A VALENTINE KISS



THERESE BEHARRIE

JENNIE ADAMS

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MILLS & BOON

By Request

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Christy McKellen
Therese Beharrie

A Valentine Kiss: A Marriage Worth Saving / Tempted by Her Tycoon Boss / The Unforgettable Spanish Tycoon

Аннотация

A Valentine KissA Marriage Worth SavingOnce, Mila Thomas had love, marriage and the promise of the family she'd always longed for, until tragedy struck. Now, with the ink still drying on her divorce papers, no matter how painful it is, it's time to move on…Tempted By Her Tycoon BossThis year, horticulturist Cecilia Tomson is hosting Sydney's most glamorous masked ball. Usually unflappable, she's struggling to concentrate—her boss, Linc MacKay, who rejected her years ago, has picked the worst moment to visit. And he's as gorgeous as ever!The Unforgettable Spanish TycoonOnce Elena Jones shared an intense entanglement with striking Spaniard Caleb Araya, ending with both their hearts in tatters. Now she's a successful entrepreneur, and when he rejects her new business proposition it's clear Caleb hasn't forgotten…

About the Authors

THERESE BEHARRIE has always been thrilled by romance. Her love of reading established this, and now she gets to write happy-ever-afters for a living and about all things romance in her blog at theresebeharrie.com. She married a man who constantly exceeds her romantic expectations and is an infinite source of inspiration for her romantic heroes. She lives in Cape Town, South Africa, and is still amazed that her dream of being a romance author is a reality.

After years of living in a small inland city in New South Wales, Australia, **JENNIE ADAMS** re-embraced the country lifestyle of her childhood. When she isn't writing Jennie dedicates her time to promoting the natural wonders of her new area and encouraging others to visit and enjoy what now constitutes her back yard—large tracts of native bushland, flora and fauna reserves, and wetlands. Jennie's family has grown to embrace in-laws (and outlaws, as she always jokes), sisters, daughters and brothers of the heart. Find Jennie at joybyjennie.com.

Formerly a video and radio producer, **CHRISTY MCKELLEN** now spends her time writing fun, impassioned and emotive romance with an undercurrent of sensual tension. When she's not writing she can be found enjoying life with her husband and three children, walking for pleasure, and researching other people's deepest secrets and desires.

Christy loves to hear from readers. You can get hold of her at christymckellen.com.

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A Marriage Worth Saving

Therese Beharrie

Never too late...

Once, Mila Thomas had love, marriage and the promise of the family she'd always longed for, until tragedy struck. Now, with the ink still drying on her divorce papers, no matter how painful it is, it's time to move on...

To begin again?

Leaving Mila was the hardest thing Jordan's ever had to do. However, when fate brings them back together, he's reminded of what drew him to his beautiful wife in the first place, and he wonders if it's ever too late to try again?

To my husband, Grant. Thank you for showing me what a strong relationship is. It's knowing that we can face whatever comes our way that has helped me to write about a relationship that survives after the unthinkable. You are my inspiration. I love you.

And for the incredibly strong women in my family. Your courage in facing the most heartbreaking of losses inspired this story. Your determination in facing the future inspired these characters.

I hope it brings you a measure of comfort.

PROLOGUE

JORDAN THOMAS COULDN'T take his eyes off his event planner.

Well, he supposed he couldn't exactly call her 'his' when his father had been the one to hire her. But since he had inherited his mother's half of the vineyard—which he would have gladly traded to have her back—he figured his father's decision went for the both of them.

'Are you going to keep staring at her, or are you going to introduce yourself?'

His father, Gregory, barely glanced at him as he said the words. The serious tone Greg had used would have alarmed anyone who didn't know him—would have made him seem almost angry—but at twenty-seven years old Jordan knew the nuances of his father's voice. Greg was baiting him.

'I'm still thinking about it. I'm not sure I want to bother her an hour before the event,' Jordan answered.

When his father didn't reply, he sighed.

'Maybe you should call her over so that I can introduce myself, Dad.'

His father nodded his approval. 'Mila! Would you come over here for a second?'

The minute she started walking towards them, Jordan's heart raced. She was absolutely beautiful, he thought as he took in the perfectly designed features of her face. A small nose led to luscious lips, pink as a cherry blossom and which curved into a smile when she saw his father. The smile kicked his heart up

another notch even though her brown eyes watched him carefully, surrounded by the fullest, darkest eyelashes he had ever seen.

He wondered idly if they were like that with help from cosmetic enhancements, but something told him that everything about her was natural. She made him think of the fields where his grapes grew in the vineyard—of the vibrancy of their colours and the feeling of home he always felt looking at it.

He didn't have time to ponder the unsettling thought when she stopped in front of them.

'Mila, you haven't had the chance to meet my son yet.' Greg nudged Jordan, and if Jordan hadn't been so mesmerised by the woman in front of him, he might have wondered at his father pushing him towards her.

But all thoughts flew out of his head the minute he introduced himself and she said, 'Mila Dennis,' and took his outstretched hand.

He'd thought there would be heat—a natural reaction to touching someone he found attractive. But he hadn't expected the heat to burn through his entire body. He hadn't expected the longing that curled in his stomach, the desire to make her his. But most of all he hadn't expected the pull that he felt towards her—a connection that went beyond the physical.

She pulled her hand away quickly, tucking a non-existent piece of hair behind her ear, and he knew she had felt it, too.

'It's lovely to meet you, Mr Thomas.'

Her voice sounded like music to him and he frowned,

wondering at his reaction to a woman he hadn't even known for five minutes.

'Jordan, please. Mr Thomas is my father.' He shoved his hands into his pockets and watched as a smile spread across Greg's face. Jordan felt his eyebrows raise.

'Actually, Mila doesn't call me that,' Greg said, and Jordan realised Greg's smile was aimed at Mila. It was a sign of affection that made their relationship seem more than that of employer/employee. It was almost...familial. Almost, because Greg didn't even share his smiles—a rare commodity—with his family. With his son.

He would have to ask his father about it, Jordan thought when Mila's lips curved in response. But then she looked at Jordan and the smile faltered.

'Well, I think it's best that I get back. We have hundreds of people coming today. It was a great idea to host a Valentine's Day Under the Stars event.'

'It was mine.' Jordan wasn't sure why he said it, but he wanted her to know that he was responsible for the idea that had brought the two of them together.

He had a feeling it would be significant.

'Well, it was a great one.' She frowned, as though she wasn't sure how to respond to him. 'I'll see you both a little later then. Greg...' She smiled at Jordan's father, but again it faltered when she turned her attention to him. 'Jordan...'

She said his name carefully, as though it was a minefield

she was navigating through. He watched her, saw the flash of awareness and then denial in her eyes, and something settled inside him.

'What was that?'

His father had waited for Mila to leave before asking, and Jordan turned to him, noting the carefully blank expression on Greg's face.

'I think I've just met the woman I'm going to spend the rest of my life with.'

Greg's eyebrows rose so high they disappeared under the hair that had fallen over his forehead. And then came another nod of approval.

'I knew you were a smart boy,' he said, and a warm feeling spread through Jordan's heart at what he knew was high praise coming from his father.

* * *

Meeting Jordan Thomas had unsettled Mila so much that she'd almost lost her headline act.

When she heard the commotion in the tent they'd set up behind the amphitheatre stage—and saw the sympathetic look Lulu, her assistant and long-time friend, shot her on her way towards the sound—Mila knew she was about to walk into a drama.

'Why would you do this to me on Valentine's Day?' Karen, the pretty singer that the whole of South Africa had been raving about since she'd won the biggest singing competition in the

country, was wailing. 'You couldn't wait one day before breaking up with me? And right before a performance, too!'

Wails turned into heart-wrenching sobs—the kind that could only come from a teenage girl losing her first love—and Mila felt the telltale tickling of the start of a headache. She took in the chagrined look on Karen's guitarist's face and realised he was responsible for the tears.

She sighed, and then strode to the little crowd where the scene was unfolding.

'What's going on?'

'Kevin broke up with me!' Karen said through her sobs, and Mila wondered why she had decided that hiring a fresh young girl to perform at one of the biggest events she had ever planned—for one of the most prominent clients she had ever worked for—had seemed like a good idea.

And then she remembered the voice in the online videos she'd watched of Karen, and the number of views all those videos had got, and she sighed again.

'On Valentine's Day, Kevin?' Mila asked, instead of voicing the 'What were you thinking?' that sat on the tip of her tongue. Best not to rock the boat any further, she thought. Kevin, who looked to be only a couple of years older than the girl whose heart he had broken, shifted uncomfortably on his feet.

'Well, ma'am, there was this—'

He cut himself off when Mila held up her hand, affronted that he was calling her 'ma'am' even though she was only a few years

older than him. Four, max. She'd also realised that whatever Kevin had been about to say would have caused Karen even more distress.

'Okay, everyone, the show is over. Can we all get back to what we need to be doing? Our guests are starting to arrive,' Mila called out and then waited until everyone had scattered, eyeing those who lingered so that they eventually left, too.

When she was alone with Karen, she turned and took the girl's hand. 'Have you ever been broken up with before, Karen?'

Red curls bounced as Karen shook her head, and Mila suddenly felt all the sympathy in the world for her.

'It sucks. It really does. Your heart feels like it's been ripped into two and your stomach is in twists. It doesn't matter when it happens—that feeling is always the same. Stays there, too, if you let it.'

Mila thought about when she had been Karen's age—of how moving from foster home to foster home had meant that she'd never had someone to tell her this the first time a boy had broken her heart—and said what she'd wished she'd known then.

'But, you know, the older you get, the more you realise that the less it meant, the less it will hurt. And, since Kevin over there seems like a bit of a jerk, I'm thinking you'll be over this in a week...maybe two.'

'Really?' The hope in Karen's eyes made Mila smile.

'I'm pretty sure. And, you know, the best revenge is to prove to him that it didn't really matter that much after all.'

'But how...? Oh, if I perform with him, he'll think that I've got over it. Maybe he'll even want me back!'

She said the words with such enthusiasm that Mila resisted rolling her eyes. 'Sure... Why not?'

She watched Karen run to the bathroom to freshen up, feeling both relieved that Karen was going to perform and annoyed that she didn't seem to have heard a word Mila had told her.

'That was pretty impressive.'

The deep, intensely male voice sent shivers up Mila's spine, and she turned slowly to face its owner. Jordan Thomas's eyes were the most captivating she had ever seen—a combination of gold and brown that made her think of the first signs of autumn. They made the masculine features of his face seem ordinary though she knew that, based on the way he made her feel distinctly female, he was anything but ordinary. Light brown hair lay shaggy over his forehead, as though he had forgotten to comb it, but it added a charm to his face that might have been otherwise lost under the pure maleness of him.

She took a moment to compose herself, and then she smiled at him.

Because she was a professional and he was a client.

And because she needed to prove that the effect he'd had on her when they'd first met had been a fluke.

'Thanks. All a part of the job.'

'Consoling teenage girls is a part of your job?'

The smile came more naturally now. 'When the teenage girl

is the headline act at my event, yes.'

He shoved his hands into his pockets and the action drew her attention to the muscles under the black T-shirt he wore. Heaven help her, but she actually thought about running her hands over them before she could stop herself.

'It looks great.'

She blinked, and then realised that he was talking about the event. She nodded, and then peeked out of the tent to where people were beginning to fill the seats of the amphitheatre.

'It's come along nicely.' She noted that the wine stalls were already busy, and she could smell the waft of food from the food vendors. 'You should pat yourself on the back. It was your idea after all.'

She glanced back at him, saw the slow, sexy smile spread on his face, and thought that she needed to get away from him as she had almost fanned herself.

'It may have been my idea to host the event here at the vineyard, but I could never have arranged a concert and a movie screening in one night.'

'It pulls in fans for the concert and romantics for the movie,' she said, as she had to Greg Thomas so many times before. 'Who can resist either of those events—or any event, really—under the stars, with delicious Thomas Vineyard wines on tap, on the most romantic day of the year?'

His eyes sparkled, as though her words had given him some kind of idea, and then he smiled at her. A full smile that was

more impactful than a thousand of his slow, sexy ones.

'I need to check everything one more time. If you'll excuse me?'

Jordan nodded, and then said, 'I'll find you later.'

She frowned as she walked away, wondering what on earth he'd meant by that.

* * *

When the movie was about ten minutes in, she found out.

He had come to her and claimed that there was a problem with the wine delivery for those who had pre-ordered boxes to take home with them. Like a fool she had followed him, her mind racing to a million different ways of solving the problem. Only when he led her through a gate past the Thomas house did it occur to her that there might not be an emergency.

'What is this?' she asked quietly, even though they were far enough away from the guests that no one would hear her.

'It's a picnic. Under the stars.'

A part of her melted at that—the pure romance of it made her feel as giddy as a girl on her first date. But it didn't change the way her heart raced in panic as she took in the scene in front of her.

A blanket was spread out overlooking the vineyard, and in the moonlight she could see the shadow of the mountains. For a brief moment she wondered what it would look like during the day, with its colours and its magnitude and the welcoming silence.

She shook her head and looked at what was spread on the

blanket. A bottle of wine—she couldn't read the label, though she thought she saw the Thomas Vineyard crest—cooled in an ice bucket with two glasses next to it. A variety of the foods that she hadn't had time to taste accompanied the wine.

Although she really didn't want to, she found herself softening even more, her heart racing now for completely different reasons than a man expressing interest in her.

'Are you going to stay or run?'

She looked up at him, and though his words sounded playful, his expression told her otherwise.

'Are those my only two options?'

'I could offer you another.'

She saw the change in his eyes and her body heated.

'What would you do if I ran?' she asked, hoping to distract him.

'I'd run with you.'

She resisted the urge to smile at his charm, and wondered why someone like Jordan Thomas would be interested in her? First, she was his employee. And second, she didn't have much to offer him. What could a woman with no family and no foundation offer a man like Jordan Thomas of the Thomas Vineyard?

Still, she found herself saying, 'Pour me a glass of wine, Jordan.'

He handed her a glass with a smile that had her shaking her head.

'You don't agree with my methods?'

'You mean lying to get me to share a drink with you?'

'Yes.' He grinned. 'But you can't tell me this isn't a welcome change to having to run around all day?'

'No, I can't.' She sighed, and took a sip from her wine. 'Drinking wine after a long day with a handsome man should be the only way to unwind.'

She didn't realise what she'd said until she saw him smiling at her, and then she blushed furiously.

Where had that come from?

'I didn't mean—'

'To tell me I'm handsome?'

She set her wine down. 'Yes. It's been a long day.'

'So I could ask you anything now and you would answer it?'

'Maybe,' she said softly, caught by the expression in his eyes.

And then she wondered who this person who was flirting with this gorgeous man was. Because surely it couldn't be tame, safe Mila. How often had she heard those comments from boys she had dated? From her foster siblings, who'd had no interest in hanging out with a girl who couldn't bring herself to try drugs or go out drinking every night, no matter how desperately she'd wanted to be liked?

She closed her eyes at the pain, and picked up her wine glass again. It must have been the stress of the event that had her thinking about a past she'd thought she'd left behind.

But before she could drink her wine, Jordan took the glass out of her hand and she froze.

'Do you have a boyfriend?' he asked her, and she realised he was a lot closer than he'd been a few moments ago. Her throat dried at the woodsy smell that filled her senses, and suddenly she wished she hadn't flirted with him.

'No,' she answered quickly, her breathing becoming more heavy than she thought could be healthy.

'Good. That makes this much easier.'

'What are you talking about?' She couldn't take her eyes off him, and knew she should be worried that the realisation only caused the slightest bit of alarm in her.

'Us.' He pulled the clip out of her hair so that it fell to her shoulders. 'I'm glad you won't have to break another man's heart so that we can be together.'

'That's presumptuous of you,' she replied, though for the life of her, she couldn't think of one reason why that was a problem. Even when he had her speaking her mind without the filter she usually employed with every word.

He didn't respond immediately, and she wondered if she'd said something wrong.

And then her heart stopped completely when his hand stilled on her neck and he said, 'It should be. Everything inside me is saying that feeling this way about someone without even knowing them is crazy. And yet I can't help myself.'

His hand moved to her face, and she thought that even if the sky fell down on them she wouldn't be able to look away from him.

'So tell me whether I'm being presumptuous when I say I know you feel it, too?'

She couldn't speak because the pieces that had been floating around in her head since they'd met—and the feelings that had become unsettled the moment he'd introduced himself—told her there was truth to his words.

'You did all of this to...to see if I felt the same way?'

'No.' He smiled, and tucked a piece of hair behind her ear. 'I did this to make you realise that you did.'

