

A DOCTOR
IN HIS HOUSE

LILIAN DARCY

Cherish

Lilian Darcy

A Doctor in His House

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Darcy L.

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***Say it, Scarlett.* “We messed it up before. And it wasn’t fun. The contrast between the—between what we had in bed, and the rest—”**

He answered slowly, “We were different people, then. In a different situation.”

“Different enough, compared with the people we are now?”

“That weekend ...” He leaned closer, looked down at their joined hands, rubbed the pad of his thumb over her knuckles in slow strokes.

“Yes, can we talk about that weekend?” she said.

“We need to.”

How? She sensed it wasn’t going to be easy. The noise level in the beer garden was rising. Hard to tell if the other conversations going on would be a protection or would force them to talk uncomfortably loud.

She stretched forward, almost knocking down her beer, so that their heads were close. Listening distance. Debating distance. Kissing distance, almost.

Almost, but not quite.

Dear Reader,

Several times a year, I drive a particular Australian road which takes me past a massive sprawl of old cars, many of which have been there for more than fifty years. They are now valuable for their rare spare parts, and have become a local tourist attraction. You can see this place and read about it for yourself if you search the internet for “Flynn’s Wreckers Cooma.” When I started writing Scarlett and Daniel’s story, I had no idea that a car yard similar to this one—smaller, though—was going to be important in the story, but it soon emerged as a significant part of Daniel’s past. With Scarlett’s help, he will need to work through his history and deal with the legacy of those cars before they have a hope of building a future together.

This is one of the things I love about writing. Something that starts off as a small detail can take on a major and meaningful role, and you have to wonder if my subconscious knew better than I did, and had been storing up my impressions of Flynn’s wrecking yard all these years.

Scarlett and Daniel had a sizzling encounter several years before this story starts, but it was a classic case of meeting at the wrong time. Now that they've found each other again, they soon discover that the same things that broke them apart before could shatter everything a second time. I hope you enjoy their journey.

Lilian Darcy

About the Author

LILAN DARCY has written nearly eighty books. Happily married, with four active children and a very patient cat, she enjoys keeping busy and could probably fill several more lifetimes with the things she likes to do—including cooking, gardening, quilting, drawing and traveling. She currently lives in Australia but travels to the United States as often as possible to visit family. Lilian loves to hear from readers. You can write to her at PO Box 532, Jamison PO, Macquarie ACT 2614, Australia, or e-mail her at lilian@liliandarcy.com.

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Chapter One

It began with a familiar headache, which grew steadily worse as Scarlett drove north to Vermont. She pulled over, swallowed painkillers and kept driving, but ten miles from her brother's house, before the painkillers could kick in, her vision began to blur as if her eyes were windowpanes and there was water running down the glass.

She almost stopped driving at that point, but by the time she'd found a place to pull over, the water seemed to have stopped running and she could see clearly again. Things didn't feel quite right. On top of the pain, her brain felt foggy and disconnected. But she was less than ten minutes from Andy's, so it seemed best to keep on going. After all, she'd had these spells before.

The symptoms had been milder those other times, though. Self-diagnosis followed by several tests to rule out more serious options had settled on migraine. The spells always passed before they cost her any significant time at work.

And before they forced her to question the way she was living her life.

Today, the real trouble hit two miles from her destination, and this time there was no warning. The whole world just keeled over like a ship run aground, except she knew the problem wasn't with the world, it was inside her head. Even though she was wearing chunky sunglasses with dark lenses, the daylight felt so bright that it blinded her, and her senses were scrambled and out of her control.

No question about waiting for a safe place to pull over now.

The safe place had to be right here, because another five seconds at the wheel and she would crash. She couldn't see, could barely move ... She just managed to brake hard, bring the car to a halt and kill the engine, a couple of hundred yards from the Radford town boundary, and she could only hope she was on the shoulder not the road.

Then she rolled the window down and sat.

Fought the dizziness and pain.

Waited, with her hands gripping the top of the steering wheel and her forehead pressed hard against it, for the moment when she would feel well enough to leave the car, or find the phone that lay in her purse.

But the moment didn't happen. If she tried to open her eyes, all she saw was painful, blinding brightness. If she moved an inch, the world tilted and rolled. She groped for her purse, but it was out of reach on the floor of the passenger seat where it must have slid when she'd braked so suddenly.

She lost track of time, although it must have been fifteen minutes or more. It felt like forever, a terrifying, featureless landscape of unraveling minutes in which all she could do was to stay motionless, keep breathing and think about what had brought her to this point. Andy had been right in his older-brother concern about her stress levels and working hours, and his insistence that she listened to Dad too much. This trip to Vermont was meant to signal a shift in her priorities, but her body was telling her that it had come too late.

Cars went past. She heard the *whoosh* of the air and the hum of their engines. No one slowed or stopped. Maybe they thought she was taking a phone call or checking an address. The painkillers she'd taken earlier began to work and the dizziness eased a little. She thought again about trying to reach for the purse.

But before she could make the move, she heard the sound of tires popping on gravel, the rumble and surge of an automatic transmission shifting gears and the slam of a car door.

Even her hearing had gone haywire, because she couldn't tell which direction any of it was coming from. Behind her? Far side of the road? She didn't know whether to call out or stay silent.

She heard footsteps crunching on the gravel shoulder. They stopped beside her open car window. A man cleared his throat. "Everything okay here, ma'am?" The voice was gravelly and slow and faintly threatening. Again, she didn't know what to do. Wish it would go away, or ask it for help?

“Um, yes, just resting my eyes,” she lied, to buy a little time. Maybe in a few seconds she could summon the ability to open her eyes and move enough to look at him, see what kind of a man he was, whether he looked as if she could trust him.

She tried it, letting a slit of vision appear between her lids, but the light and blurring hit with merciless speed and she couldn’t see a thing.

There was a pause. The voice stayed silent, but the feet didn’t move. Then the man spoke again, deliberate and slow. “I’m a Vermont state trooper, ma’am. You’re going to need to look at me, and show me your driver’s license.”

The woman with her head and arms on the steering wheel didn’t move, in response to Daniel’s request.

He couldn’t see her face at all, couldn’t tell how old or young she was, or what she looked like. Dark hair with gleaming golden lights fell around her head and onto the wheel, as effective as a deliberate disguise. He could see the frame of her dark glasses, but on a summer afternoon those were hardly a sinister attempt at concealing her identity.

She seemed a little on the thin side, the knobs of her backbone visible through a stretchy cream-colored top, as well as the faintest outline of a light blue bra. Below that, she wore a filmy patterned skirt.

She was in her twenties or thirties, he decided. The skin on her hands was smooth and soft. Her nails were neat and clean and bare of polish. The clothing looked clean and summery and of good quality, suited to the late-model car she was driving and the warm July afternoon. A chunky purse lay on the floor in front of the passenger seat, and a bottle of water had rolled against the seat back.

Nothing out of place, except for the fact that she didn’t move.

He assessed the situation. She could be on the point of passing out from drink or drugs. She could be mentally ill. She could be working some kind of a scam, luring passing motorists to stop and offer help, at which point her accomplices would appear out of the undergrowth for a gunpoint robbery. Daniel had been a hospital security guard in New York City for three years, then a police officer in New York and a state trooper here in Vermont for a total of five. He’d seen all of these scenarios and worse.

“Are you ill, ma’am?” he asked, after weighing the wording of the question in his mind.

“Yes, a migraine. A bad one.”

“I’d like to show you my ID.”

“My vision is blurred, and I’m having a dizzy spell. I can’t see.”

“In that case, I’m going to have you feel the insignia on my shirtsleeve. It’s a double chevron. I want you to know that I’m an officer of the law.” Leaning down to the open car window, he kept his eyes on the screen of shrubby trees beyond the shoulder of the road, waited for the sound of slurring—either real or faked—in her voice.

