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Home to the Doctor

MARY ANNE WILSON

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Mary Wilson

Home To The Doctor

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Covering for her father while he takes a much-needed vacation, Dr. Morgan Kelly thinks she's ready for anything—until she has to play nursemaid to Ethan Grace. Even though the handsome developer looks relatively harmless with a broken leg, he still acts too much like Bartholomew Grace, the infamous pirate in his family tree. But even before Morgan discovers he's bulldozing Shelter Island's only medical clinic—and her home—to build a luxury bed-and-breakfast, it's too late. She's already fallen for the hard-nosed millionaire. Now her job is to show him why, when there's a choice between business and happiness, business should never come first!

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Home to the Doctor

Mary Anne Wilson



For everyone who dreams of going home...
and realizes that dream

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Chapter One

As a doctor, Morgan Kelly was more than familiar with the male body and couldn't really remember the last time she'd looked at a man as anything other than a patient or a curiosity. But as she walked alone on the hard sand of the beach on Shelter Island in Puget Sound and lifted her face into the cold December air, she stopped in her tracks. A naked man was standing thirty feet above her.

At least she thought he was naked. He was on the decking of a guest house on an exclusive estate, and the wooden railing hit him just below his waist. From the distance and in the rapidly failing light of the day, she couldn't make out his features enough to know if she recognized him or not, but she definitely could tell his stomach, chest, broad shoulders and strong arms were bare. The temperature had to be in the fifties, but he didn't seem to notice at all. It was as if the bitter wind blowing over the choppy, dark waters of the sound didn't exist.

He stared out across the sound to the mainland of Washington State before he glanced north, then south. For a fleeting moment she was certain as his gaze came toward her, that he saw her, a lone figure, all five feet three inches of her in her faded college sweatshirt, jeans and heavy boots, her flame-red hair pulled into a ponytail. But he didn't react to her presence if he did. Instead he looked back across the waters playing around her boots.

He cupped his hands at his eyes, and she thought she saw a dark mark on his left shoulder, then thunder sounded and she looked away to the heavy gray of the sky above. A few centuries ago, the noise would have been the roar of a cannon that famed pirate Bartholomew Grace would have fired at his enemies who dared to disturb the peace of his Shelter Island refuge. The original owner of most of the island, old Bartholomew had come here every fall, staying until spring, either to celebrate his victories if he'd had a successful campaign in the south, or to recoup from his losses if fate had turned against him on the high seas.

But this wasn't where Bartholomew would have been scanning the horizon; he would have been in one of the turrets of the main house. She'd only seen the house from her father's boat when they'd been on the sound, and from a distance it looked for all the world like a castle. Its multiple turrets towering in the air, the home was built out of rock, stone and dark wood. This stranger had to be staying in the guest house she'd been told was on the property.

Instead of pirates occupying the house and land now, Bartholomew's descendants, Anthony and Celia Grace, did, along with their only child, Ethan. They'd lived on the island for as long as Morgan could remember. But since she'd left ten years ago, things had changed. She'd heard that Ethan's parents had taken off to Europe about five years ago and had been back only once or twice. Their son seemed to have inherited the estate, but he returned sporadically, too. The thought that he was the man at the railing came and went; Ethan Grace wouldn't be staying in the guest house.

Most of the year he lived on the mainland and, depending on who you asked among the locals, that meant Seattle, or Los Angeles, or San Francisco or New York. Maybe he had residences in all those places; he certainly had the finances to live wherever he wanted. He'd taken over as head of the corporation his grandfather, then his father, had run, and according to her own father, that company "ate up and spit out everything in its path." He'd made a comment about the pirate's occupation being revisited on his descendants, and that Ethan used money and the law as his weapons while Bartholomew had used gunpowder and swords.

She'd walked these beaches all of her life before she'd left for college, but this was her first exploration since her father had asked her to come home. She'd arrived a week ago and loved to be finally doing what she called "beach wandering." She paid no attention to the Private Beach signs she'd passed before seeing the man. Maybe he was an early arrival for the big wedding reception Ethan was giving for his friend Joe Lawrence, another islander who had come back about six months ago.

There was a lot of gossip from her father's patients and the people she knew in town about Joe's wedding to Alegra Reynolds, the founder of the Alegra's Closet boutiques. They'd marry privately, then have their reception at the Grace estate. Some of the locals had been sent invitations, but Morgan wasn't among them. No reason she would be; neither Joe Lawrence, nor Ethan Grace had been in her circle of friends in the old days.

There was a flash of lightning in the east, then more thunder rolled across the heavens, shaking the air around her. She looked up and down the beach, then decided to head back. She stepped toward the water and couldn't resist looking up again. The man was still there despite the growing cold that was cutting through her sweatshirt and his decided lack of clothes.

She exhaled, unaware until then that she'd been holding her breath, then she turned to the water. She was reluctant to go back to the office and check the phone service. She had her cell phone in her pocket, but even so, she felt the weight of the responsibility of being the only doctor on the island at the moment. Her father was on his first vacation in years—one unplanned when a good friend had invited him to visit—and she'd agreed to come back and take over his practice until he returned. Simple, right? But it was anything but simple.

She watched the lights on the mainland flashing to life through the gathering mists of dusk, and could smell the hint of rain in the air. She liked rain. She liked the moods of the island. Maybe the weather wouldn't be good for the upcoming reception, but it would be good for her. Even the rich Graces couldn't control the weather, especially on Shelter Island.

She finally turned to walk back up the beach, deciding to go directly to the office. But she had only taken a few steps when she was startled by a loud crash that had nothing to do with the impending storm, but it did come from above her. A deep male voice yelled at the same time, and although she couldn't quite make out the words, she had no doubt from the tone, that that might be for the best. She turned and moved closer to the water so she could get a better angle to look up at the decking.

She stared hard, trying to make out any movement, but all she could see were lights that were on in the house now. She turned to leave, but as soon as she took a step, another crash came from the house. It sounded like glass breaking this time, along with something heavy hitting an unforgiving surface. But this time, there was no yelling, just the low sound of foghorns over the water and the cry of a night bird in the air.

She could have kept walking, and would have if she hadn't finally heard someone scream in anger or pain or both. That drove her to change all her plans. She looked around and spotted a series of broad steps that led to the top of the bluffs defined by lights so dim they were little more than a blur. Jogging over to the well-fashioned stairs in the rock wall, she grabbed the cold damp metal railing that ran up one side.

She climbed as quickly as she could, not at all sure what she'd find at the top, but images of a naked man lying prone on the deck, bloodied and in pain, flashed in her mind. She'd look to make sure everything was all right, then she'd leave. Being a doctor, she'd learned that you offered help first and worried later about the details. The worst that could happen was that some burly bodyguard would "usher" her off of the estate.

She stepped out at the top onto an expanse of deep emerald grass, dotted by thick ferns hugging the ground and wind-twisted pines along with madrone trees. The main house, which was two hundred feet back from the bluffs and beyond a stone terrace, loomed high into the dusky sky, looking like some monstrous castle as it had from the waters. Light through the multipaned windows was concentrated in the central area, creating a series of glowing strips. Heavy drapes that covered French doors were partially pushed aside. In the low light, the structure looked foreboding and unsettling. It didn't look like home sweet home at all.

To her left and fifty yards or so along the bluff's edge, Morgan saw the guest house that overlooked the beach. At least that bit of structure wasn't hidden behind trees, shrubs and ferns. She spotted a portion of the deck to the left and a stone walkway that cut a meandering path through the

ankle-deep grass and separated to go to the back toward the deck and to the front of the house. She hurried along the path, avoiding the low limbs of old trees, and hesitated at the fork, finally choosing the direction of the deck.

She took two wooden steps up onto the deck that seemed to shoot right out into the air, with no visible signs of the heavy supports she knew were below it. Interior light spilled out of a pair of open French doors, and showed at least one reason for the crashes she'd heard. What had been a huge potted plant moments ago was now a heap of broken pottery, scattered soil and a huge, thick-leaved tree of some sort lying askew. She crossed to the mess, and carefully picked her way around the pottery shards, to get to the open doors.