'Jordan, I—'

His lips were suddenly on hers, and she felt herself melt, felt her resistance—her denial—fade away. Because as his mouth moved against hers, her heart was telling her that it wanted to be with him. She ignored the way her mind told her she was being ridiculous, and instead ran her hands over the muscles she had admired earlier.

With one arm he moved everything that was on the blanket away and she found herself on her back, with Jordan's body half over hers. But she pulled away, her chest heaving as though she'd run a marathon.

'This is crazy,' she said shakily, but didn't move any further.

'Yes, it is,' he replied, his eyes filled with a mixture of desire and tenderness.

She raised a hand to his face, pushing his hair back and settling it on his cheek. He turned his head and kissed her hand. And in that moment, under the stars that sparkled brightly on Valentine's

Day, she realised that she might have just fallen in love with a man she had only known for a few hours.

Even as her mind called her foolish she was pulling his lips back down to hers.

CHAPTER ONE

Two years later

JORDAN STOOD OUTSIDE his childhood home and grief—and guilt—crashed through him.

The house was like many he had seen in the Stellenbosch wine lands—large and white, with a black roof and shutters. Except he had grown up in this house. He'd played on the patio that stretched out in front of the house, with its stone pillars that had vines crawling up them. He and his father had spent Sunday evenings watching the sun set—usually in silence—on the rocking chairs that stood next to the large wooden door.

He turned his back on the house and the memories, and looked out to the gravel road that led to the rest of the vineyard.

Trees reached out to one another over the road, the colour of their leaves fading from the bright green of summer to the warm hues of autumn. From where he stood he could see the chapel where he'd married Mila just three months after they'd met.

He shook his head. He wouldn't think about that now.

Instead he looked under the potted plants that lined the pathway to the front door for the key he knew his father had kept there. When he found it he began to walk to his father's house—except that wasn't true any more. He clenched his jaw at the

reminder of the new ownership of the house—the house he had grown up in—and the reason he was back, and turned the key in the lock.

He heard it first—the crackling sound of fire blazing—and he set his bags down and hurried to the living room where he was sure he would find the house burning. And slowed when he realised that the fire was safely in the fireplace.

He turned his head to the couch in front of the fire, and his heart stopped when he saw his ex-wife sitting in front of it.

'What are you doing here?' he demanded before he could think, the shock of seeing her here, in his childhood home, forcing him to speak before he could think it through.

She jumped when she heard him, and shame poured through him as the glass of wine in her hand dropped to the ground and the colour seeped from her face.

'Jordan... What...? I...'

In another world, at another time, he might have found her stammering amusing. Now, though, he clamped down the emotions that filled him and asked again, 'What are you doing here, Mila?'

Her fingers curled at her sides—the only indication that she was fighting to gain her composure. He waited, giving her time to do so, perhaps to make up for startling her earlier.

'What are you doing here?' she asked him instead, crossing her arms and briefly drawing his attention to her chest. He shook his head and remembered how long it had taken him to realise

that she took that stance whenever she felt threatened.

'You want to know why I'm here? In my father's home?'

'It's not your father's home any more, Jordan.'

His heart thudded. 'Is that why you're here? Because you'll own part of this house soon?'

She winced, and it made him think that maybe he wasn't the only one unhappy with his father's will.

'No, of course not. But I do live here.'

'What?'

The little colour she had left in her face faded, but her eyes never left his. If he hadn't been so shocked he might have been impressed at her guts. But his mind was still very much focused on her revelation.

'I live here,' she repeated. The shakiness in her voice wasn't completely gone, but the silken tone of it came through stronger. The tone that sounded like music when she laughed. That had once caressed his skin when she said, 'I love you.' The tone that had said 'I do!' two years ago as though nothing could touch them or their love.

How little they had known then...

He pushed the memories away.

'I heard that. I want to know why,' he said through clenched teeth, his temper precariously close to snapping.

'Because your father asked me to move in with him after...after everything that happened.'

The reminder of the past threatened to gut him, but he ignored

it. ‘So after we got divorced you thought it would be a good idea to move in with my father?’

‘No, he did,’ she said coldly, and again shame nudged him for reasons he didn’t understand. ‘He wanted—he needed someone around when you left.’

‘And you agreed?’

‘After his first heart attack, yes.’

Her words cut right through to his heart, and he asked the question despite the fact that everything inside him wanted to ignore it. ‘His first? You mean his only.’

Something flashed through her eyes, and he wondered if it was sympathy. ‘No, I mean his first. The one that killed him was his third.’

Jordan resisted the urge to close his eyes, to absorb the pain her words brought. He wondered how he had gone to his father’s funeral, how he had spoken to the few friends Greg had had left, and was only hearing about this now.

But then, was it any wonder? a voice asked him. His father had always kept his feelings to himself, not wanting to burden Jordan with them. An after-effect of that night, Jordan thought. But there was a part of him that wondered if Greg hadn’t told him as punishment for Jordan leaving, even after his father had warned him that it would destroy his marriage—which it had. After Jordan had decided that limited contact with his father during the year he’d been gone—grief snapped at him when he thought that it had actually been the year before his father’s death

—was the only way he would be able to forget about what had happened...

'Why didn't you tell me?' he asked, determined not to get sucked in by his thoughts.

'He didn't want you to know.'

It was like a punch to the gut—and it told him that his father wanting to punish him might not have been such a farfetched conclusion.

'He told you that, or you decided it?'

Mila's face was clear, but when she spoke her voice was ice. 'It was Greg's decision. Do you think your father's friends would have kept quiet about it for me?'

She waited for his answer, but it didn't come. He was too busy processing her words.

'He didn't want you to come home until you'd decided to.'

'You should have called me,' he said, his voice low, dangerous.

'If you hadn't been so determined to put as much distance between us as possible—if you hadn't let it cloud your judgement—you would have known that you should have come home even though I didn't call you.'

Her voice was a mirror of his own thoughts, and if her words hadn't pierced his heart Jordan might have taken a moment to enjoy—perhaps a better word was admire—this new edge to Mila. But he was too distracted by the emotion that what she'd said had awoken in him.

Had his desire to escape the pain of his marriage blinded him

to what he should have known? That he should have come home?

'So you're back because of the will?'

Her question drew him out of his thoughts—drew his attention to her. He took a moment before he answered her.

'Yes, that sped up my return to Cape Town. But I'm here for good.'

Jordan watched as her left hand groped behind her, and he moved when he realised she was looking for something to keep her standing. He caught her as she staggered back, his arm curved around her waist. His heartbeat was faster than it had been in a long time, and somewhere in the back of his mind he wondered if he'd really wanted to stop her from falling, or if he'd put himself in this awkward situation because...

He stopped thinking as he looked into those hauntingly beautiful eyes of hers that widened as they looked up at him. The love that had filled them a long time ago had been replaced by such a complexity of emotion that he could only see surprise there. And caution.

Her brown curls were tied back into a ponytail, making her delicate features seem sharper than they'd once been. But maybe that was because her face had lost its gentle rounding, he thought, and saw for the first time that she'd lost weight. Pressed against hers, his body acknowledged that her body felt different from what he remembered. The curves he'd enjoyed during their marriage were now more toned than before.

He wished he could say he didn't like it, but the way his body

tightened told him that he would be lying if he did. The lips he had always been greedy for parted, and his eyes lowered. Electricity snapped between them as he thought about tasting her, about quenching the thirst that had burned inside him since they'd been apart...

They both pulled away at the same time, and again Jordan heard the smash of glass against the floor. Pieces of a wine bottle lay mingled with pieces of the glass Mila had dropped earlier, and Jordan belatedly realised that he'd knocked it over when he'd moved back.

'I'll get something for that,' she said, hurrying away before he could respond. But she didn't move fast enough for him to miss the flush on her face.

He stared at the mess on the floor—the mess they'd made within their first minutes of reuniting—and hoped it wasn't an omen for the rest of the time they'd spend together.

* * *

Mila grabbed the broom from the kitchen cupboard, and then stilled. She should take a moment to compose herself. Her hands were still shaking from the shock of seeing Jordan, and now her body was heated from their contact.

She hated that reminder of what he could do to her. Hated it even more that he could still do it to her, even after everything that had happened between them.

Why had he touched her anyway? She hadn't been going to fall—she was pretty sure about that. It had just been the prospect

of him staying—her stomach still churned at the thought—that had shaken her balance. And then, before she'd known it, she'd been in his arms, feeling comfort—and something else that she didn't care to admit—for the first time since the accident that had ruined their lives.

She took a deep breath and, when she was sure she was as prepared as she could be to face him again, she returned to the living room.

And felt her breath hitch again when she saw him standing there.

He was leaner now, though his body was still strong, with muscles clearly defined beneath his clothing. Perhaps there were more muscles now, whatever excess weight there had been once now firm. His hair was shorter, though it was still shaggy, falling lazily over his forehead as though begging to be pushed aside. And then there was his face...those beautiful planes drawn into the serious expression she was becoming accustomed to.

'We need to do something about the house,' he said when he saw her, and moved to take the cleaning items away from her.

But he stopped when he saw the expression in her eyes—the coldness she had become so used to aiming at him to protect herself from pain—and she bent to pick up the pieces of glass.

'I'll be leaving in the morning,' she said, grateful that he couldn't see her face as she tidied up.

The idea of going back to the house that reminded her of all that she'd had—and all that she'd lost—made her feel sick. But

what choice did she have?

After Jordan had left, she hadn't been able to be alone in the place where it had all happened. So she'd escaped to their beach house in Gordons Bay for a few months, before Greg had asked her to move in with him. But the divorce meant that she no longer had any right to stay there, and since she had been renting before they'd got married the only thing she had was the house she'd lived in with Jordan. It was in her name after all.

But what did that matter when she couldn't bring herself to think about what had happened there, let alone live there and having to face the memories over and over again...?

'That wasn't what I meant,' he said.

Sure that she had got to all the pieces of glass that could be picked up by hand, she stood. 'Not the only thing, maybe.'

She wondered how she could speak so coolly when her insides were twisted. But then, she was used to saying things despite her feelings. How many times had she bitten her tongue or said the thing people wanted to hear instead of saying what she really thought? The only difference now was that she was actually being honest.

'Fine.' The word was delivered through clenched teeth. 'There is something else. Did you put him up to the ridiculous conditions of his will?'

Anger whipped through her, and she barely noticed her hand tighten on the dustpan.

'No, Jordan, I didn't. I don't want to own a house with you,

and I don't want to plan an event with you.'

I just want to move on with my life.

He didn't say anything immediately. 'I don't want that either.'

'But we'll have to.'

'Because you want your half of the house, the vineyard?'

'Because if we don't you'll lose your half of both, too.'

He didn't deny her words, though she knew by the way his face tightened that he wanted to. It wasn't so much at the truth of what she said, but at the fact that it was the truth. How could Jordan explain the fact that his father had left his house—and his share of the vineyard—to both his son and ex-daughter-in-law? For someone who valued logic as much as Jordan did, having no explanation for something this important must be eating at him.

'I'm going to contest the will.'

The part of herself that Mila had felt softening immediately iced.

'Based on what?'

'On anything I can find. I won't just accept this.'

And yet you just accepted it when I told you to give me space.

'And if I don't succeed in contesting the will...will you...will you sell your shares to me without any of the conditions?'

Pain sat on her chest at the question—the one she knew he'd wanted to ask since he had arrived—and forced words from her lips. 'Yes, Jordan. If that's possible, and if that's what you want, I'll do it.'

Unspoken words filled the air—memories of when he had said

much the same thing to her at the end of their marriage—and she closed her eyes against them. When she was sure her emotions were in check—when she was sure that she was strong enough to look at him—she did.

And realised how different he was from the man she'd known...and loved.

She hadn't noticed any of it when she'd seen him four months ago at his father's funeral. He hadn't looked at her then, she thought, too consumed by the grief of losing his only surviving parent—the man who had raised him—despite their complicated relationship. Or maybe because of it. She wasn't even sure he knew she had only gone to the church and graveyard, not being able to bear spending time socialising after the death of the only man she'd ever thought of as a father.

After losing the last of the family she had.

Suddenly she felt incredibly weary.

'I think it's best if I go to bed now,' she said, as the shock of seeing him finally caught up with her.

'Wait,' he said, and took her arm before she could walk out of the room.

She looked down at his hand as heat seared through her body at his touch, and quickly moved away. She didn't want to think about the physical effect he had on her. The emotional one was already too much.

He cleared his throat. 'I've arranged for a meeting with Mark Garrett in the morning. To see if I have grounds to contest. Since

you're willing to sell, I was hoping you would come with me.'

Her eyebrows rose. 'You've made an appointment with your family lawyer? The executor of your father's will?' When he nodded, she said, 'And you're only telling me this now? When it's beneficial to you?'

He looked at her, those golden eyes carefully blank of emotion. 'I didn't think you needed to be there.'

'Because my inheritance doesn't concern me, right? No, it's fine. I get it.' She shook her head when he opened his mouth to respond. 'You've been making decisions for the both of us since we got married. Why stop now that we're divorced?'

She didn't wait for a response, but walked past him, hating the way her body longed to be held in his arms.

Hating the way her life was once again in turmoil because of Jordan Thomas.

* * *

Mila got up at five in the morning, her muscles hard with tension after a restless night. She got dressed and did the thing that always helped to keep her mind busy—she cooked. First she made a batch of scones and then muffins and pancakes. When that was done she scrambled eggs, made bacon and toast, and eventually, as the sun peeked through the kitchen windows, put on the kettle for coffee.

'What's all this?'

The deep voice startled her, even though she knew he was there. She supposed she had already grown so used to being alone

in the months since Greg had been gone—her heart ached at the reminder—that anyone's presence, let alone that of the man who unsettled her most in the world, would have frightened her in the quiet of the morning.

'Food,' she said, and wiped her hands on her apron. She stilled, thinking that it made her look nervous. 'I'm going to take it down to Frank and Martha's.'

Frank was the kind-hearted man who'd helped manage the vineyard after Greg had taken ill and Jordan had moved away. She had a soft spot for him and, since cooking was something she did to keep herself calm, often took food to Frank and his wife, Martha's house on the Thomas property to share with the workers at the vineyard during the day.

Though now Mila supposed she should offer some to Jordan. Except that would make it seem as if she had got up that morning specifically to cook for him. Just as she had when they were married. So she wouldn't offer him breakfast, but would wait until later to pack up the food and let him get breakfast for himself.

Satisfied with the decision, she asked, 'What time is the appointment?'

To avoid his gaze, she turned to make herself coffee. But she stopped when she realised she was about to take out two mugs, her mind already making his as he liked it. So she turned back to him and folded her arms, ignoring the way the sight of his hair, wet from a shower, made her body prickle.

‘Eight thirty.’

‘In less than an hour,’ she confirmed, proud of the fact that her voice wasn’t as shaky as she felt. ‘I’ll go and get ready.’

She nearly ran out of the kitchen, but acting normally was eating at her strength. The last time she had been in that kitchen with Jordan she had been pregnant and happy, with the only true family she’d known—her husband and her father-in-law—around her.

The loss of it all was a physical pain.

She bided her time so that she didn’t have to have breakfast with him, only coming out when they had to leave. Her eyebrows barely lifted at his choice of transportation—a sleek blue car she knew was a recent and expensive model—but her heart thawed when he opened the door for her.

The trip was silent and tense, but she consoled herself by repeating that it would be over soon. If she signed her share of the vineyard, of the house, over to Jordan she would be able to move out and move on. It would mark the end of the worst and best years of her life and, though her heart was nostalgic for the best, the worst was enough that if she could, she would sign the papers right there in the car.

When Jordan gave his name to the receptionist at the lawyer’s, they were shown into an office where Mila spent another ten minutes of tension with Jordan while waiting for the lawyer to come.

‘Good morning, Jordan... Mila.’

Mark spoke softly to her and she gave him a small smile. She had only met him twice—once when she'd signed a prenuptial contract, and again after Greg's death when Mark had come to give his condolences and to drop off her copy of the will. Both times he had been kind, and she'd appreciated that.

Jordan barely waited until Mark was seated before he asked, 'What was going on in my father's head when he made this will, Mark?'

Mark gave him a wry smile. 'I think you would be a better judge of that than me.'

When Jordan didn't return the smile, Mark nodded, apparently realising Jordan was only in the mood for business.

'Well, you've both read Greg's will by now. It's actually quite simple in its conditions—which I know you both must find hard to believe, considering what it's asking of you. You already own half of the Thomas Vineyard, Jordan, having inherited your mother's share of the property when you were twenty-one. Greg's half has been left, as he states in his will, to his son and his daughter-in-law, on the condition that you both work together to plan an...'