She reached up, found his shirtsleeve and felt the raised weave of the insignia, rubbing neat fingers across the fabric, brushing his bare upper arm with the heel of her hand just below the hem of the short sleeve. The touch was accidental, yet oddly personal. “Okay. Thanks,” she said. “I do believe you.”

“Do you need medical attention, ma’am?”

“Yes.” If she was faking, then she was good at it. If she was impaired by substance abuse, it didn’t show.

“I’ll call the ambulance,” he said.

“No, that’s ... not necessary. Not an ambulance.”

First indication of something not quite right. He went on high alert. If the “dizzy spell” was bad enough that she really couldn’t move, then why didn’t she want an ambulance?

But she was speaking again. “Call my brother.”

“Your brother?”

“He’s a doctor. Andy McKinley. He lives just a couple of miles from here. He’ll come get me.”

Daniel knew Andy quite well. Doctors and law enforcement officers tended to know each other in a rural community like Radford. There was a connection between hospital emergency rooms and crime, and he and Dr. McKinley had been involved in various incidents together. Andy was a good guy. Understood the police angle. Went the extra mile. Didn’t let any ego get in his way. Daniel would almost call him a friend.

He didn’t let on to this woman right away that the name was familiar, however. In his experience, personal information was best handled on a need-to-know basis, and he considered that most people needed to know very little about him.

Some people—work colleagues, and his sister, Paula, for example—said that this showed in the way he talked, and the way he often paused before he talked, but he didn’t care and he wasn’t prompted to change.

Andy’s sister would learn of his connection with her brother soon enough. No sense wasting time or words over it now. “Andy McKinley,” he echoed, giving nothing away. “Can you give me his number?”

Obediently Scarlett reeled off the digits of Andy’s cell phone, then heard a moment later, “Andy? It’s Daniel Porter, here.”

What?

The name ambushed Scarlett from out of the past. She couldn’t take it in, couldn’t react. Daniel—that other Daniel—had grown up in Vermont, somewhere near here. Indirectly, two steps removed, that Daniel Porter was the reason she was here, now, although he wouldn’t know it, and she hadn’t thought of the Vermont connection herself in years. Hadn’t thought about Daniel at all, except for the maddening fact that he wouldn’t stay out of her dreams.

But now he was here.

Because it had to be the same man.

She couldn’t know for sure, since the blurred vision meant she couldn’t look at him and his voice wasn’t enough to go on, but it had to be him. This man had said he was an officer of the law, she’d felt the insignia on his shirt and she knew that a law enforcement career had always been Daniel’s goal.

It had to be him.

She waited for a whole slew of possible emotions to wash over her—anger, regret, embarrassment, self-doubt and loss—but none of them came. She was simply too shocked.

“I have your sister here,” he said into the phone, “pulled over on Route 47, just coming in to town.” He listened for a moment, then said carefully, “No, nothing like that. She’s been taken ill, and she’s hoping you’ll be able to come get her.” He listened again. “A dizzy spell, she says.”

“Put him on,” Scarlett managed, on a croak.

She felt the hard, cool shape of a cell phone pressed against her cheek, and the softer touch of a masculine hand. Daniel Porter’s hand. She scrabbled for the phone, managed to take hold of it and the hand went away. She made another attempt to open her eyes but the bright light whirled in a sickening way and twelve steering wheels danced like dervishes right in front of her.

Don’t try it, Scarlett, just breathe. “Andy?” she got out, after a moment.

“Scarlett, you sound terrible. What’s the problem?”

“Migraine. Vision problems and dizziness. I had to pull over. I need you to come.”

“I can’t,” Andy said blankly. “Not right now.”

Before she could stop herself, she let out a stricken sound.

“I have a patient under local anesthesia, and four moles to take off her back. I practically had the scalpel in my hand when you called. After that, okay? *Immediately* after.”

This time, she couldn’t keep back a moan. His voice had made her feel as if help was at hand, and now it had been snatched away.

“I’m sorry,” her brother said. “I can’t blow off a patient.”

"I know." Scarlett wouldn't have done it, either. She rounded her lips and blew out a careful breath, gaining enough control to tell him, "You're right."

"Listen, Daniel is a good guy. Straight down the line. A state trooper."

"Yes, so he said." Andy hadn't met Daniel, six years ago, even though, indirectly, he'd moved to Vermont because of Daniel's influence. He had no idea that Daniel and Scarlett had briefly been involved. Almost no one knew that. Their whole relationship had vanished into the past without trace.

"He'll call an ambulance for you. He'll wait with you till it comes."

"I don't need an ambulance. It's just a migraine. I've had these spells before."

"Like you're having now?"

"Never this bad."

"So the hospital—"

"Don't make me go to the hospital." She was so overdosed on hospitals. She'd been working ninety hours a week in one for years. She was the smartest one in the family, Dad always said, but somehow that didn't seem like the best end of the deal when her skin always smelled like chemicals and she only ever saw the sky through tinted glass. "I just want to be lying flat in a dark room."

"Put Daniel back on and I'll ask him if he can drive you to my place."

"My car ..."

"He'll drive your car off the road, park it somewhere safe. One of our office staff can drive it home for you later."

"Home to your place."

"Home to my place, it's no problem, it's not far. Put Daniel on."

Blindly she held out the phone, gripping the wheel with her free hand to minimize the movement. "My brother wants to talk."

A hand took the phone. "Sure," said the gravelly voice. Daniel had been twenty-four years old when she'd known him, to her twenty-six. He must be thirty, now. His voice had deepened, matured, but he was as measured and careful with his words as he'd always been.

"Yes, I can do that," he said to Andy after a moment. "Give me the address." He listened. "Yeah, no problem. I had court, this morning, in White River Junction. Was on my way back, done for the day. It's no trouble."

"Thank you," she said weakly, after she heard him put away the phone.

"No problem," he repeated. "We'll get you home, Charlotte."

Charlotte ... Andy must have said her name, only Daniel had heard it wrong. He didn't know who she was. The thought came with a wash of relief. Maybe he wouldn't even remember.

No, he had to remember. He'd brought her up here, six years ago, had given her a passionate, romantic weekend in a gorgeous bed-and-breakfast, and then she'd dumped him two weeks later—or they'd dumped each other, she wasn't even sure—because ...

Well, just because.

Too many reasons to count, and maybe she was ashamed of some of them, or maybe they weren't all her fault. They'd both had issues that ran deep. They'd both had reason to be angry ... and full of regret. She hadn't been involved with another man since. She'd been burned, and it had been all too easy to retreat into her demanding work and conclude that the thing with Daniel—its intensity and its failure—was a warning sign.

He had to remember.

But right now, he wanted her to move, to climb out of the vehicle. He had one hand on her elbow and one on her shoulder, trying to ease her out from behind the wheel, trying to help her, but it was going to be impossible. She felt incapable of walking, and she couldn't have corrected him about her name even if she'd wanted to.

And she didn't want to, because ...

Well, just because.

Because it was easier not to have him know who she was.

Not yet. Not until she'd reached a safer, better place than the verge of a county road.

Five and a half years ago, she'd sent Andy to the same bed-and-breakfast that Daniel had brought her to, at a time when Andy had been going off the rails due to stress and ambition. Her brother had found Vermont so good for his soul that he'd moved here, but that little leapfrogging connection wasn't relevant now.

She doubted that Daniel had looked at her face yet, and might not recognize her even if he did, she must look so wretched, white-skinned against the contrast of the dark frames of her sunglasses. Oh, and she'd been in her blonde phase six years ago, too, the style of it perky and tousled and a lot shorter than it was now.

"Can you help me to your car?" she asked him. "I'm so dizzy."