She grabbed the door frame and almost stepped in, but stopped when she saw the second cause of the noise—a heavy leather chair had been upended along with a small side table. A lamp that had probably been some sort of Tiffany antique was shattered beyond hope of restoration. Broken pieces of bright glass scattered in a wide arc on the polished wooden floor.

She looked into an expansive room with polished wood floors, furniture in supple leather and dark woods arranged in front of a stone fireplace to the left, and more antique furniture set to get the most of the view of the sound. Paintings on the rough plaster walls were either great prints or the originals. She'd bet on them being originals.

She carefully stepped past the chair and to one side of the broken glass, then called out “Hello?” before noticing traces of dirt smeared on the floor as if something had been dragged through both messes. Whatever had done the damage had been heading to steps that led up to a set of partially ajar doors. She touched the closest door and it swung back silently.

“Hello?” she called again, and was slightly surprised when she heard a muffled response from a deep male voice.

“In here.”

She took the steps in one stride and found herself in a huge bedroom space. She barely noticed the heavy antique furnishings or the fact that the area was a true suite, with open rooms off both sides and a circular staircase near the middle of the room that led upward to another level.

All she really saw was the man from the porch sitting on the dark, polished wooden floor at the foot of a bed that would have been appropriate for Bartholomew Grace's boudoir. It was huge, made of dark, intricately carved wood, with heavy drapes at all four posts and a mattress that sat a good three feet off the floor. She focused on the man slumped against the side of the bed, the partial cast on his left leg and his skin, which was sleek with sweat despite the definite chill in the room. His eyes were closed tightly, and his face looked oddly flushed and pale at the same time. She knew that look—he was in real pain.

She hurried over to him, crouched and automatically took in his rapid breathing, his clenched jaw and erratic pulse. At some point she realized he wasn't actually naked but wore a pair of khaki shorts. He also wasn't just anyone. He was Ethan Grace.

“What's going on?” she asked, knowing that he'd been aware of her presence when he didn't flinch at the sound of her voice or even open his eyes.

“Get my medication. It's in the bathroom.” He rasped out the order.

She didn't take any offense at the rude demand; pain changed everything. “Of course,” she said, “but first, let me get you up off the floor.”

She scooted closer and reached out to him. She might only weigh a hundred and ten pounds at the most, but she was used to lifting patients twice her size. She'd guessed he was around a hundred and ninety pounds, maybe six feet two or three inches tall. She hadn't seen Ethan Grace for years, but she had no doubt she was helping the man who owned all of this. And that man didn't have a smudge on his upper arm but a tattoo, which surprised her as she looked at the four-inch-long dagger with a snake twined around it. Beneath it was the script “Do It.”

When she touched the tattoo, he jerked at the contact and his eyes flew open. Deep brown eyes, almost black. He looked confused, then said in a tight voice, “What in the hell?”

His dark brown hair was clinging damply to his flushed face that seemed all sharp angles and his jaw was shadowed by the beginnings of a new beard. He looked strong and capable, but she knew that even the strongest man couldn’t help himself when pain took over. She tried to be reassuring as she said, “Okay, we can do this,” while carefully straddling his legs and attempting to push her hands under his arms.

His skin was hot to the touch. No wonder he had the doors wide-open. She needed to get him in bed, then find the medication he mentioned.

“Mr. Grace, I’m going to get you up and onto the bed.” She braced herself, took a deep breath and pushed as hard as she could with her legs. But nothing worked.

Even with his dead weight, she could have lifted him, but he barely moved up before his momentum pulled her back and toward him. She felt her feet slip on the hardwood floor, and in that moment, she knew that she was going to fall onto him.

Deliberately she let go of him and threw herself to her right as far as she could so her legs wouldn’t make more contact with him than they already were. She tumbled to the floor, hitting her shoulder hard, but as she landed she knew that she’d managed to keep off of his legs.

She twisted to look at him, saw those black eyes on her. She was sitting on the floor by Ethan Grace, in a guest house and trying to figure out how to get him into bed.

ETHAN WASN’T SURE what the hell was going on. It seemed that there was a woman with him, a stranger, almost sitting on top of him and calling him Mr. Grace. This small redhead wasn’t Natalie. No, Natalie was in L.A. on a case. Or maybe she was in Europe. He couldn’t remember. And Natalie never would have worn a sweatshirt and jeans and certainly wouldn’t have called him Mr. Grace. His mind was so damn foggy from the pain. Then the woman was pulling him, making pain shoot up his leg, making him almost nauseated.

She was suddenly gone as if she’d fallen off the edge of his world, and he was back on the floor surrounded by the throb of bone-deep pain. No, she was still there, close by, talking in a breathless voice. “I’d say that didn’t go well.”

What hadn’t gone well? He frowned, then she was in front of him again, crouching over him, her hand on his forehead, her fingers pressed to the hollow of his throat. “You have to get into the bed,” she was saying. “And you have to help me.”

Forget the bed. “Who are you?” he muttered, each word causing him more agony.

“I’m a doctor,” she said.

He closed his eyes tightly, trying to control his pain, as well as blot out the weirdness of what was going on in front of him. He had to be hallucinating. A doctor? With flaming-red hair? A doctor in some sort of sweat outfit? A doctor who’d been trying to sit in his lap? Ethan forced himself to open his eyes again and focus. “How?” he said, intending to ask her how she got here.

But she said, “Tons of medical school and hard work.” He couldn’t have smiled to save his life. “Now, you have to help me get you into bed.”

Sure, and he could fly if he jumped off the deck, he thought. He couldn’t move, let alone get onto the bed. If he even tried to sit straight, the pain increased. “No, I…”

She was standing over him again, and he tried to focus on her, but his vision was blurry and the world had a halo of gray around everything. “I’ll help you, but you have to help me,” she said, and her hands were on him again, at his chest, slipping under his arms. “Push as much as you can and try to lean toward me.” He realized her cheek was against his, and her mouth was by his ear. “All right?”

Before he could agree or disagree, she was actually lifting him up. He was amazed that this tiny person who was supposed to be a doctor managed to get him into the cool linens of the bed. Pain burned through him when he hit the sheets, but the next instant, it eased and he found he could

actually breathe. Was he doing it all himself, or imagining the doctor was doing it for him? Had he hallucinated the whole thing? Catching his cast on the plant, the fall, then trying to get inside, another fall, then this woman sitting in his lap?

“It’s okay,” she whispered from somewhere above him, but he couldn’t even muster the strength to open his eyes for a moment. “It’s okay.”

His good leg was being raised onto the bed, then his broken leg was miraculously positioned on the bed, too. The pain was circling him now but no longer cutting in to him. He kept breathing as evenly as he possibly could. He didn’t move until he felt a hand on his forehead, a soft touch that was gone quickly. “Where’s your medication?” she asked him.

Without opening his eyes, he muttered, “Bathroom.”

He could sense the emptiness where she’d been or where he’d imagined she’d been when she left. Just when he thought he’d lost it, that there was no one here but him, the red-haired doctor was back. She slipped a hand under his neck and shoulders, helped him up a bit, then said, “Open your mouth, Mr. Grace.”

“Ethan,” he mumbled right before he did as he was told and felt two pills fall onto his tongue. Then the coolness of a glass rim was against his lips and cold water slipped down his throat.

She lowered him gently onto the bed, and in a moment, she was speaking to him. “Put your arms around my neck. Hold on and let me maneuver you up and back so I can adjust your leg.”

When he opened his eyes, the blurred image was breathtaking. Brilliant hair, blue eyes, hands on his shoulder, her breath brushing his clammy skin. Put his arms around her? He didn’t hesitate. He slipped his hands onto her shoulders and behind her neck. He felt her hair brush his bare skin as she shifted, practically hugging him to her with one arm.

He heard her whispering over and over again, “Just a bit farther, just a bit, just a bit.” He felt his hands start to slip, and he tried to get a new grip on her, but it didn’t work. His hands balled up her sweatshirt, and she was falling toward him, the way he’d thought she had on the floor. But this time she didn’t just disappear to one side; she landed on his stomach and chest. The scent of flowers seemed to be everywhere, and the weight of her on him wasn’t painful at all.