Mark paused and took a closer look at the will.

'An Under the Stars event. Instructions have been left regarding the nature of the event—which, again, both of you will have read—and this event has to take place no later than two months after the last of you received a copy of the will.'

'I received mine two weeks ago,' Jordan interrupted, looking

at Mila for confirmation of her date.

'I probably got mine a week before that,' she said, and wished her heart wouldn't beat quite as hard.

'Which would mean that we have just over a month to plan this. If we do,' Jordan said, his voice masking all emotion.

'Honestly, Jordan. I don't see you having a choice if you want to keep the vineyard solely in your family. If you don't plan the event, your father's share of the vineyard will be auctioned off and the proceeds will be divided between the both of you.'

'Excuse me, Mark?' Mila said, ignoring the way her stomach jolted as Jordan's eyes zoned in on her. 'The will says that I've been left half of Greg's portion as his "daughter-in-law," right?' When Mark nodded his head, she continued. 'So, since Jordan and I aren't married any more, won't that give Jordan grounds to contest the will?'

And leave me out of it?

Mark's eyebrows rose. 'When did you get divorced?'

'About a year ago.' Jordan spoke now, and his eyes were hopeful when Mila lifted her own to look at his face.

She knew that she shouldn't take it personally—if Greg's will could be contested they would both get what they wanted—but her heart still contracted.

She diverted her attention to Mark, saw him riffling through the papers in front of him, and felt concern grow when he lifted one page, his face serious.

'Is there a problem?' she asked.

'I'm afraid so.' Mark looked at them both and laid the page back down. 'Before we send the beneficiaries copies of a will, we check all the details we can for accuracy. Your marital status was one of them and, well...' He gave them both an apologetic look. 'According to the court records of South Africa, the two of you are still very much married.'

CHAPTER TWO

THE SILENCE THAT stretched through the room was marred only by their breathing.

Jordan tried to use it to compose himself, to control the emotions that hearing he was supposedly still married had drawn from him. But then, how could he compose himself when he knew there had to be some mistake?

'I could check again,' Mark said, when Jordan told him as much, 'but I'm afraid the chances of there being a mistake are quite slim.'

'But I signed the papers.' Jordan turned to Mila. 'You did, too.'

Her eyes, slightly glazed from the shock, looked back at him from a pale face as she nodded her agreement. He fought against his instinct to hold her, to tell her that everything would be okay. It wasn't his job any more. Unless, he realised as his mind shifted to their current situation, it was.

'With which law firm did you file the papers? I can have my assistant call them to ask them about it.'

'With this law firm,' Jordan said, his voice calm though his insides were in a twist.

Mark frowned. 'Do you know which lawyer?'

'With you, Mark. As you're my family lawyer, I filed the papers with you.'

His patience was wearing thin. All he'd wanted when he'd come back was to sort out his inheritance. Once that bit of unpleasantness was done, he would be able to run his family vineyard.

It was the only way he knew to make up for the fact that he'd left without dealing with any of the unresolved issues with his father. To make it up to his mother, too, he thought, remembering the only thing she had asked of him before she'd died when he was five—that he look after his father.

He forced his thoughts away from how he had failed them both.

'I think there's been a mistake of some kind.' To give him credit, Mark was trying incredibly hard to maintain his professionalism. 'I remember you asked me to draw up divorce papers. But when I met your father to set up his will last year he said that the two of you were choosing to separate—not divorce.'

'Wait—Greg set this will up last year?' Mila's voice was surprisingly strong despite the lack of colour in her face. 'When exactly did he do it?'

'August.'

'That was a month after his first heart attack. And two months after I signed the divorce papers.'

'Did they have my signature on them?' Jordan asked,

wondering where she was going with this.

'Yes, they did.'

'So you would have been the one to file the papers with Mark?'

If Jordan hadn't seen her looking worse than this once before—the day of her fall—he would have worried about how muted she had become.

'I didn't feel entirely comfortable with that...'

Something in her eyes made him wonder what she meant, but he decided now wasn't the right time to think about it. Not when he saw that she was struggling to keep her voice devoid of the emotion she couldn't hide from him.

'So we are still married,' he said flatly.

'No, no—I was going to drop them here after I'd signed, but then Greg asked me whether I would feel better if he did it. Because Mark was your family lawyer,' she said quickly, avoiding his eyes—which told him she was lying.

It only took him a moment to realise that she was lying about the reason she'd let Greg take the papers, not about his father's actions.

'Did you follow up with Dad?' he demanded, his anger coating his real feelings about the fact that his father had been there for Mila when he hadn't been. Or the fact that his father had been supportive at all—especially to someone who wasn't his son. Was it just another way Greg had chosen to show Jordan how wrong his choice to leave had been?

'Did you?' she shot back, and Jordan stared at her, wondering

again where the fire was coming from.

'No, clearly not.'

There was a pause.

'I think that, all things considered, we should probably postpone this meeting until a later point,' Mark said, breaking the silence.

'I don't think that's a good idea with the time frame we're working with, Mark.'

Though denial was a tempting option, Jordan knew that he had to face reality. And it seemed the reality was that he was still married.

'Could you please give us a few moments to talk in private?'

'Yes, of course.'

If he was perturbed by being kicked out of his own office, Mark didn't show it as he left the room.

The minute the door clicked closed, Jordan spoke. 'So, my father was supposed to give the papers to Mark, who was supposed to file them. And since none of that happened, I think Mark's right—we are still married.'

'Yes, I think so...'

Her eyes were closed, but Jordan knew it was one of the ways she worked through her feelings. Closing herself off from the world—and in those last months they'd shared together closing herself off from him—so she could think.

The silence stretched out long enough that he became aware of a niggling inside his heart. One that told him that there was

still hope for them if they were married. He didn't like it at all —not when that hope had already been dashed when Mila had accepted the divorce.

He had filed for divorce because he'd thought that it was what she wanted—she hadn't called, hadn't spoken to him once after he'd walked out through the door to a life in Johannesburg. He'd taken it as a sign that she wanted the space she had asked him for to be permanent. And so he'd thought he would make it easier for the both of them by initiating the divorce, half expecting her to call him, to demand that he come home so that they could fix things.

But he'd realised soon enough that that wasn't going to happen —when had she demanded anything from him anyway?—and he'd figured that he had done the right thing. Especially since he had been the one to make the decision that had caused the heartbreak they'd suffered in the first place.

'Your father spoke to me about a reunion between the two of us.'

He turned his head to her when she spoke. Her voice held that same music he had heard the first time they'd met.

'In his last few months. He wanted us to be together again.'

She opened her eyes, and Jordan had to brace himself against what the pain he saw there did to him. Against the anguish that disappointment was the last thing his father had felt about him.

He cleared his throat. 'I suppose that gives this situation some meaning. He wanted us to plan an event like the one where we

met. He knew that still being married would mean we would have to bend to his will. Unless we can show that he was unfit when he made it.'

'I don't think that will work.'

She shook her head, and he wondered why she kept tying her hair up when those curls were meant to be free.

'He was completely sane—his heart attacks had nothing to do with his ability to make rational decisions.'

'What's rational about this?'

She lowered her eyes. 'Nothing. Of course, nothing. But making an emotional decision isn't against the law.'

'It should be.'

'Maybe.' She looked at him stoically. 'But he isn't the first person to do that in this family, so I think we can forgive him.'

Jordan found himself at a loss for words, unsure of what she meant. Was she talking about when she'd asked him to go, or the fact that he had left? Regardless of their meaning, her words surprised him. She hadn't given him any indication that she regretted what had happened between them... But then again, she wasn't exactly saying that now either.

But still, the feeling threw him. And because he didn't like it, he addressed the situation at hand.

'It doesn't seem like we're going to get out of this before our time is up, Mila.'

'Out of this...? You mean out of our marriage?'

Why did the question make him feel so strange?

He cleared his throat. ‘Yes. The divorce—the one we thought we had—was supposed to take six weeks, and that’s as much time as we have to make sure the will’s terms are met. So...’ he took a deep breath ‘...what would you say about putting the divorce off until we’ve planned the event, and then we can take it from there?’

She briefly closed her eyes again, and then looked at him, her expression guarded. ‘Why would I do that?’

‘What do you mean?’

‘Exactly what I said.’

Her guard had slipped enough for him to see a complexity of emotion that reflected the complexity of their predicament.

‘I lose in this situation either way. If I help you, we’ll get the inheritance, sure, but I would still have to sell my share to you. So what do I get out of this besides spending time with the man I thought I would never have to see again?’

It took him a moment to process what she was saying, and even then he found it difficult to formulate an answer. ‘You’ll get money. I’ll pay you for the share of the vineyard my father left you.’

‘Money? Money?’ She pulled her head back as though she had been slapped. ‘I can’t believe that we’re still married.’

Her words felt like a slap to him, too, but the shame that ran through him at his own words made him realise that maybe he’d deserved it. He was surprised that she had said it—she would never have done so before—but that didn’t make it any less true.

'I'm sorry, Mila, I didn't mean that.' He sighed. 'This has been a shock to me, too.'

She nodded, though the coldness coming from her made him wonder if she really did accept his apology.

'You know money isn't an incentive for me,' she said after a few moments, her voice back to being neutral. 'Especially since selling you my share of the vineyard would mean that I lose the only thing I have left of someone I thought of as family.'

His heart ached at that because he understood it. But the logical side of him—the side that didn't care too much for emotions—made him ask, 'If you didn't want to sell your share of the vineyard to me, why did you say you would?'

'I didn't say I wouldn't sell. I just want you to understand what I'm giving up so that you won't say something so insensitive again.'

He was beginning to feel like a schoolchild who was being taught a lesson. 'What do you want, then, Mila?'

'I want—' Her voice was husky, her face twisted in pain. But it disappeared almost as quickly as it came, and she cleared her throat. 'I want to sell the house and the car—everything, really, that was a part of our life together.'

Pain flared through him, and the only way he knew how to control it was to pretend it didn't affect him at all. 'Why?'

'To get rid of everything so that I can move—' She broke off, and then continued, 'Move away.' She said the last two words deliberately, as though she was struggling to formulate them. 'I

haven't been able to sort things out since you left. The past year I've been busy. Looking after Greg, planning some events and...'

Getting over you, he thought she might say, and he held his breath, waiting for the words. But they didn't come.

'Your help would be useful so that by the time the vineyard is yours, I'll have something to move on to.'

'Where will you go?' he asked when it finally registered that she wanted to move away.

She raised her eyes to his, and they brimmed with the emotion he thought he carried in his heart.

'I'm still working on that part.'

Hearing her say that she was leaving was more difficult than he could have imagined. He couldn't figure out why that was when he had done the same thing.

'Are you sure you're not sacrificing more than I am?'

She smiled a little at that. 'I'm sure.'

Her smile told him all he needed to know. That he needed to help her so he could help himself. Once this was all over he would have the vineyard his parents had owned and would be able to live up to the promises he'd made to them. Maybe he would even be able to make restitution for the decisions he'd made during his short marriage and finally find some peace.

'So if I agree to help you deal with everything from when we were married, you'll agree to plan the event and then sell your inheritance to me?'

'Yes.'

'And then we'll file for divorce again?'

'We?'

The hope he thought he'd extinguished earlier threatened to ignite again at the uncertainty in her voice. But then he remembered that he was the one who had filed for divorce the first time, and she was probably just checking whether that would be the case again.

'You,' he clarified. 'We might as well even the score since we have the chance.'

He could have kicked himself when he saw the way her eyes darkened. He wasn't entirely sure he blamed her since his words seemed callous even to his own ears. But despite that, she nodded.

'I guess we have a deal.'

CHAPTER THREE

THEY DROVE BACK to the house in silence.

Jordan's presence was already turning Mila's life upside down. He reminded her of the things she'd failed at. Of the things she had wanted since she'd realised as a child that she didn't have a family in the way her classmates did.

Her entire class had once been invited to a party and she had begged her foster mother at the time—a perpetually exhausted woman who'd spent all her time catering to her husband instead of the children she'd been charged with caring for—to let her go.

When she'd got there Mila had seen for the first time what a real family was. She'd seen her classmate's parents look at

their child with love, with pride. Had watched them take photos together while the rest of her class played on the grass. Had seen the easy affection.

She had spent that entire afternoon watching them, wondering why no one else was when this family was clearly doing something out of the norm. But when Mila had been the last to be picked up, she'd seen the way the other parents had treated their children. She'd realised that that was normal, and that she was the one with the special circumstances.

Her longing for family had started on that day, spreading through her heart, reminding her of it with every beat. Since she had lost her child, those beats had become heavy with pain, with emptiness. And it would only be worse now that Jordan was back.

Since he was back for good, she would have to leave the house she'd been staying in for almost a year. Though she'd known she couldn't stay there for ever, she had hoped for more time than she'd got. Not only because she didn't know where she would go —again, the thought of returning to the house where she'd lost their baby made her feel nauseous—but because it had come to feel like the home she'd never had. But then, Mila had also hoped for more time with Greg—especially since she'd finally managed to pierce that closed-off exterior of his...

But that was the least of her concerns now that she'd found out she and Jordan were still married.

It was the hope that worried her the most. Hope had been her first emotion when she'd heard the news, and it had lingered until

Jordan had brought up filing for divorce again. It reminded her of how receiving those papers for the first time had destroyed her hope for reconciliation. And rightly so. She shouldn't be—wasn't—interested in reconciliation, however easy it might be to get lured back into the promise of a life with Jordan.

But that wasn't what he wanted, or he wouldn't have left so easily. And that, she told herself, was exactly why she needed to protect herself from him. That was why she had accepted Jordan's suggestion that she be the one to file the divorce papers this time. She needed to remind herself that their life together—at least in a romantic sense—was over.

She didn't want him to know how difficult things had been for her since he'd left, even though she had almost told him about it in Mark's office. About how selling their possessions had nothing to do with moving away and everything to do with moving on. But because she couldn't bear to expose herself to him she'd lied instead. Though now that she thought about it perhaps moving away was the first step to moving on...

Either way, she needed his help. She couldn't go back to their house—she would never think of it as hers, even if it was in her name—alone. She couldn't face it by herself. And she had to face it. She had spent long enough grieving for the family she was sure she would never have now. She knew the loss of her son would stay with her for ever, but she was determined to make something out of her life. To prove that she would have been a worthy mother...

'Do you want to talk about how everything will work?' Jordan asked, almost as though he knew that she'd been thinking too much and wanted to distract her.

'You mean how we'll plan the event?' she asked, and looked out of the window to the vineyards they were passing.

Stellenbosch had always felt like home to her, even when she hadn't had a home. The minute she had driven down the winding road that offered the most beautiful sights she had ever seen —the peaks that stood above fields and fields of produce, the kaleidoscope of colours that changed with every season—a piece had settled inside her. That had been the first time she had visited the Thomas Vineyard.

'That's part of it, of course. But I was speaking about all the details. Like where you're going to stay, for example.'

She sighed. She had told him that she would leave Greg's house that morning, and when she'd said it she'd thought it was the best way to force herself to face going back to their house. But her deal with Jordan meant that she could delay that a little longer, and immediately the ball in her chest unravelled.

Though that didn't mean she could stay at the farmhouse.

'I can still leave today.'

She could stay at a bed and breakfast, she thought, forcing herself to ignore the pain in her chest. She didn't need to be thinking about how leaving would sacrifice her only connection to Greg—to the memories of family and the love she'd never thought she deserved. She also didn't need to remember that

she'd spent little time working since the accident, which meant her bank account was in a sorry state.

'You don't have to,' he said stiffly, and she turned to him.

'What do you mean?'

'It might make more sense for us to stay together.' Jordan's eyes were fixed on the road. 'We have six weeks to sort this event out. Being in the same space will make it a lot easier.'

There was Mr Logical again, she thought, and unexplained disappointment made her say, 'I can't stay in the house with you there, Jordan.'

She saw him frown. 'Why not?'

Because there's too big a part of me that wants to play house with you again, she realised.

'It's too complicated. This whole thing with us still being married...' Her head pounded at the knowledge and what it meant. 'It's a lot to deal with. It would probably be best if you and I lived separately.'

He didn't respond as he turned onto the gravel road that led to the house that would soon be theirs. She used the time to remind herself that she had been at a standstill for a year. She couldn't keep letting the tragedies in her life or her dreams for a family hold her back. It was time to move on, and living with Jordan—even if it was practical, considering her current financial situation—didn't seem to be the way she would do it.