"Of course," was all he said.

She waited for him to hold her shoulders or reach for her hand, hating this feeling of disorientation. Where was he? Which part of her body would he touch first?

Okay, here was his arm coming around her shoulder ... and his other arm sliding across the backs of her knees. He was planning to carry her. He lifted her into his arms before she could protest, settled her closer against his body, and then she had to concentrate so hard just on breathing that she couldn't say a word.

He didn't speak, either.

She was pretty light, but she was still a grown woman, and this had to be hard for him, but he gave no sign of it, just held her and paced toward his patrol car, his stride as smooth as he could make it. He was trying not to bounce her and she was grateful for that.

Grateful for his shoulder, too. She couldn't hold her head up without dizziness and wild color strobing behind her closed lids, and his shoulder was the only place to rest her cheek. There, she could smell the summer-heated cotton of his shirt and something nutty and fresh and masculine that was probably shampoo or aftershave.

It was good, the male fragrance. It was *familiar*, heaven help her. It brought a tangle of powerful, seductive memories, yet still somehow steadied her senses so she kept breathing it, drawing it in through her nostrils in slow pulls of air, while her hair fell across her face and tickled her mouth. She wanted to ask Daniel if he could brush the hair away, but still didn't trust herself to speak—let alone to make such an intimate request.

Touch my hair. Touch my face. You've done it before ...

No.

Daniel Porter was carrying her in his arms like a knight rescuing a maiden and his strength and his movement felt so nourishing and good, yet he had no idea who she was.

By the time she was seated inside the patrol car, she felt weak with the aftermath of the short journey. She would have to see if Andy could find something stronger for the migraine pain. These over-the-counter pills were barely taking the edge off. She had to lean against the dash to anchor herself so that the whirling universe would slow down. Once more, her hair hung around her face, hiding skin that must be paper-white by this point. She couldn't even speak enough right now to say, "I'm sorry."

Daniel didn't seem to need the apology. "It's okay," he said, just as if she had managed the words. "It's fine. You're not heavy." The tone was friendly, professionally reassuring, with the same measured carefulness she still remembered so well.

As if words were too powerful, sometimes, and might detonate an emotional bomb blast if you spoke too many of them, or if you said the wrong ones.

"Just sit for a bit," he continued. "I'll open the windows so you have some air." She heard the humming sound of the glass lowering in its frame. "Your keys are still in the ignition, right? Just nod."

But with her throbbing head, speaking was easier than nodding. "Yes."

"I'll pull your car over, farther from the road." He made a momentary pause, then added, "That's why I thought I should stop and check on you, before, on my way through. Your car isn't pulled off to a safe distance."

"I couldn't."

"I understand that. It's okay. It's a quiet time of day."

Daniel Porter left her, and she sat with closed eyes and her forehead against the dash and listened to the sound of her car being moved. He was back in a couple of minutes, putting her purse carefully into her lap through the open passenger window, below the stiff forward angle of her upper body, and guiding her hand to close around the keys he gave her. "Got them?"

"Yes."

"Anything else you needed?" A pause. "I'm sorry, I should have asked before."

"My bags are in the trunk."

"Right, okay."

"But they can stay there until Andy organizes to get my car to his place. Did you lock it?"

"Yes, I did."

"Thank you."

Poor woman, Daniel thought, as he pulled onto the road. When he'd carried her, every step and every tiny movement he made had seemed to worsen her dizziness and pain, and she'd felt too light and limp in his arms, with her head pillowed on his shoulder like that.

He really would have preferred to take her direct to Mitchum Medical Center, but her brother was a doctor and hadn't insisted on the need for urgent medical attention, so he deferred to the expert opinion.

Dr. McKinley's house was only a mile or two from here, in the oldest part of the town, a street of grand old Victorians dating from when nearby marble quarries gave Radford a vibrant economy. The street had gone through a period of decline at one point, and Daniel vaguely remembered from early in his childhood that some of these places had been pretty run-down, divided into cheap apartments or lived in by families who couldn't afford to keep them maintained.

They weren't run-down anymore. He passed a bed-and-breakfast place, an architect's office, an upscale hair and beauty salon, each with a professionally painted sign swinging on pieces of chain hanging from a wooden stand planted in the lawn.

Dr. McKinley's wouldn't have a sign. Which of the elegant houses was it? He had the number, but glanced sideways to see if his passenger might point it out.

She wouldn't.

Couldn't.

She still had her head pressed onto the dash, with her forearms folded above. As he'd noted before, she looked too thin, as if she hadn't been eating properly or as if she burned all her calories in stress. Suddenly there seemed something familiar about her. He couldn't place it, but realized that he easily might have seen her up here before if coming to visit her brother was a regular thing.

No, he thought. It wasn't that kind of familiarity. It had been triggered by seeing her beside him in the car, as if he'd had her as a passenger in his vehicle before.

He couldn't think about it now ... 2564 ... 2570 ... This was Dr. McKinley's house right here, nicely done up but not too feminine or fancy. Cream and dark green paint, newly stained timber on the front porch.

He turned into the first of two driveways. "Do you have a key to your brother's house?"

"No, but I know where he keeps one. Could you ... get it for me?"

"If you tell me where it is."

She described the location, somewhat less obvious than under the doormat or sitting on top of the frame. Fourth planter pot to the left of the driveway, under the dark gray rock. She waited in the car while he unlocked the front door—the big Victorian was divided into two apartments, and

he guessed that Andy's was 2572, not 2572A—then he had to come back to help her out. She clung to him and leaned on him as if he was the only fixed point in the whole universe, but at least she was walking on her own, this time.

Suddenly, holding her in his arms once again, recognition came. It elbowed its way past the changed hair color and style, the pale face beneath the large sunglasses, the weight loss, and came fully into focus.

It was Scarlett.

Scarlett Sharpe.

Shoot! Damn! It really was!

Scarlett Sharpe was Andy McKinley's *sister*?

Daniel didn't know if she had recognized him. He thought she was probably in such bad shape that she hadn't. He must have said his name to Andy, but had she been listening? Had she made the connection? Did she remember? What had he said? Too much?

He felt a wash of anger and embarrassment and regret and yearning and vivid memory, as well as a sense of unfinished business. He fought to keep any of it from showing then realized that she wasn't going to be picking up on those kinds of emotions, when she was struggling to take one step in front of another.

"I can't leave you alone here," he said, trying so hard to keep the reluctance from coloring his voice, so that it ended up sounding completely wooden instead.

"Andy won't be long."

"All the same."

"I'm okay. I just need to drink some water and lie down."

He was torn by a level of uncertainty and indecision that didn't happen nearly so often anymore, but which had once been very familiar. How much to give away? How much to trust? What to offer? What to say?

He'd been twenty-four years old when he and Scarlett had known each other before. Six years on, twenty-four seemed like it was just a couple of years beyond boyhood. In so many ways back then he'd been older than his years. In other ways, far out of his depth, with his emotions so powerful and simple that they frightened him.

Lord, he didn't enjoy some of those memories ...

Which was good, because memories weren't relevant right now.

"I'm going to wait with you until your brother arrives," he told her, making a decision he didn't intend to change.

Scarlett didn't reply.

They made it up the steps and through the door. "Where do you want to go?" he asked.

"Couch." Apparently because she didn't think she could make it any farther, even though he was carrying her again.

He helped her to lie down, finding a red silk pillow for her head. "Could you close the drapes?" she asked weakly. "The light is so bright."

It wasn't.

Not to his eyes, anyhow.

But he did as she'd asked, and it seemed to help her. She lay with her eyes closed, still wearing her sunglasses, and less tension stiffening her thin frame. She'd had more weight on her six years ago, for sure. He remembered how her body had felt in his arms, and it hadn't been scarecrow thin like this, it had been lush and soft, almost plump in places. Recognition might have come sooner if she hadn't changed so much.