If it all was a hallucination, it was one hell of a hallucination, he thought. She slipped away from him again. He didn’t have the strength to reach out for her this time. It was all he could do to open his eyes and look up to find her bending over him. “The pills should work quickly,” she said in a soft voice that seemed to drift around him.

“Where...” He licked his lips. “Where did you come from?”

“The beach. I was walking.” The words echoed in the room as if bouncing back off the fog that was creeping into his line of vision. “I heard the crashes and thought you needed help.”

Help? That fog was creeping closer and closer, the way it had off the sound so many times. But he was in the guest house. And there was a woman with him. Not Natalie. Standing over him, with the gentlest voice and touch.

He closed his eyes again when it became too hard to keep them open. “I fell,” was all he could get past his lips.

“I heard,” she murmured as her hand touched his forehead, smoothed back his hair. “Can I call someone?” Her voice seemed farther away and muffled now.

“No,” he said. “No.” He settled deeper into the grayness. “Just need sleep.”

There was no voice now, and he had that same feeling that he’d had before, that empty sensation when he knew he really was alone. Whatever had happened, it was done. Whatever he’d dreamed or hallucinated was gone. The woman, whoever she was or hadn’t been, wasn’t there, and he fell into a sleep that came in a rush of relief from the pain.

Chapter Two

Ethan woke slowly and did what he had done every morning since his accident—he kept his eyes closed, measuring the pain to test the levels of discomfort he’d be facing that day. This time he felt a dull throb that ran the length of his injured leg, from his foot to his hip, but it was bearable. Then he remembered the fall and the aftermath. He opened his eyes to glance around the bedroom in the guest house, where he’d moved to from his suite in the main building basically to avoid the confusion of the preparations for Joey’s wedding reception.

He’d been tired of the chaos everywhere, and had yet to understand why so many people were needed to pull off a party that would last for two or three hours tops, two weeks from now. He’d do anything for Joe, but enduring the insanity all around him while he was healing and trying to work hadn’t been possible. So he’d taken over the guest house on the bluffs.

And regretted ever driving himself in the Jaguar. He should have waited for James Evans, his assistant and friend for the past ten years, to come back from a late-day appointment. Then Ethan wouldn’t have been outside his corporate building when a car swerved to miss a pedestrian and broadsided him as he’d pulled out of the underground parking and onto the street. The speed hadn’t been great and the Jaguar had been heavy enough to take the impact, but if he hadn’t gotten out right away to check the damage, he wouldn’t have gotten pinned between the two cars. The other driver had jumped out of his car and forgotten to put it in Park. Before Ethan knew what was happening, he had a broken leg.

“You’re pretty lucky to get out of it with a simple fracture,” his doctor had told him. When Ethan had challenged Doctor Maury Perry’s definition of lucky, the man who had been his physician for over ten years had shrugged philosophically. “You’re alive, it’s a clean break and you won’t be off your feet too long. You’re damn lucky, Ethan.”

Ethan had never bought in to the idea of luck. If luck had been involved, there wouldn’t have been an accident. He exhaled, assured that the pain wasn’t going to get worse any time soon, and twisted his head to see his medication and a half-full glass of water by the bed.

An image flashed in his mind of someone lifting him, giving him pills and cold water. Then he remembered. Tripping. Falling. The pain exploding. Almost crawling into the house. The table and chair crashing to the floor, the lamp breaking. The red-haired woman coming to him out of nowhere, helping him, sitting on top of him. Or maybe not. Maybe he’d dreamed it, or maybe the pills had made him hallucinate. But he wasn’t imagining being in bed with his broken leg raised on a couple of pillows. And his prescription and water were right by him.

Had the doctor done that?

He raised himself carefully on one elbow to look around. He was sure the chair had fallen over, but now it was sitting by the door, right along with the side table. The only clue he had that the accident had happened at all was the missing Tiffany lamp, which he remembered shattering.

He glanced at the French doors. They were shut. He checked the clock by the bed. Six-thirty. The light coming in the back windows was dull and gray, and he could see the rain streaking the glass. He reached for the service button Jim had rigged on the side of the headboard, the button he’d been trying to get to last night when he’d passed out on the floor by the bed. He pressed it, then fell back into the bed and closed his eyes. His leg was throbbing steadily, and he felt confused. He hated both sensations, but more than that, he hated not knowing exactly what had happened the previous evening.

In less than five minutes, James came striding into the guest house. The man was large, matching Ethan’s six-foot-two-inch frame, but outweighing him by a good thirty pounds. James wasn’t given to much physical activity unless it was a rousing game of chess, but he always wore running shoes. He was dressed as usual in a casual polo shirt, dark slacks and white sneakers. He brushed his

prematurely gray hair straight back from his square face, and his pale blue eyes flicked over his boss as he came closer to the high bed.

“Good morning, sunshine,” he said with a gusto that grated on Ethan’s frayed nerves. “How are we doing today? Or should I say, who are we doing today?” He didn’t wait for a response. “Ginero is waiting on your decision on the money, and if you could, let Bruce know what you are going to do about approaching the Wakefield Group. He’s in Mexico now.” James was invaluable, never forgetting anything, yet dealing with the business in an almost offhanded manner. “You really need to put these people out of their misery, boss.”

“Later,” Ethan murmured and gingerly pushed himself up, feeling a twinge in his leg when it slipped off the pillows that had been supporting it. He grimaced but kept moving to sit up against the headboard.

James proceeded to stuff pillows behind Ethan’s back, then adjusted the ones that had been under his injured leg. “Good idea to elevate your leg,” he said as he stood back. “Isn’t that what the doctor said to do, along with resting as much as you can?”

Yes, Dr. Perry had said that very thing, but it hadn’t been Ethan’s idea to do it. “Were you down here last night?”

“Last night?” James asked. “No. I told you I was going to the city to see... a friend. Julie, the dental assistant.” Ethan nodded and James went on. “I took the first ferry back this morning. Just walked into my room when the bell went off and I came on down here. Why?”

“I took a fall.”

James frowned at Ethan. “What were you doing to fall?”

“I was trying to walk. I went onto the deck, wondering why the hell I agreed to come here to recuperate at all. When I turned to come back in, the damn cast hit a potted plant. I ended up on my behind.”

James was all business now. “I’ll call Dr. Perry, and then get Scooter to bring the helicopter over right away.”

“No,” Ethan said quickly. “Forget that. I’m okay.” He was so sick of being sick and even sicker of doctors. At least, most doctors. “There was a doctor here already.”

James looked confused now. “The local doctor?”

“No,” he said, remembering Dr. Andrew Kelly from his childhood, a pleasant man with thinning sandy hair and a quiet manner. “No, it wasn’t Dr. Kelly. It was a woman.”

“She checked you out?”

“I think so,” Ethan said, but couldn’t remember her doing more than touching his forehead and being on top of him in the bed. “She got me settled,” he said, “and I guess she got my medication.” He glanced past James. “She must have picked up the mess I made over there, too.”

“I thought you said you fell on the deck.”

“I did, then I came in here, grabbed that chair by the door for balance, but I sent it over on its back with the side table and lamp.”

“What lamp?” James asked, looking in the direction Ethan indicated.

“The one I broke when it fell.”

“Hurricane Ethan,” James muttered as he crossed to the French doors and opened them. “Well, you made a mess out here,” he said, then closed the door and walked over to the phone by the spiral staircase. After dialing four digits and asking someone to come clean up the guest house, he came back to Ethan. “How did you get the doctor to visit?”

“I didn’t. I think she was on the beach and came up to...” He wasn’t sure why she’d come up or even if she actually had been there. The falls had been real, but maybe they’d knocked him senseless. Maybe he’d just imagined her being with him and her touch on his skin. Maybe the pills had conjured her up. He usually hated medication. “She was here,” he said as much to assure himself as to answer James’s question.

“Are you sure you don’t want to check in with your own doctor?” James asked, either not noticing his uncertainty or not wanting to ignore it.

“No, I’m okay.” He was. Although his leg was no better or no worse, his head was finally clear. He wouldn’t take any medication again unless he absolutely had to. Besides, he had work to take care of, and one more thing he wanted to do. “Find out who the doctor is for me, will you?”

“Sure,” James said, before changing the subject. “Want me to check your faxes and e-mails?”