But then she thought about the deal she had made with Jordan—about how he was going to help her sell all the things from

their marriage if she helped him—and she began to wonder if living together and planning the event was the way she was going to move on.

As though he knew her thoughts, Jordan repeated, 'I think you should stay. We're planning an event that will happen in the next six weeks. We need to get your house and your car sold—things that might take a lot longer than six weeks—but we can start now. And we can definitely get everything in the house sold before then.'

Which should help her financial problems, she thought.

'Handling all of it will be a lot easier if we could do it from the same place,' he said again.

It made sense, she thought, but cautioned herself not to make a hasty decision.

'I'll think about it,' she said, even though the rational part of her told her she should say no. 'But I'll stay here until I've made a decision.'

'Okay,' he responded politely, and though she didn't look at him, she frowned at his acquiescence.

The Jordan she knew would have pushed or, worse, would have made the decision for her. Was he giving her space just so he'd get what he wanted? Or was it genuine? She couldn't decide, but he had pulled up in front of the house now, and her attention was drawn to the raindrops that had begun to fall lightly on the windshield.

They made a run for the front door.

'Where you'll be staying isn't the only thing we should talk about,' he said, once they were inside the house.

Mila turned to him when she'd taken off her coat. The light drizzle had sprinkled rain through his hair, and her fingers itched to dust the glittering droplets away.

Another reason I should stay away from you.

'Yes, I know.'

She moved to the living room and started putting wood in the fireplace. It had become a routine—a ritual, almost—and it comforted her. Perhaps because it was so wonderfully normal—so far from what she'd grown up with. 'We need to talk about the event—about how we're going to plan something I did in six months in just over one.'

She saw a flicker in his eyes that suggested that wasn't what he was talking about. She supposed she had known that on some level. Which was why she had steered the conversation to safer ground. To protect herself. Now she just had to remember that for the entire time they spent together...

* * *

'Is it possible?' Jordan asked, watching Mila carefully. Something about her was different, and it wasn't only her appearance. Though as she sat curled on the couch opposite him—to be as far away from him as she could, he thought—the cup of tea she had left the room to make a few moments before in her hand, he could see that the old Mila was still there.

His heart throbbed as though it had been knocked, and he

found himself yearning for something that belonged in the past. His present—their present—involved planning an event to save his family's vineyard. And his family no longer included the woman he had fallen so hard for, despite every logical part of him...no matter what his heart said.

'It's going to be difficult,' she conceded, distracting him from his thoughts.

'What do you think we should start with?' he asked, deciding that the only way he could focus on their business arrangement was by talking about business. But then she shifted, and the vanilla scent that clung to her drifted over to him. Suddenly he thought about how much he had missed it. About how often he'd thought he'd smelled it—had felt his heart racing at the thought that she'd come to find him—only to realise that it had been in his imagination...

'Well, the conditions of your father's will stipulate that we try to replicate the original Under the Stars event as much as possible. But, considering the season...' she looked out at the dreary weather '...I'm not sure how successful that will be.'

As she spoke she ran a finger around the rim of her cup. It was a habit for her—one she reverted to when she was deep in thought. Once, when he'd teased her about it, she'd told him that one of her foster mothers had hated it when she'd done it. The woman had told her that she was inviting bacteria, and that Mila shouldn't think they would take her to the doctor if she got sick.

It was one of the rare pieces of information she had offered

him about her childhood, and she had meant for him to be amused by it. But instead it had alerted him to the difficulty of her past. Since he knew how that felt, he had never pushed her for more information.

'I don't think he thought this through,' he said, to stop his thoughts from dwelling further, but only succeeding in shifting them to his father.

'No, I don't think so either,' she agreed. 'He meant well, but in his head this idea was romanticised. We would do an event together, just like the one where we met, and it would remind us of how we felt that first night.'

The dreamy look on her face made his heart accelerate, and for the first time Jordan wondered if his father had been right. But nostalgia wasn't enough to save a broken relationship.

'And then he'd have facilitated our reunion through his death,' she ended, the expression he'd seen only moments before replaced by sadness.

His heart ached. 'He always said he wanted his death to mean something.'

'Especially after your mother's,' she said softy.

His eyes lifted to hers, and the sympathy he saw there stiffened his spine. 'Maybe.'

He didn't speak about his mother's death. He had been five when it had happened and he had spent most of his life till then watching her suffer. Because she hadn't done anything about her cancer soon enough. Because she had chosen him.

The memory made him think about whether his father had designed his will as a punishment for Jordan. To get justice, perhaps, for the fact that Greg had always blamed Jordan for her death. Something Jordan had only found out years after his mother had passed away. It would be the perfect way for his father to make his death 'mean something,' Jordan thought, especially since Greg had made his will after Jordan had left to cope with the loss of his son, of his wife. It was something he knew Greg hadn't approved of, despite the fact that although Greg had been there physically, in all the ways that had mattered, Greg had done the same after Jordan's mother had died...

Jordan lifted his eyes and saw that Mila was watching him in that way she had that always made him think she saw through him. He only relaxed when she averted her gaze.

'We have six weeks to do this—which means that the event is going to happen in winter. And this rain suggests that the weather has already made a turn for the worst.'

He was grateful for the change in subject. 'It also means that the grounds in the amphitheatre won't be suitable for the public.'

'Actually, I don't think that will be a problem. When your father got sick, he couldn't take care of the vineyard as well as he'd used to. So we minimised operations. We closed up the amphitheatre since we wouldn't be using it, and concentrated our efforts on the wine.'

'How did you do that? The area is huge.'

She shrugged. 'I had a connection with a tent and marquee

supplier, and he designed one for us. I'll take you to see it tomorrow, if you like...' She trailed off. 'You know, I could probably get him to customise the design so that the top of the marquee is clear. That way the event would still be in the amphitheatre—'

'And still be under the stars,' he finished for her.

'Why do you look so surprised?'

'I'm just...' He was just what? Surprised to see her throw herself into a task like this when he couldn't remember the last time she had shown interest in anything?

'I'm good at my job, Jordan,' she said flatly when he didn't continue.

'I wasn't saying that you weren't,' he replied.

The look she shot him burned through him, and he found himself bristling in response. It simmered when he saw a slight flicker in her eyes that made her look almost vulnerable, and he wondered why he couldn't tell what had caused her reaction. He should know her well enough to be able to... Except he didn't, he realised in shock.

'I'll draw up a list of everything that needs to be done and give you a copy once I have,' she said tightly as she stood, and Jordan could see that tension straightened her spine. 'We can discuss things then.'

She walked to the door and grabbed her coat.

'Where are you going?' he demanded, anger replacing the shock of only a moment ago.

'Out,' she replied, and slammed the door on her way out, leaving him speechless.

The woman who had walked out through that door—who had got angry at nothing and left before they could deal with it—was not the woman he had married. Or was she? a voice mocked him, and briefly he wondered if he was angry at Mila for seemingly acting out of character, or at himself for not knowing his wife well enough to be able to tell.

The thought spurred his feet forward, and he was out the door before she could get far.

'Mila! Mila, wait!'

Her steps faltered, but she didn't turn back. He stopped with enough distance between them that she wouldn't feel crowded, but so she could still hear him.

'Why are you upset?'

She turned and pulled her coat tight around her, determination lining her features. 'I didn't like that you looked surprised about me being good at my job.'

It took him a moment to process her words—especially since he was surprised that she had actually chosen to answer him.

'I wasn't surprised that you're good at your job. I know you are.' He watched her, hoping for some indication that she believed his words, but her face was carefully blank. 'You took the spark of an idea I had with the first Under the Stars event and turned it into something I'd never dreamed of. And you made it a success. Of course you're good at your job.'

'I did do all of that,' she said after a moment. 'I am good at my job.'

'Yes, you are,' he reiterated, and thought about the vulnerability he'd thought he'd seen in her eyes earlier. 'But are you trying to convince me of that, or yourself?'

She folded her arms in front of her—but not before he saw her wince. She was trying to convince herself, he thought, and wondered how she could even doubt it.

'Don't pretend like you know me.'

Because he was suddenly worried that it was true and he didn't know her, anger stirred inside him again. 'It goes both ways, Mila.'

'What?'

'You assumed that I thought poorly of you because of one look you misinterpreted. If you knew who I was, then you would have known that couldn't be true.'

'Then tell me the real reason for your surprise.'

Her arms fell to her sides and he watched her straighten her shoulders. As if she was preparing for battle, he thought. But he couldn't answer her question. It would open the door that both of them seemed happy to keep closed—the one that protected them from their past.

When he didn't respond, she shook her head. 'That's what I thought.' She sighed. 'You know, maybe I jumped to the conclusion that you thought I wasn't good at my job because you never told me that I was. But then, we didn't have that kind of

relationship, did we?'

She walked away, leaving him wondering what kind of relationship they had had.

CHAPTER FOUR

MILA WALKED DOWN the gravel road to the amphitheatre, Jordan beside her, and some of her tension eased. It was home, she thought as she looked at the road shaded by trees, their leaves brown and gold as though they didn't know whether to mourn or celebrate the coming winter. The grass around them had begun to lose its colour, too, though there were still patches that seemed to be fighting to remain as green as in spring.

When she made it through the trees she was standing at the top of a slope that led to the vineyard on the one side, and to the amphitheatre on the other. She had sombrely told Jordan that she would take him there that morning, and thought she needed to get over herself. She'd spent most of her time since their argument thinking about why she'd been upset—the real reason, not the one she had made up.

Because as soon as she'd given herself time to think it through—with Jordan's words still in her head—she'd realised her reaction the previous day had been because she was doubting her skills. It wasn't just about her job either. Jordan's return had reminded her of her failures—at being a wife. At being a mother.

Her heart hiccupped and she laid a hand over her chest, hoping to comfort herself.

Losing her baby when she was barely six months pregnant had only succeeded in amplifying her insecurities. Insecurities that stemmed from growing up without hearing anyone tell her she was good at something—at anything. She could see now that it had led to her believing that she wasn't good enough. Certainly not for Jordan when she'd first met him, since he'd had everything she hadn't had in her childhood.

Love, a family, a home.

A little voice had reminded her of that throughout their marriage. It was part of the reason she wished Jordan had told her he was happy with her. Or that he was proud of her. Or that she was a good wife.

But then, they'd never shared things like that during their brief marriage. She had just accepted what he'd said because she'd been afraid to speak up in case it upset him. She hadn't wanted to risk him realising that their relationship was too good to be true. That she wasn't the right person for him.

Now she saw no point in keeping her thoughts to herself—he'd realised all that anyway. And perhaps that had been the reason for Jordan's surprise—she was no longer meek Mila who didn't speak her mind. What had that got her? Nothing but a heart broken by the loss of her husband and her child.

'Nothing beats this view,' Jordan said quietly from beside her, and her heart pounded when she turned and saw him looking at her. But then he nodded towards the vineyard, and she mentally kicked herself. Of course he wasn't talking about her—especially

since things between them were still tense.

She turned her attention to the vineyard to hide her embarrassment at thinking such a silly thing, and took in the clash of different shades of red and brown. Fields of the colours together was a picture she would never forget—even when it was years in the future and she no longer had any reason to be a part of the Thomas Vineyard. She could see the dam just beyond the fields, large and beautiful, and behind it the hills that made the vineyard look surreal.

Walking the vineyard with him felt like old times. Despite how difficult things were with them now, when they had walked past the chapel where they'd got married, Mila's heart had longed for the people they'd been then. It didn't help that the weather had turned from the rain of the previous day to bright sunshine. It reminded her of her wedding day, almost two years ago.

It had been cold, true to the season, but the sun had been shining just as it was today, as though the gods had approved their union. A fanciful thought, she realised now, indicative of the person she had been then. The person who had fallen in love at first sight and married three months later.

The fact that their wedding anniversary was a few weeks away pained her, and she tried to ignore it. Her mind reminded her that she and Jordan hadn't been together long enough—physically or emotionally—for them to celebrate their first anniversary. Now, on their second, they'd be together physically, but emotionally...

'It's more beautiful than I remember,' he said, and she almost

smiled at the sincerity in his voice.

'It's become a bit like home to me in the past year,' she murmured, deep in thought, and then her stomach dropped when she realised what she had said. 'Because of Greg,' she added hurriedly, hoping it would make her words seem less like a revelation.

He didn't answer her, and when she looked over he had a blank expression on his face. How was it possible that the tension between them could become worse? she wondered, her insides twisting.

'I have memories of every part of this place,' he said, his face pensive now. 'This is where I last saw my mother. This is where my father raised me.'

Mila frowned. Had he just willingly mentioned his mother? His reaction the previous night when she'd said something about her had been what Mila was used to. A quick brush-off, an unwillingness to respond. She had wanted to know about his mother so badly when they were dating, when they were married, but she'd never had the nerve to push beyond Jordan's resistance. Since she didn't really want to offer information to him either, she'd convinced herself that it didn't matter. That one day, while they watched their children play in front of the house, he would tell her about the woman who had died when he was five, and she would hold his hand and tell him that it was okay.

But that day would never come now.

Jordan turned towards the amphitheatre and she followed

him, and then she stopped, her eyes widening when she realised what going to the amphitheatre meant. Why hadn't she realised this earlier, she thought in panic, when she could have done something about it? Before she had suggested it, for heaven's sake!

'Are you coming?' Jordan asked her, and she exhaled shakily, forced her legs to move and her mouth to respond.

'Yes...yes, I am.'

* * *

'This is great,' Jordan said when he saw the white marquee that covered the amphitheatre. The edges were pinned down between the trees that surrounded the area, and it had done its job for the most part, he noted. Though water ran down the steps, the seats and the stage were still dry, along with most of the ground. It would do for their event, he thought.

'Whose idea was it to do this? It was smart.'

He took the steps as he asked the question, and was about halfway down when he realised Mila hadn't answered him. Nor could he hear her following. When he turned back to look up at her his heart raced at her expression. Her face was white—and so was the hand that clung to the railing that ran down the middle of the stairs. He could see her chest heave—in, out...in, out—and his first instinct was to run to her side and make sure that she was okay.

But somewhere at the back of his mind he realised what was happening, and a picture of her at the bottom of the stairs at their

old house, lying deadly still, flashed through his mind.

This is what you left behind, a voice told him, and a ball of grief and guilt drop in his stomach.

Careful to keep his expression blank, even as his heart thrummed, he walked up to her and slid an arm around her waist. She didn't look at him, and he could feel her resistance, so he waited until her hand finally gripped the back of his jacket. Slowly they made their way down to the bottom of the stairs, and with each step the ball of emotion grew inside him.

'Thank you,' she said through tight lips when they got to the bottom, but he could hear the shakiness in her voice—felt it in her body before she stepped back from him.

'Since the accident?' he asked.

She lifted her eyes briefly, and then lowered them again as she straightened her shoulders. 'Yeah. It's not impossible to do. It just takes longer.'

He didn't know what to say. How could he say anything at all? he wondered with disgust. He knew the loss of their son had hurt them both—Jordan lived with it every day, no matter where he was. Every moment of his life since that day still held glimpses of what it would have been like if his son had been alive—images of them as a family in the home where he and Mila used to live crushed his heart each time.

But the reality was that he wasn't a father. And, yes, he had complicated emotions about it—dashed hopes, a broken heart—but his body was fine. Though his heart pained, he could go down

a flight of stairs without thinking about the fall that had led to a placental abruption and a premature baby who couldn't survive outside the womb. His mind, though still dimmed by grief, wasn't addled by a fear of stairs.

Seeing Mila's reality, seeing the effect losing their baby had had on her, gutted him. The shame and guilt he already felt about the loss of their child pierced him. And the anger—the tension Jordan felt at the fact that Mila hadn't turned to him—flamed inside him.

'Why didn't you tell me?'

She slanted a look at him. 'About...?'

She was giving him a chance to back down, he thought briefly, but he wouldn't do it.

'About the stairs. Is there anything else you're still struggling with?'

'That isn't your business any more, Jordan,' she replied easily, though he could tell that the conversation was anything but easy for her.

'You're my wife, Mila.' It didn't matter to him that they had both signed divorce papers and had only found out they were still married the previous day. 'I have a right to know.'

'No, you don't,' she said tersely. 'You gave up that right when you walked out. When you sent me divorce papers. When you didn't come home.' There was a brief pause. 'I'm your wife in name only.'

'You asked me to leave.'

'You should have known you needed to stay!' she shot back, and hissed out a breath.

His eyes widened at the show of temper and his heart quickened at the sight of her cheeks flushed with anger. She still took his breath away, he thought vaguely, and then his mind focused on her words.

'Is that what you really wanted?' he asked softly.