"Can I fetch you the water you wanted?"

"Bottle or tap, I don't mind. A big glass. It'll help."

He went through the adjacent dining room and into the kitchen and ran the faucet into a glass he found upturned in the dish rack, not wanting to check in the refrigerator or open the kitchen cabinets in someone else's house. When he brought the filled glass back to her, she said in a thready voice, "Is it okay if I don't try to sit?"

"It's fine." He brought the glass awkwardly sideways to her mouth, and it was such a personal action it gave him the jitters. Would she want this from him?

She seemed to prefer the drops spilled down her cheek to the thought of movement. "Thanks. You can go now. Please. Don't feel you need to stay."

Did she know who he was?

There was no reason for it to matter, not when she could barely move, and he wasn't going to ask, or tell her. Not yet. Not unless it seemed truly necessary.

"I'm not leaving."

She stayed silent for a long moment, as if assessing his determination, and whether to protest. Finally she told him, "Thank you."

And then they just waited.

Chapter Two

This was Andy now, thank heaven. Scarlett heard his car, then the thump of hurried feet up the steps and onto the wide, wraparound apron of the porch. He barreled through the door and into the front room. “Daniel, thanks so much for staying. Scarlett, how’re you doing?”

“A little better,” she said, putting some chirp into her voice. “My vision is the main thing. Really can’t see.”

“Can I take a look?” She heard him sit on the coffee table in front of the couch. Daniel must be hovering in the background. She couldn’t hear him. They’d been silent together for probably fifteen minutes or more before Andy had showed up. She hoped Daniel put it down to the fact that she was feeling so bad. Hoped he still didn’t know who she was. But really she had no idea. She wasn’t in a position to discern anything about what he was thinking or feeling. He’d never been a man of easy words.

Right now, she was just glad that Andy was here.

“Open your eyes,” Andy ordered.

She did so, to be greeted by blurring and multiple images and blinding light.

“Your pupils aren’t contracting,” Andy said. “That’s why it feels so bright. You’re not focusing at all.”

“Tell me about it!”

There was a pause. “Still biting your nails, Scarlett?”

“What’s that got to do with anything?” But she hid her raw-tipped little fingers in the curl of her hand, self-conscious.

“Migraine can be stress related.”

To head off a lecture, she just blurted it out. “I resigned, okay?”

“You *what*?”

“I resigned from the hospital.” She had to talk carefully and quietly, or her head hurt too much. “Dad doesn’t know. He thinks it’s just a vacation break. I’ll have a month here, as planned, but I’m not going back to City Children’s.”

“When will you tell him?” Andy knew as well as Scarlett did that Dad wouldn’t approve the decision.

“When I’ve worked out what I’m going to do next.”

“And you haven’t, yet? You have no idea?”

“That’s what the next month is about. I know he’s going to kill me. Or not speak to me for five years.”

“Wow.”

“What?”

“I didn’t think you’d actually do it. Thought you should. Didn’t think you would.”

“Neither did I.” She was a little scared about it, too. Was she giving up medicine completely? Giving up pediatric oncology? She didn’t know. All she knew was that being the smartest one in the family wasn’t making her happy, the way Dad was so sure that it should.

“Is a month going to be long enough?”

“Don’t know that, either.” Who was she, if she wasn’t a doctor? Who did she want to be?

He wasn’t going to let the subject go. “Do you have any concrete plans for how you’re going to spend your time up here?”

This one, she could answer with confidence. “Woodwork.”

“Woodwork?”

“I want to learn to do something with my hands, something practical and creative.” Something sensual, almost, but she didn’t feel comfortable using this word out loud. Wood? Sensual? It sounded

weird. She went on, “But I’m not—you know, much into fabric or yarn. I’ve been in contact with a man up here, Aaron Bailey, who makes fine furniture and he’s happy to have me as an unpaid intern for as few or as many hours a week as I want.”

“Scarlett, that’s great!”

“I know.” *No, don’t nod. It’s painful and dizzying.* “I’m looking forward to it. I’m giving myself a few days and starting with him on Monday. I’ve told him I’ll start with sweeping shavings off the floor and just see how far I get. Maybe it will tell me something about my life.”

“Seriously, Scarlett, I think that’s a really great idea!”

“Thank you,” she drawled at her brother. “I do have them occasionally.”

She registered that Andy had said her name a couple of times now, and that this time Daniel Porter couldn’t possibly have misheard, as he was standing in the room, probably looking right at her. Even though he hadn’t said it, he must know who she was, despite the fact that she was thinner and had long ago abandoned her brief exploration of short and blonde.

Did he know that she knew him? Did he know that she knew that he knew that she knew?

It was more dizzying than the state of her brain.

It was weird.

“I’ll get a stronger painkiller for your head,” Andy said. “And what do you feel like eating? I can go to the store.”

“You’re driving down to the city this afternoon,” she reminded him. “I’m supposed to be moving in next door, to your vacant rental, not collapsing on your couch and having you take care of me.”

“I can postpone the trip till you’re feeling better. I’ll head down tomorrow or Saturday.”

“I’m not letting you do that. Claudia is expecting you. She needs you. She *wants* you. Go today.”

She knew how important the trip was to him. He’d worked the past two weekends in a row, covering for colleagues who would in turn cover for him, for the next six days while he went to New York to spend time with his girlfriend, Claudia.

Claudia was starting back part-time at work this coming Monday, three days a week, and despite this reduction from the full-time hours she’d once planned, she was very jittery about leaving her three-month-old baby in day care. Andy wanted to be there for her, there for baby Ben, and then they would both come up here again next Thursday before Claudia needed to head back to the city the following Sunday afternoon.

Yeah, it did sound overcomplicated.

Since Claudia was the best thing that had happened to Andy in a long time and he was quite adorably in love with her, if you could ever consider an older brother adorable in any context, Scarlett absolutely did not intend to ruin their plans.

She didn’t think this dividing-their-time-between-New-York-and-Vermont thing was going to work for them for long. Not when there was a baby involved. And she couldn’t bear the idea of being responsible for them having less time together, instead of more, until they worked out a more concrete future. They were exploring several options, she knew. The one thing they were both certain of was that they wanted to be together, and to make it work.

“So you’ll manage on your own,” Andy said, delivering the words with a heavy dose of sarcasm.

“I’ll be fine in a few hours.” But she knew this was too optimistic. Her last migraine, less severe than this, had required two days off work. She’d spent a further day gritting her teeth and pushing her way through the aftermath of a weak body and a woolly brain. Being here on her own, even with stronger painkillers, wouldn’t be fun.

Silence from Andy.

She could feel his hesitation. He wanted so badly to be in New York, this minute or sooner. “I can’t leave you on your own yet.” The words dripped with reluctance. “I could see if Mom could drive up and—”

“Not Mom.” Because then Dad would get involved, and Dad didn’t believe in stress-related migraine, not in the McKinley family. And she absolutely didn’t want to have him find out yet that she’d left City Children’s Hospital, because she knew that even if he understood and forgave her at all—and she was sure he wouldn’t—he would still push her to make decisions about the future right now, and she knew she wasn’t ready.

McKinley medics were invincible, as far as he was concerned, and Scarlett didn’t want to have to confront him on the subject until she was actually *feeling* invincible. With answers. And certainty.

Dad had reacted badly enough to the little she had said. He’d spent weeks trying to talk her out of this break. As the youngest daughter and only girl, she should have been the one he spoiled and doted on, and okay, she was, but Dad’s form of doting had always been a little different. IQ tests and puzzle books and mathematical challenges, prizes for perfect grades, summer science camps and father-daughter museum trips. She’d felt all the love and pride and pressure, and she felt it still.