“I’ll do it,” Ethan muttered. “I hate being out of the loop like this.”

“Out of the loop? How? You’ve got every modern convenience in this place from the fax, to the high-speed Internet connection and four computers, which are never turned off.” He shook his head. “Your receptionist is keeping your office in the city going, and keeping you going out here. And isn’t Natalie going to show up sooner or later?” His grin turned a bit mischievous. “At least as soon as you’re up for her visit.”

Ethan had had enough. “Natalie’s going to come for the wedding reception, then stick around. And my receptionist is earning her pay. And my assortment of methods to keep in contact just don’t cut it. I never should have agreed to come here in the first place.”

“Well, you did. So suck it up, heal and get out of here,” James said with a flippancy that no other employee would get away with. “And quit falling over your cast. Now, are you getting up, and do you need help dressing?”

“I’m getting up and I’m getting to do just fine putting on fresh shorts myself.”

James glanced at Ethan’s sole clothing, the beige shorts he’d had on the day before. “Well, you might have had a doctor in here, but she didn’t get you in your jammies, did she?”

“Oh, knock it off,” Ethan said and let his friend pull him up and out of the bed. He stood there, carefully getting his balance, then waved off James’s support as he grabbed the single crutch he hated using and made his way across the room to the bathroom. “I’ll be damn glad to have a real shower when this thing comes off,” he said.

“You’re telling me,” James said with an exaggerated sniff. “I have to be around you.”

Ethan laughed harshly at that attempt at a joke. When he got into the bathroom, James retrieved the protective plastic sleeve and bootie that fit over the cast so Ethan could at least get in the shower, but keep the bottom part of his right leg dry. James fitted it for him, then turned on the shower. “Take your time,” he said, closing the door behind him as he left.

“James?” Ethan said quickly.

The man peeked back in at him. “What now?”

“Don’t forget to find out who the lady doctor was.”

“Sure,” he said, leaving.

Ethan got his shorts off, then limped into the shower stall and, keeping his right leg out of the direct stream of water, let the spray wash over his face. Closing his eyes, an oddly clear image of the lady doctor came to him. The red hair, the blue eyes. Then it blurred and was gone.

By the time Ethan was out of the shower, dried and had stripped off the plastic protection for his cast, James was knocking on the door. “What?” Ethan called out.

“Got some information on the doctor,” he called through the closed door.

Ethan slipped on clean shorts and opened the door. “So, what do you have?” he asked, hobbling back into the room.

“A lady showed up at the main house last night, told Mrs. Forbes you’d taken a fall and that you were in bed. She said she was a doctor and that she’d given you pain pills and that it appeared you were going to be okay, but you might need to see your own physician in the morning.”

Ethan felt great relief that the doctor had indeed been here, that she’d been real. The news settled something in him, and it also made him more curious about her. “She’s a guest?”

“Not that the maid knew of. The doctor just told them to check on you. She mentioned the mess in the living room and on the deck, and that she thought you’d sleep through the night.”

“What’s her name?”

“Well, Estelle didn’t know at first, but then a local woman, Sylvia something or other, who’s here helping with the reception seemed to know her. She called her Morgan, and Estelle said they talked as if they were old friends.”

This was taking too long. “Who is she?” he asked.

“I’m getting to that,” James said patiently.

“Then do it.” Ethan headed for a room to the right that was set up as an office for him. He sank down in the swivel leather chair, propped his cast on a low footstool James had found for him and didn’t touch any of the computers or reach for the phone. James hung out by the door. Ethan looked right at him. “You know, I hate this about you. You hold on to information as if it’s gold.”

James just grinned. “I like knowing something you don’t,” he murmured.

Ethan picked up the crutch he’d laid against the desk and mimed holding it like a spear and aiming it at James. “Come on. I’m in no mood for games.”

“Okay, okay,” James said as he held out his palms toward Ethan in surrender, and the crutch went back to leaning against the desk. “Her name’s Morgan Kelly.” He paused, waited and when Ethan didn’t show any sign of recognition, James continued. “She’s the daughter of the local doctor.”

With the nudge of the name given to him, he had a vague memory that the doctor had a kid. He’d never paid any attention to her. “She’s practicing here?”

“Seems she’s covering for her old man, who is on a vacation somewhere south of here. She’s staying until after the holidays, then is returning to her real job.” James stopped and Ethan didn’t give him the satisfaction of asking what her real job was. With a sigh, James finally gave in. “She works at a free clinic in Seattle down by the docks.”

“Is that it?”

James shrugged. “That’s about it.” Then he did an abrupt change in the conversation. “They’re having a bachelor party for Joey next Wednesday. In a week. I told them I’d let you know.”

A bachelor party? God, who would have thought that Joseph Lawrence would even consider marriage again after the mess that had been his first marriage? It was strange the twists and turns life took. Hell, Joey was getting married, and old Dr. Kelly’s kid had walked into his life out of the blue. He chuckled softly to himself.

“What’s so funny?” James asked with a raised eyebrow.

Ethan ran a hand over his face, then rested his head back on the leather of the chair support and sighed. “Life.”

James didn’t ask for any clarification of that one word, but said, “Ring if you need me,” before taking off.

Ethan heard his retreating footsteps on the wooden floor, and called out, “Tell Isabel to bring down breakfast in about an hour.”

“You’ve got it, boss.” The other man returned. “Any other orders?”

He hesitated, then said, “Find out an address for Dr. Kelly’s daughter...so I can send a payment for services rendered.”

“Sure thing,” James said without bothering to hide the chuckle in his voice at Ethan’s choice of words.

MORGAN SAT in her father’s office in the old building where he’d practiced medicine on Shelter Island for as long as Morgan could remember. It looked the same—cluttered, worn and comfortable—but now it seemed so small to her. She couldn’t remember ever thinking that until she’d come back this time. The huge desk took up most of the space, and sagging shelves of medical books took up the walls. Morgan exhaled and tipped back in the swivel chair, turning it enough to see out the single window to her left.

The building was on the water side of the main street of Shelter Bay, with her dad and mom's house in back. Across the street, there was a series of specialty shops that had sprung up since she'd last been home. The offices had a side view of the bay, but the house had one that came close to being as good as any on the island. Not as spectacular as those views from the Grace estate, but pretty impressive nonetheless.

Her last appointment of the day had left and it was late, almost six o'clock. Rain came down in mists, driven by the wind skimming in over the rough waters of the sound. She'd thought about Ethan Grace off and on during the day and had even considered calling the estate to make sure he was okay. Then she remembered the woman she'd finally found at the main house and her assurances that "Mr. Grace would be well taken care of." That someone called James would take care of everything.

Ethan Grace had a staff and he had money, which was certainly more than she had. She was the lone doctor on the island right now, and as far as money went, if she had enough she would have helped her father update his equipment, and maybe figured out how to start a four-bed clinic that he'd only dreamed of for years on the property next door. There was no hospital on the island, and when a medical emergency came up, patients were transported either by ferry or by helicopter to the mainland. Sometimes that wasn't good enough. Her father, a pure idealist, dreamed of being able to offer decent emergency care. She'd never understood how he could, given the money it would take to build the clinic, but he'd never given up on the idea over the years.

Dreams came easily, but reality with her father was another matter. She'd always known she'd come back here sooner or later to help her father and possibly take over for him. Somewhere in the future, the very distant future. Having the new clinic would be terrific, if it could happen. Until then, they had to make do with what was here, but she knew her father wasn't at all comfortable with the current limitations of his equipment and facilities. She wouldn't have been, either, if she'd had to practice here instead of just visiting.

More staff would have been nice, she thought as she sat forward and reached for the thick stack of mail that had been piling up over the past few days. She sorted through the envelopes, more than aware that quite a few were bills. A couple could have been payments, but a certified letter that Sharon Long, her nurse/receptionist, had signed for that day stopped her. Morgan noted the return address, E.P.G. Corporation, Development and Acquisitions Division, along with a Seattle address that she knew was in the business district. She hesitated before she finally opened it and scanned the correspondence.