She pursed her lips. 'I don't want to talk about this, Jordan. What's done is done.'

'Clearly it isn't done. Tell me,' he begged. It had suddenly become imperative for him to know what he had walked away from. And whether she had wanted him to walk away at all.

'You made a choice to leave, Jordan.'

She looked up at him, her eyes piercing him with their fire. It wasn't a description he would have used of her before. And perhaps before he wouldn't have found it quite as alluring. But it suited her, he thought.

'We all have to live with the decisions we made then. For now, we need to focus on getting this event done.'

His jaw clenched and tension flowed through his body with his blood. She made it seem as though he had left easily—as though he had wanted to leave.

'I left because you asked me to. Why are you punishing me for it?'

She watched him steadily, and for a brief moment, he thought he saw her soften. But it was gone before he was sure, and then

she answered him in a low voice.

'You're fooling yourself if you think you left because I asked you to.' She stopped, as though considering her words, and then continued, 'You left because you couldn't handle my grief.'

He felt his blood drain. 'Did my father tell you that?'

Mila frowned. 'Why would you think that?'

Because that was exactly what his father had accused him of in one of their last conversations before he'd left, Jordan thought in shock. After Jordan had told Greg he was leaving—that Mila had asked him to and that he was going to Johannesburg to focus on getting their research institute started—his father had accused him of leaving because Mila's suffering had reminded Jordan of his mother's suffering. And that that meant Jordan was in the same position that his father had been in.

He had ignored the words when his father had said them—had believed the two situations had nothing in common—and had refused to think about it afterwards. But hearing those words come from Mila now brought the memory into sharp focus. But, just as he had then, Jordan shut down his thoughts and feelings about it.

'Do you think your contact would actually be able to make a customised marquee?'

He saw her blink, saw her adjust to his abrupt change in topic. She opened her mouth and closed it again, and then answered.

'Yes, I think he would.'

Her voice was polite. No, he thought, controlled.

'I think the more appropriate question would be if he'd be able to do it in such a short period of time.'

She took her phone out and started typing, changing the tone of their conversation. The tension was still there though, he realised, noting the stiff movement of her fingers.

'If he is able to do it we'll have solved one of the major problems of this event.'

'I'm sure the others won't be quite as bad,' he said, and walked up the steps to the stage.

He needed space from her, even though she was standing a far enough distance away that her proximity shouldn't have bothered him. The stage was clear of the usual clutter events brought, he saw, with only the large white screen used for movies behind him.

'It's not going to be easy,' she warned. 'We'll have to see if the same food vendors are available, and we'll have to find out if Karen can perform...' She trailed off, as though the thought frightened her, and he felt the release of the tension in him at the memory of Mila dealing with the teenage singer.

'Won't that be fun for you?'

'I can't wait,' she said wryly. 'We might have to consider someone else if she isn't available. After that, the hardest part is going to be getting people to come. Karen—or whoever we get to perform—will have a huge impact on that, but it's still going to be a challenge.'

'Social media will help,' he said, and walked down the stairs to where she stood. She was taking pictures, and he realised that

with the marquee the space was different from what she'd worked with before. 'We can have Karen post something closer to the time. It could even be a pop-up concert.'

'That won't work,' she disagreed. 'Doing that would put us at risk of overcrowding or riots. Of course we can have her post about the event, but we need to sell tickets. That's the only way we can know how many people to expect.'

If he'd thought she wouldn't be insulted by it, he would have complimented her on her professional knowledge. But he'd learned his lesson the previous evening. He hadn't been around before to see her in action, but his father had complimented her often enough. Now Jordan could see why.

'Was it hard work the first time?'

She glanced over at him. 'Yes, but for different reasons. We had to start from scratch then. Design it, figure out what would work, what wouldn't. Now we don't have those problems, but we're working from a blueprint. Which means we're confined. It also puts us at risk of making a loss.'

'Well, regardless of that, we're going to have to plan this.' He stuck his hands into the pockets of his jacket. 'Maybe it's a good thing I wasn't here the first time.'

'Marketing wine in American restaurants does sound more exciting,' she said easily, and his heart knocked at hearing her attempt something remarkably close to banter. Perhaps they should stick to work, he thought.

'Well, seven of the ten restaurants I visited now carry our

wines, so I was working. Besides, if I'd been here, we probably would have been married a lot earlier—' He broke off, cursing himself for not thinking. He almost saw Mila's walls go up again.

'This event is going to take a lot of work,' she said instead of addressing his slip. 'I might have to give Lulu a call...'

Her face had tightened, and Jordan wondered what he didn't know about Mila's only real friendship.

'Have you spoken to her recently?' he asked, watching the emotions play over her face.

'Now and then,' she answered him. 'Not nearly as often as I should have.'

The admission came as a surprise to him—and to her, too, it seemed.

'I think we've seen all we need to here.' she said quickly. 'The stairs...they're easier going up.'

It was a clear sign that she didn't want any help from him, and he had to clench his fists at his sides to keep himself from doing just that as he watched her painstakingly climb the stairs.

Why couldn't she just ask for help? he thought irritably, and then stilled when a voice asked him why she should need to ask at all.

CHAPTER FIVE

MILA HEARD THE door to the house slam and closed her eyes. Clearly Jordan hadn't returned from their trip to the amphitheatre in a good mood. Not that she was feeling particularly cheerful herself. She had let him bait her into lashing

out, into revealing things she didn't want him to know.

It was only because she had been feeling particularly vulnerable after hesitating at those stairs. She had always hated that reminder of her accident—any reminder, really. But as she had stood in front of those steps, her heart in her throat, she had hated that the most. Because every time she thought she would be able to take a step she was reminded of the sensation of tumbling to the ground. Pain would flash through her at the memory of lying at the bottom of the steps, her breathing staggered, waiting for someone to help her.

She blamed that feeling for the accusation she had hurled at Jordan from nowhere earlier. She had never intended letting that slip—the real reason she thought he'd left—but her tongue no longer seemed to obey the 'think before you speak' rule she had always played by.

Heaven knew she was tired of taking all the blame for him leaving—yes, she had asked him for space, but that had been said in grief, in pain. She hadn't meant it, but when he'd packed his bags she hadn't been able to bring herself to ask him to stay. She had wanted him to—every fibre in her being had urged her to stop him—but she had also wanted him to want to stay. She had wanted him to refuse to go, to tell her that he needed her, to acknowledge that they needed each other to get through the heartbreak of losing their son.

But he hadn't, and she had been forced to admit to herself that their make-believe life—the one where they were playing

at being a happy family and where she was a worthy wife—was never really going to be her life. Jordan hadn't had any reason to be with her before she had lost their baby, so why would he bother with her now, when she'd proved that she wasn't capable? When she'd proved that she was broken, especially during her grieving?

He must believe that, too, or he would never have asked her if Greg had told her that. Jordan must have said it to Greg at some point, in confidence, and the stunned expression she'd seen on his face must have been because Jordan had thought Greg had broken his confidence...

Hurt beat at her heart, but she set her shaking hands down on the lists of the things she needed to do and the notes from the phone calls she had made at the kitchen counter.

'Hey,' he said, and the deep voice made her heart jump in the same way it had when they'd first met.

She turned and saw the amicable expression on his face. Had she been mistaken about his mood? Perhaps not, she thought as she looked in his eyes.

'Hi,' she replied, determined not to let her emotions get in the way of amicability. If he could do it, so could she. 'You were gone for a while.'

'Yeah, I bumped into Frank and we talked about the vineyard. I got us some food, too.'

She could tell from his voice that something was bothering him, and while her heart wanted to ask him about it, her head

told her to keep to the game they seemed to be playing.

'That was nice of you,' she said measuredly, and took the pizza from him.

It had already gone cold, she saw when she opened the boxes, making her wonder if he'd gone somewhere else after picking the food up. But she was distracted when she saw he had got her favourite pizza, and she had to force herself not to be swayed by something as simple as that that only indicated his memory.

'Frank couldn't have told you all that much,' she said, and took out two oven trays to warm the pizza on. 'You two spoke about the place quite often while you were gone.'

'Did he tell you that?'

She looked back at him, and was suddenly struck by how attractive he was. He'd taken off the red winter jacket he had on that morning, and now she was being treated to the sight of the muscles he sported almost lazily under his long-sleeved top. Even his light blue jeans highlighted the strength of his lower body.

She swallowed, and told herself to answer him instead of staring like a fool. 'Frank's mentioned it, yes. But he told your dad first, and Greg told me. I think he thought that if I knew you'd kept in touch, I'd get in touch with you.' She closed her eyes briefly as soon as she realised she'd said it. It was being in this kitchen with him, she thought, and desperately changed the topic. 'Do you want to eat now?'

'I'd like to take a shower first, but that shouldn't take too long.'

There was a pause, almost as if Jordan had wanted to say

something else and then decided not to. She glanced at him and saw an unreadable expression on his face. That in itself told her something was bothering him, but still she refused to ask him. That wasn't supposed to be her job any more.

'This is different,' he said, abruptly changing the topic.

She followed his gaze and for the first time since Jordan had first brought her to his father's house she saw the brown cupboards and cream countertops. But since that was the part of the kitchen that hadn't changed, she knew he was referring to her new additions.

'I thought a little colour might cheer the place up.' She didn't add that she'd hoped it would cheer his father up, as well. Greg had always been a man of a few words, and often she'd thought that it was because of sadness. He hadn't ever spoken much about his wife—like father, like son—but when he had she'd seen that Greg had loved and missed her. And then in his ill health and missing Jordan, his sadness had become grumpiness and sometimes even meanness.

Jordan was watching her when she looked up, a complicated expression on his face, and she wondered if he realised what she hadn't said after all.

'I knew it would be something like that,' he said, and it sounded forced. 'I would never have pegged Dad as a fuchsia kind of guy.' He nodded his head to the curtains and matching utensils that were scattered across the counters.

She smiled a little, felt her guard ease a touch. 'I think he grew

fond of it after a while. Though at the beginning he made all sorts of noises.' The smile widened. 'And then he started seeing how the colour lightened up the place, and how the art helped me, and he got much better then.'

The walls were covered with her mosaic artwork—something her doctor had once suggested she do to keep herself busy during a postaccident, postbaby check-up—and she was quite proud of it. It made her remember the simple things she had taken pleasure in before her life had been destroyed.

'How did it help you?'

He said the words so quietly that at first she didn't register what he'd asked. And then she realised that her guard was down, and her shoulders stiffened in response. It shouldn't be this easy to slip up in front of him, she thought. Not when slipping up meant talking to him about the time she was trying to move on from. Not when it meant him prodding her about it again.

'It just gave me something to keep busy with while I recovered,' she said firmly, and then turned to put the oven on and slide the trays with the pizzas into it.

She took her time with it, and it didn't take long for Jordan to get the picture. After a few moments, she heard the shower being turned on and she sighed with relief.

He was getting under her skin, she thought. He had always been able to do that to her, from the moment she had first taken that glass of wine from him two years ago. She'd forgotten all her insecurities then—had slipped into those enticing eyes of his

and had believed that they would last, that she could be someone he wanted. Someone he needed.

The past didn't matter now, she thought, checking the pizzas. She had been young and completely in love then. Now she knew better. She could protect herself now—she would protect herself, regardless of how easy it seemed to be to slip up in front of him. Whether it was out of anger, or out of familiarity, she would control it.

A sharp pain snapped her from her thoughts, and she looked down to see an angry welt spread across her hand where she had reached for the oven tray without a mitt. She rolled her eyes as she ran the hand under cold water, blaming her silly thoughts for distracting her, but grateful that she had only used one hand instead of both, as she usually did.

Once the pain had subsided to a throb, she saw the welt was threatening to blister and rushed to the bathroom to get the first-aid kit and the gel she knew would soothe the burn.

She realised too late that Jordan was still in there, and barely had the chance to move back before the door opened. A cloud of steam followed a muscular body precariously covered by her white-and-pink towel out of the room.

'I'm so sorry! I was just—' She felt her face redden as she tried to avert her eyes from Jordan's half-naked body.

Except every time she tried, her eyes moved back to him of their own accord. She had been right when she'd thought his body was more muscular than she remembered. His broad shoulders

were more defined, the muscles in his chest and abs sculpted so perfectly that she wondered if it were possible for her insides to burn, as well. Then she cleared her throat and told herself that she had seen him like this before. There was no reason to panic.

She took a deep breath. 'I'm sorry, I just need to get the first-aid kit.' She gestured to her hand and was quite proud of the way she'd managed to put words together in the calm tone her voice had taken.

Which all went out the window when he immediately walked to her and took her hand in his.

'What happened?'

'I...I burned myself.' Her mind was whirling at the feel of her hand in his, at the contact between them—however minimal. But her heart was the problem—it was thumping at a rhythm she thought she couldn't possibly sustain, merely because of his proximity.

'Still a clumsy cook, I see. Even when you're just heating pizza,' he said softly, and then he led her into the bathroom.

She had no choice but to stand there as he reached for the first-aid kit. He pulled out the soothing gel and spread it gently over her burn, and the heat went from her hand to the rest of her. His body was still warm from the shower, and she could smell his body wash—the same kind he'd used before they had broken up. The same kind that had thrilled her each time she had smelled it.

And suddenly her heart and her body longed for him with an intensity that had her backing away from him.

'It's fine, thanks. I'll finish this up in the kitchen.' She grabbed the kit and almost ran back to the kitchen, not caring if he saw.

All she cared about was putting some distance between them so she could try and convince herself that he wasn't affecting her.

* * *

'Did you manage to call Lulu?' Jordan asked Mila when he'd finally got his body back under control.

He hadn't expected her to react like that after seeing him in a towel. The look she had given him before she had bolted had been filled with the desire that had marked their entire relationship, and his body had acted accordingly. But that was over now, he told himself, and he was making an effort to forget it. Except that all of a sudden he was noticing the curve of her neck, the faint blush of her cheeks...

'I did,' she replied, her voice husky, and he thought that maybe she wasn't as recovered as she pretended to be. 'She's coming over to the house tomorrow.'

Something in her voice made him forget about the curls that had escaped the clip she'd tied her hair back with. He looked up, saw the shaky hands that handed him his pizza and a glass of wine, and something pulled inside him.

'You're worried.'

'About seeing her?' She picked up her glass and plate, walking past him on her way to the lounge.

He followed, saw that she took one couch, and sat on the other. He didn't need another reason to be distracted by her. He

watched as she broke a piece of pizza from the rest, but didn't lift it to her mouth.

'No, I think that's going to be fine,' she said, and lifted her head with a defiant smile.

But he could still see the uncertainty, and he knew that she was pretending. He just didn't know for whom.

'Do you really?'

'Yeah, of course. I mean, we've spoken in the last year.'

She was desperately trying to convince him—or perhaps again convince herself.

'Then why are you worried?' he asked again. 'And don't tell me you aren't because I can see that you are.'

'Honestly, it's nothing,' she replied, picking at her pizza, and he had to force himself not to be annoyed by her denials. He had to force himself not to push her just because he wanted to know. Because he wanted to help.

So he didn't answer her, biting from a slice of pizza that he didn't taste, chewing mechanically, waiting for her to speak. Her hands grew busier, and soon there was a pile of cheese on her plate and her pizza base was nearly bare. Still, he waited, because he could see it unnerved her, and perhaps it would do so enough that she would open up to him.

'I have to apologise.'

The words came out of nowhere, and Jordan felt a short moment of pride that his patience—a trait that maybe he needed more of—had paid off, before reacting to her words.

'Why?'

'I haven't...kept in touch with her like I should have. Not after the baby.'

She didn't look at him, and concern edged into his heart.

'You were in a difficult place.'

'And that's when you're supposed to turn to your friends, not push them away,' she said hotly, and then lifted a hand to her mouth as though she was surprised at her own words.

He could believe that, since it was the way he felt, too. Did she mean she shouldn't have pushed him away either?

'Maybe Lulu should have understood,' he replied carefully.

'Maybe,' she repeated. 'Maybe I expected her to.'

They were talking about the two of them, he knew, and yet he couldn't bring himself to speak plainly.

'You would have had to say it. How else would she have known?'

'Because she's my friend.'

You were my husband.

'She should have known.'

You should have stayed.

'People don't just know things, Mila,' he said with anger, the only emotion he was ready to accept. 'You have to tell them.'

'Because saying things means so much, right?' she replied calmly.

But he saw the ice in her eyes and he knew the calm was just a front.

'Like when you say things like "until death do us part"? That means you can never go back on it?' She raised her eyebrows, waiting for him to reply.

Just beneath his anger, he felt the guilt. When he had left he had gone back on his word. But he wouldn't have if she hadn't done it first.