“And anyhow, Mom couldn’t get here before nightfall, so you’d still lose nearly a whole day,” she told her brother, with difficulty.

Daniel Porter hadn’t said a word, but now he cleared his throat. Scarlett heard a creak as he shifted his weight. “I can stay till she’s feeling better, Andy.”

“I can’t— I don’t—” Andy began.

“Listen, what are we talking about? The rest of today? Overnight at most? I don’t have to be back in court till ten tomorrow morning. And I owe you over that arrest back in March.”

“That was professional. This is personal.”

“Might not get the opportunity to return a professional favor for a while.”

Andy went silent again. So did Daniel.

Then Andy’s phone rang.

Claudia. Even in her impaired state, Scarlett could hear the heat and softness in his voice. “No, there’s been a delay,” he said. “I’ll be a little later than I wanted, I’m so sorry.” He listened for a moment, then controlled a sigh. “Hopefully before dark.”

He’d made the decision. It was settled. Daniel Porter was staying.

“Yeah, me, too, can’t wait ...” Andy said. He was grinning, she could tell. He ended the call and his tone changed. “Dan, thanks. I *really* appreciate it. Can I make a list of errands? I’ll pick up the script for her medication and drop it back here, but if you could shop for something to eat?”

“Whatever you need,” Daniel said. “Scarlett—” he cleared his throat again, and again she heard a floorboard creak as he made a shift in his weight “—help me make a list.”

He most definitely knew who she was. It was clear, now.

He felt as awkward about it as she did, she could tell even with her eyes closed and her head throbbing, and the fact of her migraine was almost *convenient* in masking the odd, complicated feeling in the air, but it still wasn’t enough. “Soup,” she said. “And toast.”

“Yeah, let’s talk about what you’ll need to do.” Andy sounded so much more cheerful, in a hurry to get everything sorted and take to the road.

“For a start, her car,” Daniel answered. “I can head back to the station and get someone to drive me down to Route 47. It’s not far. Then the store. I’ll run home and change, too, grab a couple of things.”

“Okay, let’s check what I have on hand.” Both men began to move, heading toward the kitchen. It was a relief to Scarlett to be left on her own, with their voices in the background, working out the details.

“She can sleep here tonight,” Andy said. “Doesn’t make sense for her to move next door to the rental apartment, where the refrigerator and pantry are both empty.” Scarlett heard the sound of his refrigerator door opening as he checked its contents. “We need milk and bread.”

“I’ll write it all down.”

“This is great, Daniel. I really appreciate it,” Andy repeated. “When you don’t even know her ...”

Oh, but he did.

He stayed silent about it, and so did she.

Andy left after about five minutes, apologizing to Scarlett and Daniel and thanking them all the way out the door, saying he’d drop the medication in before he left for the city, probably in an hour or so. They both listened—or at least Scarlett assumed Daniel was listening—to his car backing out of the driveway, and then another eerie and uncomfortable silence fell.

“Please turn on the TV,” Scarlett eventually said.

“What would you like to watch?”

“Nothing. But you must be getting bored.”

“I’m reading. Found some crime fiction.”

“Right, okay, then, sorry.” He must have given the book a flourish, because she could hear the rattle of the pages.

“You should try to rest, shouldn’t you? Sleep?” She heard the creak of the adjacent armchair where he must have sat down.

Sleep was a thousand miles away. “I’ll try,” she lied. Time passed, stretched out and endless the way it had seemed in her car before Daniel had stopped. “Please can we have the TV?” she said at last. “I need the distraction.”

She heard him stand. “Sorry,” he said. “I didn’t realize.”

“It’s okay.”

He picked up the remote, swore under his breath a couple of times as he pressed the wrong buttons, but then the sound came on. She heard snatches of music, gunfire, voices shouting, canned laughter, a newsreader’s measured words, and guessed he was surfing the channels. “What do you feel like?”

“Keep pressing. Stop for a little on each channel. I’ll tell you.”

He surfed some more. How many channels did Andy get? She heard weather and more news, a cooking show, an old Western, then Angela Lansbury.

“Stop there,” she said.

“*Murder, She Wrote?*”

“I’ve probably seen it.” Every episode, at least three times, late at night while winding down from a heavy on-call or a heart-rending session with the parents of a gravely ill child. She’d watched most every detective series over and over. “I can fill in the visuals from the dialogue.” She liked the old-fashioned, family-orientated crime shows, the less graphic and confronting ones, the ones with a nice twist and a lovable sleuth and a satisfying ending, nothing too confusing or clever or challenging. Comfort food on a screen.

“Okay. *Murder, She Wrote*, it is.”

“Sorry, it’s probably a lot less interesting than your book.”

“I’m not really getting into the book. So it’s fine.”

“Thanks.”

“No problem, Scarlett.”

I know you know I know.

But still they didn’t say it, and she felt horribly out of her depth about it, because of the fact that she couldn’t see.

Daniel had caught the beginning of the episode. After a few minutes, she recognized which one it was. The one with—

“Well, what do you know?” he said. “That’s George Clooney!”

Yes, she’d remembered it right. George wasn’t the murderer, just the clean-cut love interest for one of the other characters, mugging in the background with a top-heavy mop of 1980s hair.

“Funny where people start, isn’t it?” she said, before she thought. “And where they ... end up?”
“Yeah, it is.”

Like the two of them, right now, in Andy’s house, with her unable to look at Daniel or move.
You know I know you know.

But we seem to be agreeing not to say it, now.

“Can I get you anything?” he asked. “Andy has fixings for a BLT, or grilled cheese sandwich.”

“No, thanks. Just ... more water?”

“Of course.”

He went out to the kitchen and refreshed the glass. She opened her eyes and could just make out the dark, blurred bulk of his figure on its way through the door. She’d forgotten the size of him, and the big shoulders. She closed her eyes again, thinking that maybe, blessedly, the brightness had grown a little less extreme.

A minute later she heard him bend down to her, heard the sound of his clothing shift and slide against his body. His knuckles pressed lightly against her cheek while she took the same awkward sips as before, and something familiar came to her senses, a charge of awareness and need that she shouldn’t be feeling when her vision still churned and her head still pounded like this.

What did he look like now, beyond the blurred, broad-shouldered silhouette she’d been able to glimpse?

She had a sudden, powerful shaft of memory, from the first time they’d met, six years ago, and for a few blessed moments, the memory managed to override the migraine.

In her mind, she was back in the E.R., examining a child complaining of stomach pain, adding up the symptoms and thinking it didn’t look good. Even though the pediatric E.R. beds were in a separate area from the general beds, she could still hear the commotion nearby. A detoxing addict had turned abusive and violent. This one was apparently stronger and more persistent than most.

She finished her exam, and promised the parents that the senior doctor would be there soon to order some tests, then she left to return to the pediatric medical floor on level six ...

And there was Daniel, strong-shouldered and intentionally intimidating in his uniform, responding to a call for security. She passed him just as he reached the knot of people caught up in the addict’s drama—passed him close enough to almost brush his arm, which was flexed big and hard beneath the dark gray shirt. Close enough to see the control and determination in his face.

Some security guards didn’t look like that. They looked as if they enjoyed the prospect of wielding power and force a little too much. They practically grinned in anticipation as they approached a potentially violent scene. Daniel, in contrast, seemed calm, businesslike, implacable.

Incredibly good-looking, too, in a way she didn’t usually notice, with his angular features and well-shaped head, close-cut dark hair and matching stubble, deep-set black eyes and powerful size. Until that point, she’d always gone for very smart, cerebral men, liking their intellect before she noticed their body.

Daniel was different, that first day and every day afterward.