It was a very formal letter with wherefors and forthwiths sprinkled liberally through it. From what she could gather, the lease on the building that housed her father's offices and all other structures wouldn't be renewed in March. Her throat tightened. Their home was included. She was stunned. She'd never known that her father rented the property. He'd built the offices, she thought, or maybe that was just what she'd assumed. Maybe they'd been there when they moved here and he fixed them. She didn't really know; she'd been a baby when he'd opened the offices.

Morgan stared at the letter, but the words didn't change. The E.P.G. Corporation was putting her father out. She knew that he couldn't have known about this before he left last week. If he had, he never would have gone, and he wouldn't have talked about the possibility that the land next to them might be going up for sale in the near future. "We just have to get the money," he'd told her the night before he left. "I have some saved, and I've got a good enough reputation to get a sizable loan, but getting all of the equipment will be hard." He'd grinned at her. "But we'll do it someday or another." Always the optimist, whether reality bore it or not.

Her mother had been the grounded one, and her father the dreamer. A terrific doctor but still a dreamer. And he'd signed a simple lease for all of this, including their home.

Morgan reached for the phone to call her dad, but drew back suddenly. She couldn't call him and give him the news. He'd barely arrived at the house he'd rented in Arizona for the month. She

looked down at the letterhead on the notice, then reached for the phone again and dialed the first number listed.

A very pleasant female voice announced, “You have reached the offices of Development and Acquisitions for the E.P.G. Corporation. Our offices are closed now, but if you know the extension of the party you wish to contact, please enter it now or leave a message after the tone.” Morgan hung up and dialed the second number. This time a man answered. “You’ve reached the main offices of the E.P.G. Corporation. How may I help you.”

Morgan tried to explain the contents of the letter, but the man politely but firmly cut her off. “Ma’am, that’s a matter for our development and acquisitions department. I can give you their number if you’d like?”

“I have it,” she said. “I just need to talk to someone and not a recording about a property on Shelter Island.”

“You’ll need to call back during office hours and I’m sure that someone can help you then.”

“What office is this?”

“Corporate towers, ma’am. And everyone is gone for the day.”

“There’s no one—?”

“Ma’am, even if Mr. Grace was in town, he’d have left by now.”

Mr. Grace? She felt the blood drain from her head and she asked, “Ethan Grace?”

“Yes, ma’am, but he’s not here, and even if he was—”

She put the phone down, cutting off his polite response. Ethan Grace. She wasn’t sure what the P stood for, but now she knew what the E and the G stood for in the company name. It was his corporation. The Graces owned a lot of the island, she knew that, but she’d never suspected that they owned this place and she’d never known his company’s name. Or that the building and home could be pulled out from under them this way.

If she’d known about the letter yesterday, she could have spoken to Ethan when she’d found him half-conscious in his bedroom, but now he was “being taken care of,” and there was no way she could go back there again. She stopped that thought. She’d walked onto the beach yesterday without any trouble. She’d gone up the stairs and entered the house without anyone stopping her. If she did it once, she could do it again. And he was the boss, injured or not, over everything.

Speaking directly to him, instead of someone in one of his many corporate divisions, sounded sensible. That was another thing she’d learned at the clinic—the fewer people between you and what you needed, the better everyone was in the end. If she could convince Ethan to renew the lease, her father wouldn’t have to know about the notice. If she was incredibly lucky, she might even be able to convince Ethan to sell the complete property to her father, if they could get the money somehow. Besides, it would be bad PR for the company to just shut them down.

She stood and placed the letter back in the envelope. After slipping it into her pants pocket, she braced herself to face Ethan Grace again. The man she’d found last night had been vulnerable and in real pain. And when she saw him again, she knew it would be a different situation completely. He was regarded as a genius in the business world, but he was also known to be hard-hitting, bordering on ruthless and giving no quarter to anyone. Traits, she was sure, he shared with his pirate ancestor. But instead of sailing to the south and pillaging and plundering small settlements, he was headquartered in Seattle and he used, from what she heard, a corporate jet or helicopter to pillage and plunder floundering companies. He would be a formidable match.

A knock sounded on the office door and Sharon peeked inside. Middle-aged, she was dressed in jeans, a T-shirt worn under an open blue smock and tennis shoes. She had a pleasant face and was usually smiling, but this time she looked a bit contrite. “Sorry, I forgot to get this to you,” she said as she handed her an envelope.

Morgan took it and looked down at her name scrawled in black ink just under what appeared to be an embossed monogram. “What is it?” she asked.

“Don’t know. He just said to give it to you.”

“He who?” she asked as she looked up at the other woman.

“The guy who brought it. Don’t know him. Never saw him before.” She had her jacket over her arm and was obviously in a hurry to get going. “Forty or so, preppy, gray hair and great smile. Drove a huge black SUV with tinted windows.”

It didn’t sound like anyone Morgan knew, either. “Okay, thanks.”

Sharon said what she always did when she left for the day, “Safe trip home,” then laughed at her own joke. Morgan lived right behind the building, all of fifty feet from the office.

“Same to you,” Morgan responded, not able to muster a laugh this time. Not when she knew that her father could lose that very home—and the offices—within three months.

She turned, looked down at the envelope Sharon had handed to her and tucked her forefinger under the flap to open it. Inside was a folded sheet of paper along with a smaller piece of paper that fell to the floor. Picking it up, she saw it was a check for two hundred dollars. She was stunned to read the person’s information in the top left corner.

E.P.G. Corporation. Then she read the accompanying letter. Thanks for your help. If this isn’t sufficient, please bill the address at the top. The signature was a tangle of letters that she could barely make out, but she had no doubt it belonged to Ethan Grace. He was paying for her services. She suddenly smiled. And he’d just given her the opening she’d been looking for to contact him in person again.

Chapter Three

“Did you give the check to the doctor?” Ethan asked as James came into the makeshift office in the guest house.

James’s graying hair was damp from the rain outside, and the shoulders of his beige jacket were dark. “Yeah, it’s done.”

“Good, good.” Ethan pushed back in his chair, careful to keep his bad foot safely resting on the ottoman. “Was it enough?”

“Don’t know. I gave it to her receptionist. She said the doctor was in with a patient and that she’d be a while, so I left it with her.”

Ethan dropped his pen on the contracts he’d been scanning, and sank back in the leather swivel chair. After sitting at his desk for the better part of the day, his shoulders and injured leg had cramped. He wore shorts because they were easier to put on than long pants, with a plain white shirt he’d left unbuttoned.

“That place is ancient,” James said.

“What?”

“The doctor’s office. It’s in that old building on the sound side of the main street. I don’t see how anyone could practice medicine there.”

He remembered the property where the doctor had set up his practice after he’d moved it out of his home at the same location. The office, a nondescript building with a flat roof, two large windows in front and parking in front, had been built closer to the street. He’d been in there a couple of times years ago and remembered the tiny rooms, the waiting area with green vinyl chairs and month-old magazines.

“I guess it works for him,” he said, wondering why Morgan would have become a doctor, only to come back here to take over her father’s practice, such as it was.

“Speaking of doctors,” James said. “What did Dr. Perry say when you called him?”

“That I’ll live,” he murmured.

“Well, does that make us lucky or not?”

Ethan chuckled at that. “Depends on your mood, doesn’t it?”

James echoed his laugh. “Well, your mood’s good today. Despite the rain and the cold and all the organizers hurrying around in the main house as if they’re planning an event for world peace.”

“That’s why I’m down here.” He glanced up. “No, that doesn’t mean you can move in, either.”

James held out a hand palm out toward Ethan. “Did I ask?”

“You were going to,” Ethan said, then swiveled his chair to face the papers on the desk again.

“I was thinking, though, if you had another fall, where would you want me? Up at the house where you have to ring for me or right here to help you up off the floor?”

He remembered the doctor “helping him up,” and knew if he had to choose between James and her, the choice was simple. “I’ll manage,” he said.

“You always do,” James conceded. “So what do you want for dinner?”

A red-haired doctor with a gentle, cool touch. The thought stunned him, and he pushed it out of his consciousness. “Surprise me.”

“You’ve got it.”

Ethan checked the wall clock. It was almost six. One look out the window showed him the rain was easing, but the wind was gusting off the water. “Bring it down in an hour.”

“No problem. What about the bachelor party? Are you in or aren’t you?”