'You said it, Mila. You have to turn to your friends when you need them, not push them away. You were the first one to go back on your word.'

Her eyes widened, and it seemed that for a moment the ice melted as a tear fell down her cheek. She wiped it away and stood.

'This was a mistake. Pretending we could do something as simple as having a meal together without getting into some kind of argument.' She slammed her plate onto the coffee table. 'Neither of us may be innocent in what happened between us, but don't for one moment think I went back on my word. I lost our baby. My body failed us. So when I asked for space I was racked with guilt. I was devastated. But you didn't even fight. You left like it was the easiest decision you ever made.'

'It was the hardest decision I ever made,' he shot back, setting his plate next to hers and standing, too, his body riddled with tension, with emotion. 'But it was better for me to focus on my work, on something I could control.' He frowned at the unexpected admission, and shook his head. 'It was the best decision, Mila.'

'For who, Jordan? You or me?'

She wiped at another tear and it pierced his heart.

'This is so silly. I'm going to bed. I'll see you in the morning.'

He couldn't bring himself to ask her to stay—knew that if he did he needed to say something other than the accusations that were coursing through his mind.

When he heard her bedroom door close he flopped down on the couch, thinking about her words. She'd wanted him to stay. The realisation was a blow to his heart that he didn't know he could recover from, and the niggling in the back of his mind—the niggle that had always made him doubt his decision to leave—finally gained ground.

He had believed that he was doing the right thing for her. But her words now made him wonder if it had been only for her, or for him, too. His own words seemed to prove that it had.

He thought about how relieved he had been to focus on something he could control, to focus on his work. Unlike the day when Mila had fallen and he'd had no choice but to sign the forms approving the emergency C-section. Unlike the subsequent loss of his son that he'd been unable to do anything about, just as he had been able to do nothing about Mila's grief and suffering.

He froze as his father's accusation about why he'd left played back in his head. For the first time he considered it. If Jordan had left Cape Town—had left the wife who'd needed him—because it reminded him of his mother's illness, then Jordan had been running. When Mila had asked him for space to deal with the tragedy of losing their child he had run away. From her

pain...from his. Because he hadn't wanted to see her suffer—emotionally or physically—as his mother had. Because he didn't want to watch on, helpless, as his father had.

Pain stabbed through him and he rested his head in his hands. Were those the real reasons he had left?

CHAPTER SIX

MILA WOULD HAVE liked a day to ignore the world and lick her wounds. To ignore the fact that the tension between her and Jordan was making her feel ill. She knew that she was causing it—that if she could just sit back and agree as she had during their marriage, she wouldn't be in the situation she was.

But words kept pouring from her mouth as if she had no control over them. Maybe because she'd realised control didn't do anything. Jordan had still left, even though she had done—and said—everything she'd supposed to. She had managed to alienate her best friend—her only friend—even though she had always gone out of her way to make sure everyone liked her. To make sure she would always have someone who wanted her.

But when the doorbell rang the next morning she knew that she wouldn't be able to wallow. Not only because she had to meet Lulu, but because the meeting was only a part of what she needed to do for the event.

She'd made some progress—Karen's manager had told her that he would run the event by the singer and confirm after that. Her marquee contact had agreed to the customised design, his complaints about the short timeline quelled by the generous

amount of money she'd offered. And on her to-do list that day was getting in touch with the food vendors and checking their availability for the next month. That and Karen would determine the date of the event, and once that was confirmed she would be able to start the marketing process.

Before she could get to that list, though, she needed to face Lulu.

Her hands were shaking as she made her way to the front door. She took a deep breath before she opened it, and then she smiled.

'Hi!' she said, and her eyes swept over Lulu.

Her first thought was that Lulu hadn't changed all that much. Her face was still oval shaped, her hair cut close to her head. Her brown skin was smooth, her light brown eyes careful as she looked at Mila. Her second thought was that none of that mattered when there was something massive that had changed.

'You're pregnant...' Mila said through frozen lips, and her heart sped up. Her breath threatened to speed up, too, but she saw the reserve in Lulu's eyes change to concern and forced herself to control it.

It was just one of those annoying reactions she'd had since losing her baby—like the stairs. She was strong enough to deal with the reaction her body had to seeing Lulu pregnant. Strong enough for the emotional one, too. So she ignored the heartache, the emptiness, and clung to the genuine excitement she felt for her friend.

'Congratulations!'

She pulled Lulu into a hug, ignoring the distance that had grown between them since her fall. She also ignored the way the swell of Lulu's belly made her feel incredibly empty.

'How far along are you?'

Lulu squeezed Mila quickly and then pulled back. The concern still gleaming in Lulu's eyes was almost eclipsed by the reserve that had now returned. 'Thank you. I'm twenty-eight weeks. I wasn't sure if I should come because of...'

Her voice grew softer as she spoke, and Mila knew exactly what Lulu was saying.

'Well, I'm glad you came. Please come inside.'

Lulu walked past her and Mila closed her eyes for a second. Lulu had kept her pregnancy from Mila for more than six months because she had been afraid of the way Mila would react. What did that say about her? she thought, and her heart felt bruised at the knowledge. She had never meant for her tragedy to keep her friend from telling her the happy news. It meant Mila had more to atone for than she'd originally thought.

'Is there anything I can get you? Some tea or coffee?'

'Um...no, thank you. I can't stay too long,' Lulu said, and Mila realised that she wouldn't have time to beat around the bush.

She watched Lulu gingerly lower herself onto one of the couches, and briefly thought that she remembered that perfectly. But she shook her head and decided she wasn't going to go down that path.

Instead, she spoke. 'Look, I know things between us aren't like

they used to be. Our work has suffered because of...everything that happened to me...and now that I know you're pregnant I feel even worse about not taking on more so we could get commission —'

'I'm not interested in our work, Mila,' Lulu interrupted, her pretty face tense. 'Our friendship has suffered.'

Hearing Lulu say that made Mila feel worse. 'I know. I...I should have called.'

'You should have,' Lulu agreed. 'And you shouldn't have pushed me away at all. We've been friends for almost a decade.'

'I know,' Mila said again, and felt herself dangerously close to tears. It was almost the same conversation she had had with Jordan the previous night. And it was time she admitted the truth of it to herself.

'I just...' She stopped. Took a breath. Tried again. 'I couldn't deal with it. I didn't want people around me who would remind me of the things I'd failed at.'

Lulu didn't respond, and Mila didn't look up to see what her friend's face might tell her. She didn't deserve the benefit of the doubt, she thought harshly.

'How would Jordan and I have done that?' Lulu asked finally, with a slight hitch to her voice that told Mila she was hurt. Her heart panged.

'I wasn't a good enough wife or a good enough mother, Lulu. Can't you see that?' Mila was suddenly desperate to make her understand. 'I should have taken it easy, like Jordan asked me

to...' She faltered, but then continued, 'I didn't want Jordan around to remind me of how I had failed.'

'Even if that made sense—which it absolutely does not—why did you push me away? I wanted to be there for you.'

A trickle of heat ran down Mila's face. 'I know you did. But I didn't deserve someone around who wanted me to feel better about myself.'

'Oh, Mila...'

Lulu walked to where she was standing and pulled Mila into her arms. On autopilot, Mila returned the hug, too busy thinking about what she had just revealed to her friend—to herself—to be really present in the moment.

'You deserve everything. Happiness...love.' Lulu pulled back, her eyes teary. 'You are good enough. You just need to give yourself permission to believe that.'

Though she wanted to, Mila didn't waste her breath on asking how she could do that.

'I'm a mess,' Lulu said suddenly, wiping at her eyes. 'Pregnancy hormones are very real.'

'Yes, they are,' Mila replied, smiling, but then the smile faded. 'I'm sorry about everything, Lulu. I shouldn't have... Well, I should have let you be my friend.'

'Yeah, you should have.' Lulu watched her for a moment. 'Friends are there for one another, Mila. I don't know how after almost ten years you still don't know I'm not going anywhere.'

Because for almost double that time I didn't have anyone to

show me what that meant.

But she simply repeated, 'I'm sorry.'

'Apology accepted,' Lulu said, and then sat down again. 'So—tell me the other reason you called.'

A genuine smile crept across her lips. 'How did you know?'

Lulu gave her a look that had Mila's smile spreading.

'I want to start working again. Seriously, this time. Again, I'm sorry I let the ball drop with all the events we should have been doing—'

'Oh, I've been doing them anyway,' Lulu interrupted.

'You have?'

Lulu shrugged. 'It didn't seem right to let things fall apart just because you needed some time to recover. So I've been responding to emails from the website and I forwarded you some so that you'd have something to do.'

Another smile crept onto Mila's face. 'You've been managing me?'

Lulu let out a small laugh. 'Yes, maybe I have. But it's meant that your business hasn't fallen apart.'

'Like my personal life, you mean?' The smile on Mila's face faltered before she reminded herself that she needed to move on. 'Thank you, Lulu. That means more than you know.'

'It wasn't a big deal. All the details, including the financials are in this binder.' Lulu reached into her bag—puffing just a little, since it was on the floor—and handed Mila the file. She took it, but didn't look inside. She trusted Lulu, and knew everything

would be in order.

'I already have our next event,' Mila said, and explained about the event they needed to plan, the timeline and what she'd already done.

She absorbed Lulu's shock at the details, and was immensely grateful when Lulu didn't comment on the fact that she was doing the event with Jordan...or the fact that they were still married. At least that was what she thought.

But after they had spoken about the event in more detail, and just as Lulu was on her way out, her friend said, 'You know, I was with you when you met Jordan and when you found out you were pregnant. I saw how happy both of those things made you. How happy being a family made you. Maybe finding out you're still married is a sign for you to try again. A second chance.'

Mila ignored the hope, the fierce desire that sprang up inside her at Lulu's words. 'That's not going to happen.'

'Why not? You still love him. I know you do. And you've always wanted a family, so...' Lulu trailed off.

'That doesn't matter any more, Lulu,' Mila said firmly. 'I just want to move on with my life. Focus on my work. Be a good aunt.' She tried to smile.

Lulu shook her head. 'If that's what you really want, I'll support you. But just make sure it is what you really want. And do me a favour?'

Mila looked up at her.

'Give yourself permission to think about what you want

honestly.'

'Yeah, I will,' Mila responded, and then took the time to enjoy having a moment with the only person who had made her feel loved since she was sixteen.

No, that's not true, she thought, and heard Lulu's words about Jordan, about family, echo in her head.

Was a second chance possible?

No. She clamped down on the thought. She couldn't go down that path. Not if she wanted to survive the task they'd been given.

CHAPTER SEVEN

JORDAN WAS RETURNING from his morning run just as Lulu came out through the front door.

'Hey!' she exclaimed when she saw him, and Jordan grinned, remembering how much fun she had always been.

She and Mila had been a bundle of light together. It bothered him to see how much of that light had dimmed in Mila, he thought as he saw her, too, and his smile faded.

'You look great, Lulu,' he said, focusing his attention on the pretty woman in front of him. And then he saw that she was pregnant and his heart clenched. He suddenly became aware of the way his lungs struggled for air, the way his shoulders felt heavy with grief. He cleared his throat. 'Congratulations.'

'Thanks,' she said softly, and he saw the flash of concern in her eyes.

Because he didn't need it, he forced out, 'You finally managed to find someone who deserves you?'

'Yeah—still my husband.'

She smiled at him kindly and then turned back to Mila, who was watching their exchange with wary eyes.

'Let me know how this afternoon goes. Like I said, most of the vendors will be there. And I'll track down those who aren't.'

'Thanks.' Mila's eyes warmed as she looked at Lulu. 'I'll see you soon.'

They both stood and watched as Lulu walked to her car, and waved at the sound of her horn. When she was no longer in sight Jordan felt his legs go weak, and he walked forward to the chair that stood next to the front door.

'Hey...' Mila crouched down in front of him, and as his heart palpitated and he fought for a steady breath, she took his hand and squeezed. 'Look at me. Look at me, Jordan,' she repeated when he didn't respond the first time.

He lifted his eyes.

'You're going to be okay. Just keep breathing.'

She repeated it until finally he could feel his heart falling back into the uncomfortable rhythm it always had around her. He pulled his hand away, embarrassed at his reaction. She stood up, but his hope that she would leave it alone and go inside faltered when she took the seat next to him.

'So it happens to you, too?'

He looked over at her, but she was staring out to where the trees lined the driveway.

'I don't know what you're talking about.'

'Your lungs feel like they don't work any more and your heart feels like it's beating to keep the entire world alive.'

She still wasn't looking at him and he eased. He didn't know why he had reacted to Lulu in that way. He had seen other pregnant women before. Why had this one been any different?

'It's happened to you?' he said hoarsely before he could stop himself.

'Yeah, plenty of times.' She paused. 'It almost happened with Lulu today.'

'Why didn't it?'

'I didn't want her to think I wasn't happy for her.'

He nodded. He understood that. And perhaps for the first time he found himself opening up the door he had locked his feelings about his son's death behind.

'I don't know why this is different.'

'Because she's someone you know. You care about her,' she answered softly. 'It hits harder when it's closer to home.'

'Yeah, probably,' he agreed, but something told him there was something else, as well.

'I know what I said, but it doesn't mean that you're not happy for her.'

He knew she was looking at him, so he nodded, but didn't respond. Pieces were settling in his mind from where he had locked them away. And then he spoke almost without realising it.

'You're right. When I saw Lulu there was a part of me that was happy for her before the doom and gloom set in.' He realised

now where the reaction had come from, and for some reason felt comfortable with saying it out loud. He didn't care to examine why.

'And...?' Mila prompted softly.

'And I felt bad about it because when we found out you were pregnant...' he couldn't quite believe he was saying it '...I was terrified.'

'What?' The shocked tone of her voice had his heart accelerating.

'Of course, I was happy, too. But I was scared.'

'You never told me that.'

'You were so happy. I didn't want to spoil that.'

'I was scared, too, Jordan.' She let out a little laugh when he looked at her. 'I didn't know the first thing about being a mother. About being in a family.'

His mouth opened in surprise, but before she could see it, he asked, 'Why didn't you tell me?'

'Because you were so happy.' She smiled over at him. 'I didn't want you to think I couldn't do it.'

Something bothered him about her answer. It reminded him of the time she'd thought he was telling her she wasn't good at her job.

'I never thought that,' he said. 'I knew you were going to be a wonderful mother.'

'You would have been a wonderful father, too.'

'Maybe,' he replied.

Or maybe he would have been as emotionally unavailable as his own father had been. He frowned, but didn't ponder it any more. Not when he was thinking about how nice it was sitting with her. The grief he'd felt at seeing the chairs where he'd spent so much time with his father for the first time after Greg's death had faded, and he knew it was because of Mila. She was the only person besides his father that he wanted to be there with.

The realisation unsettled him.

'Why were you scared?' She interrupted his thoughts. 'I mean, I know becoming a parent is scary in general, but was that the only thing?'

No, he thought, but he couldn't bring himself to say it when he was only just beginning to realise the effect his parents had had on him. Like the fact that part of his fear over becoming a parent was because of the way his father had treated him as a child—fear that he would turn out just like that.

'Yeah, that's all.'

He looked over at her and saw that she didn't believe him. Saw the flash of hurt in her eyes because of it, felt the nudge in his heart. And still he couldn't formulate the words.

'It didn't seem like things went poorly with Lulu,' he said instead, hoping for reprieve.

'They didn't,' she replied in a measured tone, and he closed his eyes when he realised he might just have undone the progress they'd made. In their working relationship, he clarified to himself.

'So, you guys are friends again?'

'We were never not friends, it seems. She's even been doing events for me while I've been...away.'

'That's great,' he said lamely, and felt helpless as the tension seeped back in between them. Silence came with it, giving him enough time to berate himself for spoiling the tentative truce that they'd been starting to forge.

But he couldn't tell Mila why he hadn't told her everything. She didn't know that side of his father, and he didn't want to taint her memories of Greg by telling her about the angry person his father had been in Jordan's youth. About the remnants of that time that had marred his relationship with his father right up to Greg's death. And now Jordan would never get the chance to fix it, or to make up for the past year when he hadn't been in touch...

'Lulu told me about a food fair that's happening this afternoon.' She broke the silence. 'It's at the Johnson High School in town—and most of the vendors who were there for the original Under the Stars are going to be there. I'm leaving in an hour. You can come, if you like.'

'I'd like that very much. I'll go get ready,' he said softly, grateful that she was still trying to be amicable despite his reluctance to open up to her.