Daniel was so, so utterly different from Kyle, the ex-husband whose last name she’d still been using back then. She was powerfully aware of it from the very first moment, when he glanced sideways at her and then ahead to the scene that awaited him.

She couldn’t help the turn of her head in his direction, couldn’t miss the moment when their eyes met, heard him say to the addict a moment later, “We’re done here,” and then that was it. She reached the swing door that led out of the E.R., pushed it open and left. The backward swing of the door blocked out sound and sight. She never learned the aftermath of the addict’s behavior, and the child with stomach pain turned out to have leukemia, which eventually went into remission and then cure.

Her first sight of Daniel Porter was the thing that stayed with her, and she must have given something away in her face or her body language ... She must have been more naked than she knew.

Because he began to smile at her when they passed each other in a corridor or met up at a desk. Soon, he was saying hi and pausing to talk.

The conversations grew longer, and he didn't seem in a hurry to bring them to an end, even though the subject matter was usually pretty trivial and sometimes he seemed to find talking a challenge or an effort, and then one day—

Yeah.

A drink. A meal. Bed.

She was so horribly on the rebound at that point, from the ugly unraveling of her marriage. Kyle had remarried so quickly, it had felt like a studied act of revenge. Maybe it was. Kyle was like that. She would never have taken him back, and she wondered about the new wife, but still her emotions from the breakup were raw.

Maybe the reason she'd responded to Daniel so strongly was purely that he seemed so polar opposite to her ex, in so many ways.

But you couldn't make a relationship work when it was based on choosing the opposite to what you'd had before. And with the painful timing, it could never have worked with Daniel, no matter what kind of a man he'd been. They'd both been crazy even to try.

Chapter Three

Was Scarlett asleep?

Daniel wasn't sure.

She hadn't moved or spoken for a while now, and her breathing was very even. It was almost three o'clock, and Andy should be back with the prescription pain medication any minute. The TV was spewing out another crime show rerun. He preferred hospital shows for when he needed to unwind in front of a screen.

There was a symmetry about it, he realized. Scarlett was a doctor and liked TV crime. He was a cop and liked TV medicine. Neither of them wanted to revisit their working environment in their time off.

Healthy.

Something in common, too, in an upside-down kind of way.

Only problem was that this particular TV crime show was killing him with its implausibility.

He tried to find in Scarlett's face and body the same woman he'd known six years ago, but couldn't, and maybe that was good. She'd been quite defiantly blonde back then. Now her hair color was a natural golden brunette, but that wasn't the biggest difference.

Where were the big, liquid, intelligent brandy-brown eyes and the sensitive, full-lipped mouth? The softness and curves? Lost in fatigue and stress and weight loss and pain. He'd eventually recognized her, but only just, and even now he couldn't put his finger on what had finally clicked. Not her voice.

Something harder to define.

Something—and this appalled him, when you got down to it—that had its source in his memories of her body when they'd made love. The way she'd closed her eyes and surrendered so totally to the moment. The way she'd moved. The way she'd been possessed by the strength of their physical connection to the same degree she was now possessed by the blurred vision and pain.

They'd only been involved for a few weeks, but he hadn't known sex like it before or since.

He hadn't known certainty like it before or since, either.

Hell, what kind of an admission was that? What did it say about his life? Was this why he hadn't said anything to her about their past acquaintance? Because he was afraid that his memories of their time in bed, and his memories of how she'd made him feel, would color his voice and she would hear it? Because if they talked about the past, then she might guess how much he'd never gotten her out from under his skin?

How could you say a calm, casual, "Remember me?" in a situation like this?

Better—*way* better—to let it go and say nothing.

For now, at least.

Scarlett began to feel human again when the stronger pain medication kicked in at around six o'clock. Andy had brought the pharmacy bag into the house, grabbed his overnight bag and left for the city almost at once. After she'd taken the medication, Daniel had left for the store, and now she could hear that he was back. He still had the key from under the flowerpot, and when he let himself back in the house, she heard the rustle of the shopping bags.

He closed the door behind her, put down the bags and came through into the living room, to Scarlett's couch. "What can I do for you next?" He sounded like a cop, again. Voice deep and clipped. No words wasted. No hesitation or doubt.

"Find another crime show before I murder one of those designers ..."

He didn't laugh. Well, okay, she wasn't being that funny. Humor was all in the timing, and hers had disappeared along with her vision. She heard him pick up the remote and start channel surfing,

stopping at the first show he came to. She listened to it for a moment, then they both spoke at the same time.

“Sorry, I can’t handle—” from her.

From him, “Sorry, do you mind if we—?”

“Please,” she agreed. “Switch.”

“Sitcom?”

“One with an audience, not canned.”

“Let’s see what we have here ... And then can I heat you some soup?”

“Please.”

She managed to sit and sip soup from a mug, in between bites of toast that Daniel had rested on a paper napkin, and when she opened her eyes the multiple images had resolved down to two, the blurriness was lessened and the light didn’t hurt anymore. She still couldn’t see clearly, but the progress felt good.

Daniel came and took the empty mug from her hands without her having to ask.

“Thanks. I’m feeling a lot better, painwise, even if the vision still isn’t that great.”

“You’re looking better. Way better color.”

“The soup really helped.”

“I can heat you some more.”

“Actually, yes, another mug.”

“More toast, too?”

“Please. It’s really settling my stomach. How come you’re so good at this?” she blurted out.

There came a long beat of silence, then, on a reluctant growl, “My mom was sick for a long time. From when I was a kid.”

A shock ran through her. He’d never told her that, six years ago. Never once. Not hinted at it, or—

Nothing.

She’d worked out that he’d had a challenging history—well, he’d ended up rubbing her face in it, with deliberate anger—but she hadn’t known about his mom. He’d never told her enough about anything, back then, and it shocked her that he hadn’t breathed a word about something this huge.

“She died a few months ago,” Daniel added, in answer to the question Scarlett hadn’t found a way to ask. “It was a good thing, by that point. She was glad to go.”

She apologized awkwardly, as if it was her fault that she hadn’t known. Maybe it was. Maybe he would have told her about his mom’s illness when they’d come up here, if—

Yeah. If a few things.

If she hadn’t been so obviously on the rebound. If her ex hadn’t left her with so much emotional baggage. If she hadn’t been so scared of the strength of her physical response to Daniel, when her whole life her bright mind was the thing she’d been taught to rely on. If she’d had more trust—because she hadn’t trusted even the good things about him, back then, let alone the obvious differences between them.

And if they hadn’t spent so much of their short time together in bed.

“It’s okay,” he said, and the words covered all sorts of bases, and allowed them both to let the subject go.

Silence wasn’t comfortable, though. She scrabbled around in her woolly mind for something to say, but Daniel managed it first. Very polite. “Your brother has done up the house great.”

“It’s gorgeous, isn’t it? He didn’t do all of it. The previous owner had made a good start. I’ve seen some photos from the 1970s when it was a dump. Badly subdivided, with cheap paneling everywhere, and dark brown paint with mustard-yellow appliances and flooring.”

“I remember that kind of color scheme. Actually our refrigerator was avocado-green.”

“You’re not that old!”

He laughed. “Some people don’t manage to buy a new appliance or repaint a room for quite a while after the fashions change.”

“True.” She held her breath. It was the kind of conversation topic that would have deteriorated into an argument six years ago, hinging on his underprivileged background—living with bad paint—and her well-paved path through life—regularly updated decor. She would have said too much, made it all too complicated, while he would have said barely anything at all, but with a sense that there was enormous emotion lying underneath.

Would he turn it into an argument now? Or one of the white-hot, simmering silences she’d hated?

After a moment, he laughed again. “Funny how you can turn memories around.”

“Yeah?”

“I hated those paint colors when I was a kid. Now they’re an anecdote. A war story.”