He’d barely had time to spend with Joe since his friend had come back, and had only met his fiancée once—she’d given Ethan a quick hug and a thank-you for throwing them the wedding party. He wanted to sit and talk with his friend. “Sure, count me in.”

“Great,” James said. “I haven’t been to a good bachelor party for years.”

“Don’t count on this one being groundbreaking,” Ethan commented and turned back to the contracts.

“I’m easy. Give me a beer and someone coming out of a cake and I’m happy.” With that, he left.

When the door finally shut, Ethan knew he couldn’t work. He slowly got to his feet and, with the aid of his crutch, made his way back through the house to the French doors. He pushed open the closest one and stepped out onto the deck. The rain was barely a mist now, but the air was still heavy with dampness and a deep chill.

He noticed in passing that the pot he’d broken hadn’t been replaced, just removed. He gripped the railing, and looked down at the beach to the south. He didn’t realize what he was doing, until he found himself scanning the water’s edge in both directions. She wasn’t there. No red-haired doctor walking the sands. He was vaguely disappointed, then he chuckled to himself. Who wouldn’t be disappointed not to see Morgan Kelly coming toward them?

The wind was stronger now, but he didn’t mind it or the cold. Since the accident, he liked the coolness around him. Heat tended to make him feel suffocated, and worse yet, it made his bad leg throb. Now all that bothered him was that he was here, alone. Maybe he’d call Natalie and see if she could come over for a day or so. But when he thought about it, he found the idea didn’t appeal to him for some reason.

Before he could figure out why, he caught movement on the beach to the south, and thought for a moment that he was conjuring up what he wanted to see instead of seeing the reality of an empty beach. Was that really Morgan Kelly coming into view, her brilliant hair loose and wind-tossed around her face? Walking toward him with easy strides, in dark clothes, the sway of her hips hit him hard. She came closer, and he knew she was real. She was there, on the beach heading in his direction.

He watched her, wondering why he felt so pleased that she’d appeared again, then she stopped. She turned and tilted her head and, even at the distance, he felt the impact of her gaze meeting his. Instinctively, he raised his hand in greeting and saw her do the same. He didn’t even think twice before cupping his hands to his mouth and shouting down at her, “Come on up!”

She cocked her head to one side, then touched her right ear. He thought he could hear her reply, “What?”

He yelled louder. “Come up!”

This time he knew she heard him and was pleased when she nodded, waved, then started walking toward the bluffs. She was soon out of sight, and he waited. Just when he was starting to think she’d simply vanished, he heard her footsteps hit the wooden treads of the deck steps, then she appeared around the corner of the house.

Her hair was curling furiously around her shoulders, and her makeup-free face showed more than a few freckles. She wore slender jeans, her leather jacket open to show a white shirt tucked into the band at her narrow waist and boots that looked too heavy for her to walk in. The smile she gave him made his heart catch for a moment, then he smiled back. “Another house call?” he asked, wondering why he couldn’t just say, “Good to see you again.”

She came closer, and he saw her lips were as pale and as full as he remembered, and she probably wasn’t more than five foot three or four. She had her hands pushed into the pockets of her jacket and color touched her cheeks from the cold.

“I guess you could call it that,” she responded in a voice that was soft yet throaty at the same time. He saw her gaze flick over him before she met his eyes again. “You know, if you run around half-dressed in this weather, it can’t be good for you.”

He waved aside her comment, saying, “I’m cold-blooded,” and was taken back when she flashed a grin so bright it felt as if the sun had just broken through the clouds.

“Like your ancestor?”

He chuckled at that. “No, that old guy was hot-blooded, in the truest sense of the word. He had eight children, two illegitimate, at least that he knew of.”

Her smile turned rueful. “Well, that’s a fact I hadn’t heard before. How about you? Eleven small Graces hiding around here?”

“I told you, I’m cold-blooded.”

She shrugged. “I guess so. It’s freezing out here.”

He motioned with his head toward the open door. “Come on in, and I can get you some hot coffee or something more robust.”

“Hot grog?” she asked, the smile growing again.

“If you want it, you’ve got it.”

“I don’t even know what it is,” she admitted, and he thought he saw a dimple on her left cheek.

“Come on inside and I’ll get the recipe.”

He wasn’t sure what he was doing right then. It was as if he was standing back watching himself flirt with the doctor, and he wasn’t at all sure what the other Ethan was doing. Or if he really wanted it to go anywhere. But with her less than a couple of feet from him, he wasn’t going to question his actions too much. He liked looking at her, enjoyed her smile and remembered her lying on top of him in bed during their first meeting.

“If you have to cook grog, don’t bother. I don’t cook.”

He motioned to the doors again, and she entered the house. He followed her inside and closed the door behind them. “I don’t know if it’s cooked or not, but it does sound good on a night like this.”

She turned to face him, and for a moment, the overhead light caught her in its soft glow. He felt his stomach tighten. She really was pretty in a simple way with her freckles and the bluest eyes. He would have laughed at that little summation if she hadn’t been standing there. Simple? What woman was ever simple? None he’d known.

“Do me a favor and hit the button on the fireplace by the wood cradle.”

She headed toward the couches that faced the view outdoors and the huge stone fireplace. He watched her as she stripped off her jacket, laid it on one of the couches, then crossed to crouch in front of the hearth. Her jeans were tighter than he’d thought, and he felt a familiar tightening in his. It has been a while, he thought as he sat.

He heard the whoosh as the fire caught, and Morgan stood, watching the leaping flames before she looked at him. “Good?”

He studied her. “Perfect.”

She took a seat on the edge of the other couch and clasped her hands on her knees. She’d seemed at ease outside, but now he could sense tension in her. He hoped she didn’t think he was being predatory getting her in here or that he had ulterior motives. Okay, maybe he did, but he hoped he wasn’t that obvious. Calm down, he told himself. Take a deep breath. Enjoy what you can. And he smiled at Morgan. “I’m glad you came.” That was the truth.

She smiled back and murmured, “So am I.”

Good, he told himself. Very good.

LAST NIGHT Morgan hadn’t had time really to look at Ethan Grace beyond the checkup she gave him. Now she had the chance to see the man who held the fate of her father’s whole future in his hands, and to some extent, her own fate. The brown eyes that had been blurred from pain the night before, were now sharp and focused. His dark brown hair was combed straight back from a wide forehead, and his face was all ridges and angles. He had a strong jaw and a nose that surprisingly looked as if it might have been broken at one time.

She had been so relieved to have an excuse to come here and talk to him, but now that she was facing him, her mind was blank. The well-rehearsed words she’d gone over and over on the walk here were gone. “So, the grog,” she heard herself saying simply to fill the silence, “is it cooked?”

He frowned slightly. “I’ll find out.” With that he reached for a phone sitting on a side table to his right and pushed in four numbers. Without preamble, he said, “Find out how you make hot grog.” He hung up and looked at her as if to say, “Mission accomplished,” but all he said was, “Done.”

It was that easy for him—pick up a phone, give an order and know that it will be carried out. An order, such as, “Get Dr. Kelly out of his offices and home by March.” That thought gave her focus and got her past the man himself. “I can’t say I’ve lost sleep at night wondering about hot grog, but just knowing can be a good thing.”

“I guess so,” he agreed.

She felt her hands start to tingle and knew she was clasping them much too tightly. Deliberately she eased them apart, pressed her palms to her knees and rubbed the rough denim of her jeans. “I came here to...” She cleared her throat and didn’t say what she thought she would right then. “To say that I never sent you a bill, so I certainly didn’t expect any payment.”

“I needed help, and you were there. I owe you for that.”

He owed her. This was perfect. Thankfully she didn’t call him on it and say, “You owe me my father’s office and our home.” She shook her head and just said, “I’m glad I could help.”

“So am I,” he replied.

The phone rang and he picked it up. “Yes?” With the receiver still in his hand, he recited, “Hot coffee, heavy cream, brown sugar, butter, spices. That’s it. I guess it’s all boiled or brewed or something like that. Do you want some?”

She grimaced. “I’ll pass.”

“Me, too. How about a brandy or anything else?”

She needed something that would let her relax a bit, but she was worried about drinking anything with alcohol. “I don’t know, maybe hot cider,” she said.