As he headed to the bathroom for a shower he thought about it. He hadn't told her much about his childhood. Their relationship had been such a whirlwind at the beginning, and he'd fallen in love with her before he'd known what was happening. And

then they'd got married, just three months after meeting—Jordan couldn't remember ever making such an impulsive decision—and Mila had fallen pregnant a few months after that.

Things had been so anchored in the future for them that they hadn't considered their past. They hadn't considered how the way they had grown up and how the people in their lives might have an impact on their relationship.

It made him realise that there were pieces between them that had been broken long before they'd lost their child. They hadn't even been able to share the way they'd felt about having a baby, for crying out loud! Each of them hadn't wanted to offend the other with their real feelings. That wasn't a healthy relationship.

The conversation they had just had was the first open one they'd had since they'd met—at least about their pasts. Did that mean things were changing for them? Did he want them to? He couldn't deny how being with Mila reminded him of how much he had felt for her. Maybe still felt for her...

No! He shut that train of thought down as the water hit his body. There was no point in exploring that now. His marriage was over in every way but legally. He would just focus on the event, on helping Mila, and then on running the vineyard in a way that would have made his parents proud.

He would focus on that, Jordan told himself when the hope inside him twinged.

There was no point in hoping after all that had happened between them.

CHAPTER EIGHT

SHE NEEDED TO THINK.

She couldn't turn to the usual activities that helped her to do so since they all involved staying in the house with Jordan, so Mila decided to go to the place that always did.

She grabbed her jacket and walked out into the sunshine that was growing rarer the closer it got to winter. Though the cold air reminded her of the season, it brought a beauty to the vineyard that was underappreciated. Especially from here, she thought, standing atop the slope that overlooked the vineyard, just as she had the previous day with Jordan.

It felt as if it were a lot longer than that. So much had happened since then. She'd done a lot for the event, yes, but she had also learned a lot about herself. About how much she wanted to look worthy, and how she had sacrificed her relationships in pursuit of that. About how much what people thought about her affected her behaviour—and how she couldn't bring herself to acknowledge that to herself, or to the people who cared about her.

Perhaps it was because there hadn't been many people who cared about her when she was growing up. She'd had ten different foster families over her years of being in foster care, and she couldn't remember even one of them fostering because they actually cared about the children they were looking after.

It meant that she desperately wanted to feel loved, to feel needed. But it also meant that she didn't know how to turn to

people when she needed them. Her conversation with Lulu had shown her that those were opposing desires, since the people she wanted to feel loved and needed by needed to feel that, too. And, since she struggled to do that, she only succeeded in pushing them away. It was a vicious cycle, and if she was being honest with herself, it was another reason the loss of her baby had broken her.

When she'd fallen pregnant so quickly, so unexpectedly, she had let herself hope for a family. She was going to have a child—someone who would need her without conditions. Someone who would know that she needed them, too, without her having to say it. That was what family was, wasn't it?

But she had also been scared that she wouldn't be a good mother. And of the way having a baby would change her life. In some ways it had been a remnant of her fears about marriage. Her pregnancy seemed to have sharpened them, causing her to worry that they'd moved too fast.

So she had clung to her job, working just as hard as she had before she'd fallen pregnant to prove to herself that things wouldn't change that much. She'd ignored Jordan's suggestion that she move more slowly, that she take time to adjust to the changes her body and their lives were going through.

And then she'd fallen down the stairs and her baby had been born prematurely, only surviving for seventeen minutes in the world Mila was supposed to have prepared him for. Her mourning had been part grief at her loss, part guilt at the fact that she hadn't slowed down. That she'd put her selfish fears first.

And in her grief she'd realised how unimportant those fears had been. Having a family—having her son—had always been the most important. She'd pushed Jordan, Greg and Lulu away because that realisation had come too late, and she hadn't wanted to be reminded of how stupid she'd been.

So she'd locked her hopes for a family away, convincing herself that she could survive without one. And she would cling to that belief so no one would get hurt again because of her. It didn't matter what Lulu said about second chances and Mila wanting more. Wanting more didn't matter. Not any more.

Besides, she and Jordan just weren't right for each other. She absently rubbed at the ache that throbbed in her chest at the thought as she remembered their interaction earlier. She'd had no idea he was as affected as she was by their baby's death, and she felt awful about it. She could still see the way the colour had leached from his face when he'd realised Lulu was pregnant, could still remember how erratic his breathing had been.

It always gave her an objective glimpse into what other people felt when she went through her own episodes, and it wasn't good. And, though she still felt guilt about it, knowing that he struggled, too, made her feel a little better about how she was coping. It made her feel, for the first time since her life had imploded in front of her, as if she wasn't alone.

But that didn't mean anything other than shared experience, she thought firmly. She and Jordan hadn't even shared the way they'd really felt about having a baby. And then she had told him

about why she hadn't, about why she was scared, and he had still refused to share his feelings with her. It reminded her of how little she actually knew about him...

No, she concluded. They weren't right for each other. And no matter what her heart said she couldn't be with someone who didn't want to let her in.

'Going down?' a voice asked behind her, and she turned, her heart in her throat until she realised that it was Frank, not Jordan behind her.

'No.' She smiled at him and checked her watch. 'I have under thirty minutes before I need to leave to do some work on the event. There's no time for me to get lost in the fields today.'

Frank nodded and just stood behind her, and his steady presence gave her a feeling of calm.

'Something's wrong,' Frank said, still staring out to the fields.

She bit her lip when Frank's lack of eye contact reminded her of how uncomfortable he was talking about anything personal, and answered him. 'Nothing out of the ordinary.'

Not if you counted a will forcing you to reunite with a not-so-ex-husband as ordinary.

'You sure?'

'Yes.' She turned to him now, and saw the concern on his face. 'I'm not going to break down because Jordan is back, Frank.'

Frank sank his hands into his pockets and shifted his weight. He hated interfering, she thought, and her heart warmed even as she wondered why he thought he needed to.

'I know you're a strong, independent woman...'

This time Mila didn't try to hide her smile.

'But that doesn't mean that your ex being back shouldn't bother you in some way.'

Her smile faded and she shrugged. 'I'm not saying it doesn't bother me. But I can handle it.'

'He hurt you pretty bad the last time.'

'Yeah, he did. But I hurt him, too,' she answered without thinking, and lifted a hand to her mouth when she realised it was true. She had hurt him when she'd asked him to give her space. The thought left a feeling of discomfort in her stomach.

'I can talk to him if you like.'

She smiled. 'You would hate that.'

Frank returned her smile. 'I would. But I'd do it.'

'I know you would. For Greg, right?' She said it because she knew it must be true. Especially since Greg had asked her to look after the others at the vineyard in the same way.

'Yeah. But for you, too.'

She brushed a kiss on Frank's cheek because she knew he cared for her, and laughed when the action made him blush.

'I'm okay, Frank. I promise.'

She left after that, the brief interaction leaving her steadier. Perhaps it was because she believed what she'd told Frank. She could handle Jordan.

Yes, his being back brought back emotions, memories that she wished she could forget. And it stirred up the anger, the

accusations she'd wanted to hurl at him the moment she'd got the divorce papers that had made her realise he had given up on them. But the more time she spent with him now also made her realise that there were things between them that had never really been right. With her, with him or in their relationship.

But Frank's presence had reminded her of the promise she'd made to Greg to look after the vineyard. And for the first time she realised the implications of Greg's will on that promise. If she didn't put aside her feelings, she wouldn't be able to plan the event. That would mean that 50 per cent of the vineyard would be auctioned off, which would mean an uncertain future.

If someone horrible became part-owner, it would affect Frank and everyone else on the vineyard that she'd grown to care about. She had to do it for them. She needed to plan this event, make sure that it was a success and then sign her share over to Jordan even if the whole process pained her.

And she would do it for the people she cared about.

* * *

It seemed to Jordan that he wasn't the only one who had decided to let his feelings take a back seat. Mila had greeted him cordially when she'd seen him waiting for her on one of the chairs on the patio and asked him to drive them to the school. Her tone had been reserved, but not entirely cold, and Jordan had thought that maybe she had decided cordiality was better than letting the emotions of the past interfere again.

He couldn't agree more, and so an unspoken truce had formed

between them. He'd waited for Mila to grab some things from her room, and when she'd returned and walked past him the smell of vanilla had followed her. His body had tightened in response, and he'd wondered how difficult this truce would be.

'What's our plan for this?'

'Well, I have the list of all the vendors we used last time. Most of them will be at this food fair—thank goodness Stellenbosch's event industry is small—so we can split up and ask them about their availability and interest in our event.'

He ran his tongue over his teeth, keeping his eyes glued to the road. 'I don't think we should split up. Didn't the will stipulate we do this together?'

She gave him a wry smile. 'I don't think that's what your father meant.'

'Maybe not, but it would probably be a good idea for me to tag along with you. I didn't do any of this the first time, remember?'

He wasn't sure when it had suddenly become so important for him to stay with her—especially since he was sure he could convince a few vendors to come to an event that they would get great publicity and payment for.

'Fine, we can stay together.'

She said it as though she was conceding millions instead of just her company. Was there a reason she didn't want to spend time with him? Maybe it was because she could also feel the slight sizzle that simmered between them whenever they were together.

'It would probably be best if I introduce you as the new owner

of the vineyard. It might give some of them more incentive to say yes.'

'And what happens after this?'

'We speak to Karen—she's supposed to contact me to confirm if she can do it.'

He glanced over at her, saw the pained expression on her face, and smiled. 'Brings back bad memories, does it?'

She groaned, and it made him feel lighter than he had in a while. 'I've always thought about her with both pride and despair. Her performance that night was fantastic, but I could have done without the drama.'

'But if she can perform...?'

'We'll have to work with her to figure out a date. And then we market.'

They had just pulled up at the school, and were being directed up a road that Jordan remembered led to a sports field. It was ages since he'd been here, he thought idly, and then turned his attention back to Mila when she spoke.

'Did you know she's playing a concert? Saturday at Westgate Stadium. It would be an excellent way to show our support. You up for it?'

His eyebrows rose. 'You want me to go with you?'

'If I have to suffer through a concert with a load of teenagers, then so do you, buddy.'

He grinned, and found himself relaxing for the first time since he'd arrived back home. 'Sounds fair to me.'

They got out after he'd parked, and he took a moment to appreciate the beauty of the surroundings he'd in no way appreciated in his teens. The field he stood on reminded him of the countless rugby matches he'd played there, and though nostalgia was easy to slip into, he found the scene beyond the school to be more compelling.

The hills made it seem almost enclosed by nature, and had been the backdrop to many of his teenage escapades. Large trees were scattered over the grounds, leaves fading from green to orange with the turn of the season. He thought it might only be in Cape Town that even a school was beautiful to look at.

'This place hasn't changed since I was here,' Jordan said as they stood in line to get tickets, and he watched as Mila turned her head to follow his gaze.

'The swimming pool is new,' Mila pointed out, and he looked over and saw she was right.

He wasn't sure how he had missed that, since the school grounds were built at a much lower level than where they were parked.

'How do you know the pool's new?'

'I went to school here, too,' she said, a light blush covering her cheeks.

He wondered why telling him that would embarrass her. He frowned. 'Why didn't we see each other?'

'You would have been four years ahead of me, so we would have only seen each other if I was there in your last year.' She

glanced over at him. 'I wasn't.'

'So you came after I had already matriculated.' The timeline had already formed in his head.

'Yeah, and only stayed for a year.'

'And then what?'

'I got moved to another family and another school.'

Her words left him...disconcerted. Perhaps it was because of the reminder of her childhood. Or perhaps it was because she had never spoken about her schooling before. It highlighted another crack in the relationship they'd had before breaking up. Shouldn't he have known this about her, his wife?

'Why didn't I know this?'

She shrugged, though the gesture was made with stiff shoulders, and the relaxation Jordan had felt only a few moments ago slipped away.

'There were a lot of things we didn't talk about, Jordan,' she said.

Exactly what he'd realised over the past few days, he thought. He took out his wallet before Mila could pay when they got to the front of the line, and turned to her as they waited for their tickets.

'It seems a bit strange that we didn't talk about it, doesn't it...?'

He trailed off when he saw that her face had lost its colour. And then he realised why. Because the school was at a lower level, there was a long staircase that led down to another sports field. It was steep, even for him, and he felt her shake even before he saw it.

'I can't do this,' she said, and turned away, her eyes wide and frightened.

Jordan felt the punch to his stomach even as steel lined it. 'You don't have a choice,' he said firmly, and grabbed her hand, leading her to the stairs slowly.

Every step she took—every uncertain, painful step—sliced at his heart, but he knew he had to do this for her. He knew that if he could redeem himself in any way for the decisions he'd made since the day she'd fallen down the stairs, it would be by giving her back her freedom. And he knew her well enough to know that the only way to do that was through tough love.

'Jordan, please...' she whispered, her hand white on the railing. She had managed one step down the stairs, but had then frozen.

'Mila, look at me.' He waited as she did so, letting those behind him pass as he stood with Mila. 'You have to do this. The event depends on it. The vineyard depends on it. For my father.'

It was a low blow and he knew it, and he saw the responding flash of red in her eyes. But the look quickly fizzled out as he took her hand again, and was replaced by a combination of fear and...trust? he thought, and felt that punch in his gut again.

He couldn't ponder why that look had that effect on him now, though, and instead focused on taking another step down, waiting for her to join him. After taking a breath, she did. He saw the temptation in her eyes to freeze again, and decided that distracting her would soften the tough-love approach.

'Do you think it's because we did everything so fast that we

didn't talk about our pasts?' he asked her, and patted himself on the back when he saw confusion in her eyes at his change of topic.

'That was a part of it.' Her voice was shaky, but she had taken the next step with his encouragement. 'But definitely not the biggest part.'

'What do you mean?'

She rolled her eyes, and he thought vaguely that his attempt at distraction was working. Except that she was distracting him, too.

'We told each other about the most important parts. You knew that I didn't have any family, and that I grew up in foster care, and I knew that your mom had passed away from cancer.'

'And we were just content with that...' he said, more to himself than to her.

Ever since he had realised that there had been things in their relationship that were broken even before the accident, the more he saw them. Yes, they'd known the basics—like the fact that her father had died before she was born and her mother had died shortly after her birth—but he'd had no idea how that had made her feel. Just as she hadn't known how his mother's death had affected him. And how much he blamed himself for it.

'You were,' she scoffed, and took another step down, still leaning on him. 'I wanted to know everything about you. About your father, your mother, your childhood... Everything,' she repeated. 'But you didn't seem willing to offer the information...'

She took a deep breath, but he knew it had little to do with

the fact that she was going down the stairs.

'And I never wanted to push.'

He frowned. 'You didn't want to ask me about my life?'

She was silent for a moment. 'I didn't want to push you to give me any information you didn't want to.'

'Why not?'

She looked at him, uncertainty flickering in her eyes. 'Because I didn't want to tell you things either.'

It was a strange conversation to be having while she was facing her fears, he thought briefly, but in that moment the only thing that had his attention was what she was saying.

'What didn't you want to tell me?'

He felt her hand tighten, felt her resistance as she tried to pull away from him, but then she stopped. Maybe because she'd realised that pulling away from him would mean she would have to deal with her fear alone. Or maybe because she had chosen to be cordial and her refusal to answer his question would be going against that. But still she didn't say anything.

'Why did it embarrass you to tell me that you went to school here?' he asked, with a sudden urgency lighting up inside him that made it imperative for him to know. The same urgency that told him that whatever she didn't want to tell him about her life was somehow tied to that.

'It didn't,' she replied quickly. Too quickly for someone who had only a few minutes ago stiffened next to him.

'Mila...' It was a plea—one that came from that urgency—and

it seemed to make a dent in that defensiveness she'd always had about her past. One he was beginning to realise he had, too.

She let out a huff. 'I just didn't want you to think about my crappy unstable childhood when you'd had the complete opposite.'

'That embarrassed you?' he asked incredulously, and a wave of shame washed through him. Had he said something to her that had made her feel embarrassed about her childhood? Did she really think his had been so wonderful?

'Yes, it did,' she said through gritted teeth. 'You had an amazing home—one you could go to every day. You had a father who loved you. I had none of that.'

'Why were you embarrassed by that?'

'Because...' She had reached the bottom of the stairs, but she didn't seem to notice. She took another breath, and said, 'Because it meant that I wasn't worthy of someone like you.'

CHAPTER NINE

THE WORDS HAD already left Mila's lips when she realised how much they revealed about her. She was annoyed that it was the second time she had disclosed something to Jordan that she hadn't wanted him to know, even if it had made her feel better. Especially since the disturbed look on his face made her think that he didn't feel like what she'd said.

