits were always a challenge. He was a nationally respected cardiothoracic surgeon, for God’s sake, but all it took was walking through the front door of their house and he instantly became the boy he’d once been, always trying to prove himself. The child who worked so hard to be as good as they were and more. The kid who brought home flawless report cards and heard nothing unless one was less than perfect. Silent disappointment was the worst.

He pulled the rented Mercedes to a stop in front of the impressive brick house. This suburb of Dallas was home to a former president, chief executives of global companies worth billions, and Catherine and William Stone.

Without saying a word, Avery gaped at the sprawling, red brick structure with a portico supported by four white columns. The estate was set back from the street by a large, perfectly landscaped yard. When she looked back at him he saw that her jaw dropped and her mouth was open but no words came out.

“It’s not often you’re speechless.” He rested his wrist on the steering wheel of the sporty car.

“It’s not often a girl like me gets to see a house like this.” She glanced at him, then turned back and stared some more. “I’m waiting for the riffraff police to show up and escort me back to the poor side of town.”

“There’s the bright, shiny optimist I’ve come to know.”

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