“Have you had dinner?”

She hadn’t thought of food and wasn’t at all sure she could eat anything until she got the matter of her father’s property settled, but sitting across the table from him would make it easier for her to bring up her request. “No, I haven’t.”

He picked up the phone again. “Make it dinner for two and add mulled cider and some brandy to the list,” he said, then hung up.

Ethan settled again, his injured leg pushed under the coffee table. She frowned at it. “You should have that elevated.” Before he could argue, she stood and grabbed a pillow from the couch. “You paid me two hundred dollars, and that should get you more than what I gave you last night,” she said, gently lifting his injured leg to rest the heel of the cast on the pillow, which she’d placed on the coffee table. She went back to her seat, then looked over at him, the table a buffer between them. “How’s that?”

“Better.”

“Good.”

Great conversation, she told herself, and tried to find the words to get started. She glanced at the cast, then figured small talk could lead to big talk, especially if it was about this man. “So, how did that happen?” she asked.

He told her about his accident, and through it all, she sensed his annoyance. She wasn’t sure if his frustration was with the driver of the other car for not setting his brake, or with his own driver, who hadn’t been available, or with himself for letting it happen. She didn’t have to know him well to understand that men like Ethan Grace thought they controlled their lives and everything around them. When they lost control, they hated it.

“Is it a simple fracture?” she asked when he was finished.

“There’s nothing simple about it, but that’s what the doctor called it.”

“Who’s your doctor?”

“Maury Perry.”

She'd actually heard of the top doctor, but she'd never met him and probably never would. Morgan's patients were regular people with everyday lives and jobs, while Dr. Perry's were well-heeled members of society; their medical worlds weren't apt to collide on any level. "What did he say when he checked you after your fall?"

"Come to my office and let me charge you an arm and a leg—your good leg, of course—so I can tell you that you fell and are going to survive."

She kept a grin to herself. She'd made fun of the "high and mighty" doctors like Perry more than once, joking about how they charged to say "God bless you" when you sneezed. "And?"

"And I'm here." He waved a hand around the room. "Stuck here."

That annoyance was there again. "If you don't like it here, why come?"

"I'm a good patient," he said with a smile that was more like a grimace. "I'm doing what the doctor suggested—take it easy, stay off my foot and definitely not do what I usually do."

"Which is?"

"Work, in a thirty-floor building, take meetings all day, travel on a moment's notice and generally keep things at the office going."

Sensing the road for the conversation was heading right where she wanted it to, she helped it along. "So, is the business collapsing right now because you're here and you aren't wherever it is you prefer to be?"

He threw up his hands in surrender. "I know, I know, I'm not indispensable. Dr. Perry has told me that more than once, and James never lets me forget it."

Before she could ask who James was, the front door opened and the man who, based on Sharon's description, dropped off the check last night, strode into the room with a huge covered tray. "Here you go," he said, and came to put the tray on the table halfway between the two of them.

He didn't look over at her until he removed the cover and was straightening. Then he smiled. "You're the doctor?"

"Yes, Morgan Kelly," she said.

"Dr. Morgan Kelly," he repeated. "I'm James Evans." He lifted an eyebrow and said, "I heard you tucked him into bed last night."

"I helped him get to the bed," she said.

"Well, I'm grateful, and if there's anything you need, just call on me."

"James," Ethan said, and the man took his time turning from Morgan to his boss. "Where's dinner?"

"Coming. You just ordered it."

Morgan thought that the relationship between the two men had to be more than boss and employee. James didn't seem the least bit fazed by Ethan's commanding tone, not even when he spoke again. "Make sure there's fresh shrimp with it."

"Oh, sure, boss. Fresh shrimp. I'll make a note," he murmured, giving Morgan another grin. "Nice to see you, Doctor."

With that, he left and shut the door behind him. She looked over at Ethan, who was reaching for one of two decanters on the tray. He picked up the one that was steaming and full of rich amber liquid, the mulled cider. The other held brandy. He poured cider into a mug on the tray, and offered it to her. "Your cider," he said. "How about a cinnamon stick?"

Leaning over the table, she plucked a cinnamon stick off the tray and took the cider from Ethan. "Thanks," she replied and resumed her seat.

He ignored the cider for himself and poured a splash of brandy in a snifter before he sat back and looked at her. "Cider ceased being appealing when I was a kid," he said, then smiled. "But brandy? That's different."

"Before dinner?"

"Anytime at all," he murmured.

She cradled the warm mug between both hands, but didn't drink any. Ethan, on the other hand, sipped his brandy, closed his eyes with a sigh and rested the snifter on his thigh. "I needed that," he said. She wasn't aware she'd been frowning at him until he spoke again. "Why are you looking at me as if you're waiting for me to walk off a cliff or, to be more appropriate, to walk the plank?"

"I was wondering if you'd taken any medication today."

He lifted the snifter toward the fireplace and stared at the rich liquid that reflected the flames in the hearth. "Why?"

"Mixing alcohol with those pills could be pretty risky."

He held the glass a moment longer, then put it back down on his thigh. "I took aspirin today. Does that put me at risk?"

She knew her cheeks colored a bit. "Of course not. It's the prescription medication you're taking I'm concerned about—it's very strong."

His dark eyes met hers. "Tell me, could it make a person hallucinate?"

She blinked at the question. "I suppose it could."

"Oh," was all he said before taking another sip of brandy.

She had some of her cider, then settled back in the cushions a bit. She wasn't sure if they'd be alone at dinner, not after James had made his appearance and seemed to do whatever he wanted around Ethan. She'd been ready to get to the point of her visit when the other man had intruded and tried to regroup. "Did Dr. Perry suggest you come here to recuperate?"

"That about sums it up," he muttered.

She bet no one made him do anything he didn't want to do. "They forced you on the ferry and sent you over here into exile?" That brought a crooked grin that transformed his almost harsh face into something that bordered on being boyishly cute. Now that was an odd word to use for a man like Ethan Grace. Cute. She quickly covered the smile that twitched on her lips.

"I came by helicopter and no one held a gun to my head, but this does have the flavor of being in exile."

"Then why come?"

"I had other things going on and it made sense."

She didn't push for further details; she wasn't here to learn about his personal or even his business life. She wanted to know about only one thing. "You're the CEO of your company?"

"CEO, COB and any other combination of initials you want to come up with. A real alphabet man."

"Basically you own it."

"The investors and I do."

"But what you say goes?"

"To a point."

"Who do you answer to?"

"The board."

"I mean, do you have an actual boss?"

He frowned at her. "Boss? No, I guess not."

"Then you have the final say on everything your company does?"

He took a drink, then sighed. "In some sense, I guess that's right."

This was it! The opportunity she'd been waiting for. But just as she was about to ask him about the lease, James was back, yelling, "Room service" and crossing the room with another huge tray in his hands. A young woman Morgan thought she'd seen before brought up the rear and headed toward a table by the windows. She cast a sideways glance at Morgan, smiled and kept going. While James came to where they sat, the woman got busy setting the table with linen and crystal. "Just as you asked, boss," James said as he went to the table.

In a matter of minutes everything was laid out. “Dinner is served and the shrimp is exquisitely fresh,” James announced.

He didn’t have a napkin over his arm, and he didn’t bow, but he was as close to being a manservant at that point as anyone could be, except for the obvious sarcasm in his voice. “Thanks,” Ethan said and pushed to get up.

James moved quickly, taking Ethan by the arm and helping him off the couch. He let him go when Ethan drew back, clearly wanting to cross to the table himself. Morgan took the chair James held out for her and settled in front of a plate filled with meat and vegetables and a side dish of shrimp all on a pewter charger. The woman poured wine into fine-stemmed goblets, then laid a basket of bread in the middle of the table.

Ethan settled with James hovering over him. “Anything else, sir?”

Ethan looked up and shook his head. “You’ve done more than enough,” he said with a touch of sarcasm, too.

James barked out a laugh, then nodded to Morgan. “Enjoy,” he said, then left with the woman and other tray in tow.

Ethan looked at Morgan. “Sorry about that.”

“Who is he?” she asked.