“Kids today think they have it tough,” she mimicked. “*We* had to live with avocado-colored refrigerators.”

“What is it they say? What doesn’t kill you makes you stronger.”

“It surely does!”

They talked a little more, never openly confronting the fact that they knew each other, but letting it say itself in a reference here and there. Daniel held himself back, the way he always had. Scarlett gave a little more, and felt a zing of triumph every time she got something from him in return.

She thought that they couldn’t have related to each other like this in any other situation. It was only happening because she couldn’t see, because he’d had to help her, and because there had been that first ten or fifteen minutes when it wasn’t clear whether they both realized that they’d met before.

After a while, the conversation petered out in a natural kind of way. They watched—or in her case listened to—TV in silence, while she measured the passage of time in sitcom units and listened to Daniel’s occasional gruff gurgle of laughter.

She liked it when he laughed. It was a warm and very physical sound, reassuring and hopeful. Laughter created companionship every bit as much as conversation. Maybe more. She laughed along with him a couple of times, and his laugh touched her like a soft blanket or the palm of a comforting hand. She wished the sitcoms were funnier, so that the laugh would come more often.

Four and a half of them went by, which meant that it must be around nine. They’d spent most of an evening together and barely said a word, and yet she felt her emotions settling to a deeper place, a better place than she would have thought possible, with regard to this man.

For the past six years she’d felt a churn of uncomfortable memories and feelings any time she thought of him. She’d second-guessed everything she’d said and done, and everything he’d done, too. Maybe she hadn’t needed to feel that way. Maybe none of it had been as bad as she’d thought, on either side.

Well, huh.

She let the thought sit, didn’t know what she wanted to do about it.

Time for more medication, and the bed awaiting her upstairs. He brought the pills to her, with a glass of water, and she gulped them down. From experience, she knew that it didn’t do to let the pain take hold again between doses. The medication was most effective if she stayed strictly to the four-hour interval.

“Thanks, Daniel.”

“No problem. Going up now?”

“That’s the plan.” She stood.

And swayed.

Light-headed rather than actively dizzy, maybe because she’d been lying down for so long.

Daniel was there almost at once, grabbing her by the elbows and then, in case this wasn’t enough, stepping right up to her so she could grasp two fistfuls of his shirt and lean her weight into his chest.

When she took a staggering step sideways, he kept her on her feet, and then the lightheadedness subsided and she felt almost normal, apart from her sight.

He put his arm around her waist and engulfed her hand in his and it felt good, even though she couldn't even see him, she had no idea what he really looked like now. Not in detail. If he had lines starting to form around his eyes and mouth, or if his hairline was receding, but he felt so good, and he smelled so good, too, like sandalwood and mint and clean laundry.

"I could make you a bed on the couch, if it's too hard for you to get upstairs," he said.

"I want a real bed. It's worth going up for."

"Yeah, a real bed is always good."

The words dropped into the air and seemed to hang there. She remembered the big, puffy four-poster at the bed-and-breakfast. She remembered the bunk bed in the doctors' on-call room at the hospital, when Daniel had wedged a chair under the handle of the door.

She remembered her own bed at home in her parents' Manhattan apartment. She'd gone back there to live after her separation from Kyle and had stayed on there through her demanding internship year, until she had more time to find the right place on her own.

Mom and Dad had been away for the weekend. Daniel had looked around at the high ceilings, the oil paintings on the walls, the windows with a distant view of Central Park, and couldn't hide that this level of privilege was new to him and troubled him. What did it say about their differences?

But in her bed together, that hadn't mattered.

In her bed, nothing had mattered except the way they moved together, the way they made each other feel, the sense of discovery and magic, the blissful contrast of his big, strong body and her softer, smaller one.

The only thing they'd ever really had during those short, intense weeks—sex, and bed, sleeping wrapped in each other's arms.

It had scared her with its overwhelming power.

"Are we doing okay to move?" he asked. "Steady?"

"Yes. Thanks."

But before they could start the walk toward the stairs, he added quietly, "We should say it, don't you think? We've both been holding off." He took a careful breath, and she could feel it through their contact. "You remember me."

"Of course I do." She opened her eyes, but they still wouldn't focus properly. He was just a darker blur in a fuzzy radiance. "Even though I can't see you."

Sight was overrated, her body said. Neither of them moved. Time slowed. The heat of his hands burned into her and she felt the air seem to thicken around them. She could have let him go and stepped away, but she didn't. Neither did he.

"You're not blonde anymore."

"That was my divorce hair." She could feel the way his chest expanded and contracted as he breathed, could feel the detail of ribs and abs and back muscles beneath the cool weave of a short-sleeved T-shirt.

"You never wanted to talk about your divorce." She knew the sleeves were short because the soft inner skin of his arm was in direct contact with her forearms as he closed his body more protectively around her. "I think you mentioned it twice."

"We weren't all that much about talking, you and me, were we? I still don't want to talk about it."

"It was that bad?"

"No, it was more ... The marriage was that bad."

"That's not why we fell at the first hurdle, the two of us—because you'd had a bad marriage."

"No. One of the reasons."

"The other reasons ... I never really understood what they were," he said slowly. He loosened his hold a little, creating a slow friction where their bodies touched.

“You were angry ...” she reminded him.

“So were you. And you pulled right back. I could feel you pulling back, and so I pushed harder and it all got worse until you just cut off.”

“The timing was wrong. Everything was wrong.”

“Without giving me a chance to bridge the gap. The last thing we ever did was go to bed.”

“Are you still angry?”

“Are you?” he countered quickly.

She bit back a retort that this was what he’d done before, he’d always turned things onto her, made her talk first and talk longest, so that she was the one who had to put herself out there, put her needs and feelings on the line, at a time when she was still such a mess from her marriage.

It was true. He had done that.

But there were so many mistakes and faults on both sides, she couldn’t untangle the rights and wrongs of it. It had been a mess. If she forgave herself, then she had to forgive him.

She said some of this, haltingly, and *felt*—because she couldn’t see—the way he listened. Cautiously. Willing to hear. Resistant about some of it. Tightening his hands at one point, and then softening them against her back. “I agree it was both of us,” he said. “I agree that we can’t just ... be angry. Anger is such a prison. It holds you back. Even when you can see it, you can’t help it sometimes. But let’s not.”

He spoke as if he knew from bitter experience, driving home to her once again how little they’d really known about each other. She didn’t know what had happened in his past to make him believe anger was like that, did things like that.

“Is anger what you’ve felt, if you’ve thought about me, over the past six years?” She tried to open her eyes again, saw a shimmery blur. He was too close. She couldn’t bring him fully into focus and it threatened to make her queasy. Best not to look.

“No, mostly not,” he said. “You?”

“No. More like a sense of inevitability. I’ve thought about it. I could never find a way for it to have been different. We just weren’t in the right place, either of us. Me more than you, maybe?”

“Don’t know about that. But yeah, neither of us in the right place. Lot of regret. Not much clarity.”

“Pretty much.”

He shifted his weight again, and she felt the pressure of his chest against hers. They didn’t speak. She remembered what she’d decided after Daniel—that she really wasn’t cut out for the whole *love* thing. It was too daunting. Too huge. Too much of a contradiction to everything she’d been taught about her own strengths.

She’d had one failed marriage, and one failed fling where even the great sex couldn’t hold them together for more than a few weeks. The great sex seemed like the problem more than the solution. It was deceptive. It got in the way.

Immersed in her work, she might have tried love again if it had come her way. She’d planned to be very careful about it, to take it slow, to keep sex safely out of it for as long as she could. But she’d never had to follow through on those plans because no man had seriously tried for more than a date or two. How likely was it, really, when she kept to such a tight, demanding routine?

Daniel was the first to speak again. “What about the reasons why it was good between us, Scarlett?” His voice dropped low and slow. “What do you think, now, about those?”