He exhaled in a rush. “That’s a good question. An assistant, a friend, a thorn in my side and someone I rely on completely and have for the past ten years.” He reached for his wine goblet and lifted it in her direction. “Here’s to a nice dinner and good conversation....” He glanced over at the closed door before looking back at Morgan. “And to James forgetting his way to the guest house.”

She laughed, picked up her own wine and took a small sip of the rich red liquid. As she put her glass down, she met Ethan’s dark eyes and he spoke again. “Now, tell me why you came all this way on the beach.”

“To see you,” she said simply.

His gaze never wavered. “Why?”

She resisted the urge to take another drink of wine and said, “I have a problem and you’re the only one who can fix it for me.”

The goblet stopped partway to Ethan’s lips, and he stared at her over the rim. “Me?”

“You.”

Chapter Four

Ethan forgot about the wine and looked at the woman across the table from him. “What are you talking about?” he asked, entirely certain that her mind was not going down the same road as his. He might have wanted her to visit him again, but not to fix a “problem,” at least that’s not what he would have called it. Feeling lust for someone wasn’t a problem, unless the other person didn’t reciprocate.

She drank more wine before her eyes lifted to meet his. He heard her take a breath before she said, “I have something to show you,” but she didn’t move to show him anything. Instead, she kept speaking in a rush. “You know I was brought up here and lived with my folks in the house behind his office before I left to go to college, then medical school?”

He hadn’t thought about that chronology of events, but they made sense. She grew up, left, became a doctor. He nodded and she continued.

“I usually work at a clinic in Seattle, the Wayfarer Medical Care Center.” He’d never heard of it. “A month ago, my father called and asked if I’d come home to cover his practice for him while he took a long-needed vacation.”

She was a good daughter obviously, and probably a good doctor, but what did that matter to him? “And?” he asked as he fingered the stem of his wineglass.

“Okay,” she said, releasing a breath as if she’d reached a marker that was totally invisible to him. “My father has this idea to expand his facilities on the island to a small four-bed clinic for emergencies and light surgery, so he could give the islanders more than general medical aid. Right now he doesn’t have the space or the equipment and has to pack them off to the mainland, or order a helicopter for emergencies. But if he had the extra room, it would be terrific.” She paused, staring at him as if he could follow what she was talking about. He didn’t.

“And?” he repeated.

She frowned, and he had the oddest feeling that he hadn’t understood the way she’d hoped he would. She reached into the pocket of her jeans and extracted a folded envelope. “And this.” Honestly, he was more interested in the way high color touched her cheeks as she spoke and the brush of freckles across her nose than anything she had said or had in her hand.

He reached for her offering, looked down at it and was taken aback to see an envelope with his company logo on it. The address was on the island, her father’s medical offices.

“Go ahead and read it,” she said.

He opened the envelope and took out a letter written on his corporate stationery. He skimmed the contents and recognized a formal “quit” notice for the property on the main street. Whatever lease agreement there had been with his company for use of the land and property was being terminated.

“Why are you showing me this?” he asked as he looked at her.

“It’s your company,” she said, leaning toward him, her dinner totally untouched. “You’re taking the property back. You’re canceling the lease. You’re putting my family out of their home and the medical offices. You’d be closing the only doctor’s office on Shelter Island.” She bit her lip before adding, “My dad’s lived there for thirty years, and my mom did until she passed away ten years ago. I never knew the land and buildings weren’t his, but I’m positive they were never late on the rent. My father is a man of his word.”

Ethan sat back. “I never said he wasn’t.”

She flashed a glance at the paper still in his hands, then looked back at him, the earnestness in her expression deepening the color in her cheeks. “Why are you doing this, then?”

He felt as if he’d been blindsided. She had been on the beach, walking, he’d called her up, they’d sat down to dinner. God knew what he’d hoped might happen when he’d invited her in for a drink, but it sure wasn’t sitting here talking business and being forced to explain anything to her. “I’m not. This is from our acquisitions and development division, and I don’t have a thing to do with it.”

She sat there silent for what seemed an eternity, but he didn't miss the look of displeasure on her face. Wrong answer, he told himself. Really wrong.

"But you are the head of the company. It's your company. What you say goes."

"That's a simplistic view of the situation," he said as he pushed the letter back in the envelope. "I don't do day-to-day work on the front lines. It's called delegating. The divisions in the corporation run their business, and as long as they don't lose money, I don't interfere."

She sank back in her chair, her expression puzzled. "So you don't have control of your own company?"

"I didn't say that."

"You said—"

"I know what I told you," he said, a bit shocked that his irritation was starting to displace some of the good feelings he'd had since she'd shown up on the beach. "What do you think I can do to fix your problem?"

"Can you stop this eviction?"

"I don't think so," he said, surprised by the touch of bitterness in his voice.

"Then I want you to sell me that property and the one adjacent to it."

The bitterness deepened. It was becoming clear her visit today had been about business, all business. That was probably why she'd smiled when she'd spotted him outside and why she'd agreed to dinner. He wasn't vain enough to think every woman wanted him, but he thought he read people a hell of a lot better than he'd read this woman. She'd likely come by when she'd found him after the fall and been disappointed that he'd been too out of it to talk about the lease. He just bet she'd been annoyed at that. "Talk to acquisitions and development." He tossed the envelope onto the table next to her plate. "Talk to a man named Jaye Fleming. He'll have all the answers for you."

She didn't move to pick it up. "I was hoping you could look into it for me and give me a figure."

His appetite was completely gone now. He pushed the plate away and downed the last of his wine before he spoke again. "A and D sent that to you for one of two reasons—nonpayment on the contract, or they aren't going to renew the option on the lease because they have development plans for the property. Since you think your father wasn't in arrears on his payments, my best guess is the land is slated for development."

"What development?"

He shrugged. "I don't know."

She exhaled in frustration. "But you own the company."

"We've already established that and how it works."

"But you—"

"I let my subordinates run their divisions," he said, cutting off what he knew she was going to say. "If A and D wants that land, they're going to develop it."

"For what?"

"I don't know."

She looked as exasperated as he felt. "Can't you find out?"

He could make one call and ask, but he found he didn't want to. "Call them yourself and ask for Jaye Fleming. He'll know all the ins and outs of the situation. A hell of a lot more than I do." He crossed his arms over his chest, knowing he looked defensive. He didn't care. He was suddenly very tired and his leg was starting to throb. "He should be in the office at nine in the morning."

"Okay," she muttered. "I'll call him. Maybe he'll understand that they're taking away our home and the only medical center on the island."

"Maybe he will," he said, and he actually hoped Fleming could say something to make her understand their side of it.

She reached for the envelope. "Thanks." He really wished that she would smile again. But she didn't. "Can you let him know I'll be calling him at nine?"

“Sure. What about dinner?” he asked, motioning to the untouched food.

She didn’t even glance at the plate. “I’m not very hungry anymore.”

He knew this was over, whatever “this” had been at the start, and the sooner she left, the better. But that didn’t stop him from asking, “Are you sure?”

She nodded and stood, then crossed to the couch to get her jacket. “Yes, I’m sure,” she said as she slipped on her coat and tugged at her cuffs.

“Do you need a ride back to your place?”

She shook her head and met his gaze. “No, I’ll just go back the way I came.”

“It’s dark,” he said, pointing out the obvious.

“I’ve walked these beaches all my life.”

He didn’t know what else to say so kept quiet and stayed where he was as she turned and headed for the French doors. She slipped through them without a backward glance, and he released a breath he hadn’t been aware he’d been holding. He sat there, listening to her footsteps as she made her way across the deck and down the steps. Finally, he could no longer hear her. He was alone. He looked around the empty house and hated the silence.

“Damn it all,” he muttered and turned abruptly to get up, forgetting momentarily about his leg. His foot lurched and a sharp pain shot up into his hip. He waited for the ache to subside to a dull throb before he carefully got to his feet and made his way back to the couch.

When he sank down onto the cushions, there was no brilliant-haired doctor facing him across the low coffee table. So he reached for the brandy, filled his snifter and took a long swallow. The next thing he did was pick up the phone and punch in Natalie’s cell number. It rang four times before the call was transferred to her voice mail. “It’s Ethan. Just wondering how you’re doing.” Then he hung up, drained his brandy and poured more.

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