The air went still and heavy around them, while the past crowded in and their bodies remembered. She wanted to tilt her head and see if her cheek would find his shoulder. Or lean in and lift her chin. Her mouth would be sure to find something, if she did that. Something delicious and wonderful. She knew it, because he was so close. She would find the hard, satiny heat of his neck. Or the fragrant tickle of his hair. Or the tease of his gorgeous mouth.

A man’s mouth didn’t change in six years.

Her own body began to soften and swell and melt. Her skin was so sensitive, she was acutely aware of every inch of Daniel's touch, every ounce of pressure, every tiny sound he made, the strength that seemed to come off him in waves, like radiant heat.

"The reasons why it was good ..." she said.

Incredibly, with her vision still below par, her capacity for arousal seemed to be working just fine. She shifted her weight, the way he had done a minute ago, and the movement brought their thighs together. He stood at a slight angle, so that one knee pressed between her legs, dragging her skirt into a deep fold.

"Yes. You know what I'm talking about. Have they changed?" The whole world narrowed to just this—her and Daniel, holding each other, remembering with their bodies what they were skirting around so cautiously with their words. "Has *it* changed? That one amazing reason?"

"How can I know?"

"You have an inkling." His hand slipped a little, closing over her hip. She could feel the warmth, and didn't want it to go away.

"Okay, but that's a toe in the water."

"Is it? You can tell a lot from a toe. If the water's warm or cold. If it's clean against your skin." They both stood very still, and Scarlett barely managed to breathe. "You want to find out if this feels the same all the way?" His hand slid across and down and traced the curve from the small of her back, across her butt, to the top of her thigh. "More than a toe in the water?"

She answered him only with a ragged breath.

"This was always so good, Scarlett, *so* good. This was how it started. We got to this pretty soon. This was the center of it, the meaning of it. This was where it was always the best."

"Yes ..."

"Yes!"

"But we stuffed it up."

"We stuffed everything else up," he corrected her. "We never stuffed this. Never once. We slept together on our first date and we never, ever got it wrong."

Chapter Four

Daniel heard himself sweet-talking—practically begging—Scarlett into bed and wondered what the hell he was thinking.

Start into this again? Risk losing himself this way? He didn't know if he should wish he'd never stopped beside her skewed car on the verge of the road this afternoon, or if he might count it as the luckiest action of the year.

His body had a pretty powerful opinion on the subject, but should he listen to it? His body told him he could have Scarlett in the palm of his hand with the right touch behind her ear, the right peachy softening of his mouth over hers, exactly the way he'd had her before, but how crazy would that be?

He couldn't believe how much he wanted her, even with all the baggage they had, all the memories of how it hadn't worked before. His body said none of that mattered. The past was gone. *Now* was what counted. But he knew that *now* didn't last, while its legacy often did.

It was like in a cartoon, with a tiny angel version of himself sitting on one shoulder and a tiny devil on the other. Talking him up. Talking him down.

"You can regret it in the morning, big fella," the tiny cartoon devil urged. "Now is now."

"She's worth more than a one-night stand," the cartoon angel insisted.

"Doesn't have to be one night. The regret might be weeks away. The regret might never happen."

While the cartoon symbols of his conscience bickered away, Scarlett made the decision for them. He could feel her body shaking beneath his touch, the power of her response that much stronger because she otherwise seemed so thin and frail with the pain and dizziness that were only just losing their hold. "Upstairs," she said. "In a bed." She took his hands and made them move down her body, the message that she wanted his touch so naked and clear. "Because I don't have a strong enough head for anything creative tonight."

"You mean—?" he began, slow about it in spite of her bluntness and her signals, not able to believe that she would make it this easy, even though she'd always made it easy six years ago.

She'd never used sex as a bargaining chip or a power play or a strategy. Not even right at the end. As he'd reminded her just now, the very last thing they did before she told him it was over was to make love with dizzying, almost desperate satisfaction, as if there'd been no problems between them at all.

"You're right," she said simply, with her palm cupped softly against his jaw and her whispered words just a fraction of an inch from his mouth. "We never once got this wrong."

He carried her.

Not because she needed it, the way she had on the verge of the road, but because the sheer, crazy charge of hearing her say that she wanted him had no place else to go. He just scooped her up and settled her against his chest and went for the stairs, while she tightened her arms around his neck and tried to control her breathing. "Oh, Lord, Daniel, how do you make me want this so much?" He felt so strong and full of triumph about what was happening that he practically laughed out loud.

It was so sudden.

So very much wanted.

Both of them.

Total equality about it.

He'd had to fight all evening not to keep looking at her and mostly it was a fight he'd lost. He'd watched her color slowly come back and her movements become stronger and less dominated by pain. He'd watched her sipping the soup and chewing neatly on the toast with her eyes closed. She'd kept her hands wrapped tight around the mug and he could see in her face that it made her feel better, even before she'd said so.

He'd watched her occasional attempts to open her eyes, the dark lashes lifting to show darker pupils before she'd made a frustrated sound and closed them again. He'd watched the careful way she talked. Their past relationship was written so clearly on her face, in good ways and bad, if only she knew.

He wasn't done with this, and she wasn't, either.

It was unfinished, six years ago.

Or it was finished wrong, which came to the same thing.

"I'm scared," she said.

"I won't drop you." Her butt was safe against his stomach, while her thighs and spine pressed on his arms, with such warm, satisfying weight.

"I'm scared of pretty much everything *except* you dropping me."

"You changing your mind?" They'd reached the top of the stairs. He lowered her down, the initial charge of his energy spent. They held each other almost desperately, as if their contact wouldn't be able to reconnect if it broke.

"No! But scared is part of it." She stroked his arm, sliding her hand beneath the sleeve of his T-shirt and then bringing it right down to his wrist. Her touch triggered a million nerve endings into a response. "Honesty matters in bed." She spoke as if she knew from experience. Different experience. Bad experience. Not what they'd had together. Her marriage, he guessed.

"It does," he agreed. He stepped closer, even though that was barely possible. "Honestly, then? I'm scared, too."

"Yeah?"

"Same reasons, maybe. That it won't be as good."

She laughed, hunched her shoulders and gave a shiver. "I'm scared of the opposite." She held on to the belt loops at his waistband as if she needed the support, and pressed her forehead into his shoulder. His jaw settled against her hair as if it lived there.

"What's the opposite?" He couldn't think straight. Her hand had come whispering across the front of his jeans. He wasn't sure if she even knew she was doing it. Her eyes were closed, the way they had been all day. She was so naked in what she gave away, when she couldn't see.

"That it'll be too good," she promised. "Mind-blowingly, terrifyingly good. And you'll reach into my guts and squeeze and I won't know where to go next."

"Did that happen before?"

"Yes. It did. And I don't know how much of that was because of ... well, my marriage."

"Not a factor this time around."

"No."

"You squeezed my guts pretty hard, too," he admitted on a growl. "You nearly broke them. And you're squeezing 'em right now."

"Am I?"

"Yes. Hard. It almost hurts. It aches."

"Good," she said, almost fiercely. "Because I'm aching just as much."

He kissed her because he couldn't help it. Because her mouth was right there, so soft, with a tiny patch of dryness on her lower lip that he wanted to moisten with his tongue. She responded in an instant and they deepened the kiss with mutual need, couldn't get enough of each other.

He took her lower lip lightly between his teeth, softened it, stroked it, covered her whole mouth with his and felt the deliberate caress she gave back to him, and the little nips and tastes. Her mouth moved with velvety softness and he chased every movement, wanted it deeper and deeper and seriously couldn't, couldn't, *couldn't* get enough.

Sometimes a kiss was just a kiss.

Sometimes it wasn't.

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