'Did you really believe that?' he asked softly.

'I did.'

Maybe I still do.

'It doesn't matter any more, though, does it?'

'You're wrong, you know.' He shook his head. 'I haven't met anyone else I respect more than you. You didn't have family, but you're more loyal than any family member I can think of. Even me.'

He paused, and she thought that he was sacrificing his own comfort to make her feel better. It melted her heart.

'You looked after my father when I couldn't. Thank you.'

His words made her blush, and she mumbled, 'You know you don't have to thank me for that.'

'I know you don't think I need to—which just proves my point. You are worthy, Mila. I'm the one who isn't worthy of you.' He shook his head. 'I didn't have the childhood you thought I did.'

'What do you mean?'

He stuffed his hands into his pockets and looked down. The gesture made him look so defeated she wanted to hold him in her arms, but as she followed his gaze she realised she was looking at grass. She'd made it down the stairs!

'I did it...' she said to herself, not quite believing this victory, especially after the fear had paralysed her for over a year.

'Yeah, you did.'

Jordan smiled at her, and for the first time since he had returned, she could tell that it was completely genuine, despite the look of disconcertion on his face.

'I did it. I really did it.'

She felt like a fool when her eyes started tearing up, but she

couldn't help it. A small piece inside her that had broken after she'd lost her son had become whole, and it gave her a sense of peace. She felt relief, a sense of accomplishment, and so many other emotions she couldn't even begin to put her finger on.

When she looked at Jordan, she saw that his frown had cleared, replaced by a look of satisfaction.

He did this purposely, she thought and, ignoring the voice that screamed in her head, she hugged him.

The comfort of it hit her so hard that she had to close her eyes. But that only heightened her senses. The woodsy smell of him was intoxicating—so familiar and masculine that awareness heated inside her. She was moulded to his body, could feel the strength of the muscles she had admired when she'd first seen him after he'd returned. His arms—which had been still at his sides until that moment—wrapped around her and she was pulled in tighter to his body. Her breathing slowed, her heart sped up, and she had to resist the urge to pull his head down so that she could taste his lips.

And then she lifted her head and met his eyes. The heat of longing there was a reflection of her own, and she could feel the world fade as it always did with him. Gooseflesh shot out on her skin, and she considered for a brief moment what would happen if she kissed him.

It would be magical, she knew. The things inside her that had died when he'd left would find life. She would finally feel alive again. But at what cost? a voice asked her, and she took a step

back from him, knowing that it would take away everything she had rebuilt if she gave in to this temptation.

'Thank you,' she said, and felt the warmth of a blush light her face. But she'd needed to say it, to make sure that he knew why she had hugged him—as a token of gratitude, nothing else. The physical effect the seemingly innocent gesture had awakened was merely an unforeseen consequence.

'It's the least I can do,' he replied in a gravelly voice, and she knew that their contact had affected him, too.

What was more surprising to her was that he looked as though he genuinely meant the words, that he wasn't just saying them automatically.

She cleared her throat. 'So...we should probably start rallying the troops.'

He nodded his agreement, and she forced herself to shift focus. She could be professional. She prided herself on it, in fact. She began to explain her strategy—she would speak to the vendors first, since they knew her, and then introduce them to Jordan as the new owner of the vineyard. Then they would pitch their event, find out if they were interested and available, and hope for the best. Since the will stipulated that they should give evidence of trying their best to find exactly the same service providers for the event, she would record their interactions and use them to show Mark if they needed to find alternatives.

'You've thought of everything, haven't you?'

'That's the job,' she replied, her neck prickling at the

admiration she heard in Jordan's voice.

'Where have I heard that before?' he muttered, and she remembered she'd said something similar to him the first time they'd met.

She brushed off the nostalgia. 'We'd better get to it.'

They spent almost two hours there. It was time spent waiting for vendors to find a moment to talk to them in between serving people, and eating to fill that time. She found herself growing more comfortable as the minutes went by, the tension that was always inside her around him easing.

He was a wonderful ambassador for the vineyard, she thought as she watched him, and even though all the vendors remembered her and their event—especially since she had used many of them multiple times before—it was Jordan they responded to. He spoke to them with such warmth, with such praise, that she could almost see their spines straighten with pride. He played up his enjoyment of their food so much that sometimes she found herself giggling.

The sound was strange, even to her, and she wondered why it was so easy to relax around him now. Her determination to focus on the event and ignore whatever was between them had been decided just that morning. A few hours later and she had spoken to him about the past, made herself vulnerable by admitting that she hadn't thought she was worthy of him, and had walked down an intimidating staircase. And now she was laughing with him. At him.

She knew that at some point he had gone from entertaining the vendors to trying to make her laugh. She wasn't sure how she felt about that, but she chose not to ponder it then. Not when for the first time in a long time she felt...free.

'Ice cream?'

She looked at him when she heard his voice, and realised that she had been staring off into space while she thought about the day.

'I'm not sure it's warm enough for ice cream,' she replied, feeling self-conscious now.

'The sun is shining, Mila. We should thank it by offering it the traditional food of appreciation.'

Her lips curved. 'And that's ice cream?'

'Yes, it is.' He smiled back at her and her heart thumped. It was as if they were on a first date, she thought, and then immediately cast the thought aside.

'Besides, we have one more vendor to see,' he continued, 'and he still hasn't returned from his supply run.'

She shrugged off her hesitation. 'Sure—okay.'

She followed him to the ice-cream stand, where they joined a long line.

'Seems like everyone wants to make a sacrifice to the gods,' she said, and smiled at him when he looked at her.

'I told you so,' he replied, and took her hand as though it was the most natural thing in the world.

And the truth was that on that day, after talking, after laughing

together, with the winter sun shining on their faces, holding hands did seem natural. But it wasn't, she reminded herself, and let go of his hand under the guise of looking for the notepad where she had written down the names of all the vendors and made notes.

'I think we've done pretty well today,' she said, and pretended not to notice the disappointment that had flashed across his face. 'Of the six vendors here, three are interested and are available for two weeks—the end of this month and the beginning of next. It cuts our time in half. Not ideal, but I think it's doable. And if we speak to the owner of the Bacon Bites food truck when he gets back, we could have four.'

'So that means we only have to replace two or three?'

Jordan slipped his hands into the pockets of his jacket, and she wondered if it was because he was tempted to take her hand again.

Her hand itched at the thought.

'Yes, but we still need to hear from two vendors who aren't here. Lulu said she would follow up on those. But I think we could substitute any who don't come with some of the other vendors here. I chatted to the woman who owns the chocolate truck over there—' she gestured to it with her head '—and she thought our event sounded great. She told me to come over if we were interested.'

'How did you manage to speak to her?'

'Oh, it was between your moan of delight for the meat pies and your groan of appreciation for the burger sliders,' she teased,

and saw the tension that had entered his body after she'd let go of his hand fade.

'They have good food here,' he said, with a shrug and a smile.

Before she could respond they were at the front of the line. Behind the glass casing of the van she could see a variety of ice cream flavours that made her mouth water. After a few minutes of looking, she still couldn't decide between the chocolate hazelnut flavour and the vanilla toffee.

'How about you take the chocolate hazelnut and I take the vanilla toffee?' he said when she told him as much, and she smiled at the proposal.

'Perfect!'

She relayed their order to the patient vendor, and watched with delight at he made the sugar cone their ice cream would be served in from scratch.

Her first lick was deliciously creamy, and the thrill of cold ran down her spine. But then she realised that Jordan was watching her—with amusement and something else in his eyes—and she wondered if the thrill had come from the cold.

'This is great,' she said to avoid feeling awkward. 'Want some?'

'Sure,' he replied, and moved closer.

He watched her as he tasted the ice cream, and suddenly it was a year ago, when they'd been on honeymoon in Mauritius and had come across an ice-cream stand. It had been perfect for the hot summer's day after they'd been at the beach all morning.

Sharing their ice creams with one another had been...sensual,

she thought, just as it was now. Shivers went up her spine at the look in his eyes—the look that told her that even though they weren't together any more he still wanted her.

He offered her a lick of his, and as though she was in a trance she leaned forward and tasted it, her eyes still on his. The flavour was just as delectable as she'd thought it would be, but the thought barely registered. Instead she was wondering if their sharing ice cream would end the way it had in Mauritius—with a passion that could have heated the entire resort for a week.

The thought had her moving backwards so quickly she almost stumbled. She regained her balance in time to realise that there was ice cream on her nose. She spent a few seconds trying to figure out how to remove it, and sighed when she saw that neither of them had taken a serviette.

'Do you want some help?' he asked, and she looked up to see that he was watching her—again—this time with an amused expression. And then she thought that she must have been crossing her eyes to look at the spot of ice cream on her nose, and she flushed.

'No, thanks—I'll manage.' She rubbed her nose with her sleeve and quickly turned to look for the vendor they were waiting for, hoping with all her might that he would be there. Relief swamped her when she saw that he was, and she turned back to Jordan, who was now watching her with a guarded expression.

'We should go over there,' she said, and gestured behind her.

He nodded and started walking, and she took a moment to

instruct her emotions to stop fluttering around and get into place. When she was sure she had them under control she followed him —and wished with all her might that the roller coaster the two of them were on would stop.

CHAPTER TEN

'WHERE ARE WE GOING?'

They were in the car and supposed to be heading home from the school. But after spending the entire day with Mila, Jordan didn't want it to end.

Yes, they lived together at the moment—he kept waiting for her to tell him she would be leaving—but as soon as they walked through the front door of his father's house Jordan knew that Mila would erect a fence between them. He would be able to see glimpses of her, but he wouldn't be able to get near her, and the thought of that disturbed him.

He didn't think about why—he didn't need to defend himself for the time he spent with the woman who had once been his everything, did he?—but he couldn't bear being kept at a distance any more. Not after he'd seen parts of her today that he hadn't known existed during their marriage.

And now he knew what he had been missing.

'Did you know the Gerbers?'

'The old couple who used to live behind us?'

Mila turned to him, her brows drawn together in a frown, and Jordan's hand itched to reach out and smooth it over. But he tightened his hands on the steering wheel. Just as he had

tightened them into fists in his pockets to keep himself from taking her hand again that afternoon.

He had done that by mistake, but it had felt so right that he hadn't let go even though his mind had told him to. And then she had done it instead, and disappointment had hit him like water from a burst pipe. He blamed that desire to touch her on that hug she'd sprung on him after making it down those stairs.

His body awoke just at the thought of it.

'Yeah...' He forced himself to speak, forced his body to calm down. 'Did you ever speak to them? Get a look around their property?'

'I... No,' she said, confusion clear in her voice. 'What's going on, Jordan? Where are you taking me?'

He had wanted to keep it a surprise, but he didn't want her to worry. 'I'm taking you to our house.'

'What?'

Was that panic her heard in her voice?

He frowned. 'Is something wrong?'

'No, no,' she replied quickly—too quickly—and looked out of the window. Her hands were clasped so tightly together in her lap that he reached over with one of his.

'What's going on, Mila?'

She blew out a shaky breath and he felt the deliberate relaxation of her hands under his. Taking it as a sign that she didn't want to be touched, Jordan moved his hand away. Even that slight loss of contact made him feel empty.

'It's nothing.'

'Mila...' Again, he found himself pleading.

She sighed. 'I just haven't been there since...since you left.'

'And going back now is...worrying for you?'

She didn't answer, and he glanced over to see her deliberately relaxing again. It made him wonder about why she was reacting this way to something as simple as going back to the house they'd shared. He felt a slight stir in his brain and frowned. He was missing something.

'A reminder of the past,' she finally said softly, and when he looked at her again he saw that she was still looking out of the window. 'Going back to the house we lived in... Going back together... It's just a reminder of a life that seems worlds away.'

'We were planning to go anyway, weren't we? I have to help you get the stuff out so that you can leave.' Even saying the words sent a flash of pain through his heart.

'Oh, yes, of course,' she said, again more quickly than he thought she needed to, and again he wondered what he was missing.

There had to be something... The stirring in his brain seemed like a distant memory, but he couldn't recall it to verify whether that was the truth, and he didn't know if it had anything to do with what was currently happening between them. But it must—why else did he feel as if he was having a conversation without knowing all the facts?

'It's probably because this is unplanned,' she continued. 'Why

are we going there now?'

'I have something to show you,' he replied, forcing himself to ignore the dull thud of unrecalled memories and focus on what his intention had been from the beginning. 'Did you ever see that pathway in the backyard, just next to that huge tree we planned to turn into a tree house for the little grape?'

He heard her sharp intake of breath before he realised he had used the pet name they had given their child after finding out they were having a boy. They had been so happy, he thought, pain tainting the memory. It had been the first time they had considered names for the baby, and he had teased her, calling him 'the little grape' since their child would one day have to take over the vineyard.

Mila had protested, of course, and with each objection had come a splutter of laughter that had warmed Jordan's insides so much that the name had stuck. They'd had a list of real names, of course, but they had never got the chance to decide on what they would call him.

'Yes, I remember,' she said hoarsely, and he reached for her hand, not caring about the unspoken rules that meant he shouldn't.

'I'm sorry, Mila, I didn't mean to—'

'It's okay.' She squeezed his hand. 'I think it's time we weren't afraid to refer to our son.'

He tightened his hand on hers and then let go, unable to keep the contact. His son was always in his thoughts—and always

would be. He couldn't escape the way it had felt to hold his dying son in his arms when he'd been barely big enough to fit in Jordan's hands.

But she was right—he had been afraid to speak about him. And there was a lot more to it than just the fact that he couldn't bring himself to do it. No, admitting to Mila earlier that he'd been scared when they'd found out she was pregnant was only the tip of the iceberg. It hadn't fully left his mind since their conversation, and he'd realised that, as he'd initially thought, he had been scared he would turn out to be the same as his father. And that was part of the reason he'd left for Johannesburg.

Jordan knew Greg had loved him, but his childhood had been tainted by his father's grief. Grief that had made Greg into a bitter and sometimes angry man. The years after his mother had died had been filled with tension for Jordan—he'd sometimes felt as if he was walking on eggshells when he was around Greg. As a child, Jordan hadn't understood why his father would never look at him in the eye, or why Greg had spoken at him instead of to him. If he'd ever spoken to Jordan at all.

He had started behaving badly because of it, which had strained his relationship with Greg even more. It had also led to the night that would be burned in his memory for ever. The night that had changed Jordan—and his father—with only a few words.

Jordan vaguely remembered a time when laughing had been easy for his father. When there had been an open affection between them. But those memories were so faded he wondered

if he'd made them up. The memories that were clear were of a steady man—a sombre, reserved and often difficult man. It clearly highlighted the fact that when Jordan had lost his mother, he'd lost his father, as well. And that had led to Jordan not being able to grieve fully for his mother because, frankly, his father had done it for both of them.

He hadn't thought about it until Mila had told him she was pregnant, and then suddenly he'd spent nights worrying about whether that grief for his mother would pop up once Mila had had the baby. Whether that grief would turn him into the kind of angry man his father was and spoil his son's childhood and Jordan's marriage.

It had made him worry that they'd rushed into marriage, made him think that he should have considered those possibilities when he'd been able to do something about them.

And when they'd lost the baby his fears had only intensified. He'd lost someone he loved, just as his father had, which surely upped the chances of Jordan turning into Greg. So Jordan had left. Escaped. Or, as he'd recently realised, run away...

'He's not alone, you know,' Mila said suddenly as he pulled into the driveway of their old house. 'The little grape's with our parents.'

He glanced over and saw a tiny smile on her lips. It made her look peaceful, he thought, and a large part inside him settled at the thought. It brought him peace, too.

'That's a really lovely thing to think about, isn't it?'

She smiled at him, and something in his heart eased. Was that because she'd smiled at him—a sweet, genuine smile that he had only been privy to that day—or was it because it comforted him to think about two generations of his family together?

'He'll have met your mom,' Mila said softly. 'I always wished I could have met her, you know. Your father used to talk about her sometimes.'

Jordan could tell that Mila was looking at him, but he stared steadily ahead. He didn't want to talk about his mother. That would mean telling her about his father. About his childhood. About his fears.

'She sounded amazing.'

He didn't respond, and then he tilted his head. 'Come on. Before it gets dark.'

He got out of the car, aware of the disappointment that shrouded her, and waited for her to join him as he stood outside the house they'd lived in during their short marriage. The first time he had seen the house he had thought it timeless and elegant —exactly what he had been looking for for his sweet, beautiful bride.

A marble pathway led to large oak doors that looked newly polished yet still antiquated. Large glass windows overlooked the road, and gave the white façade a modern feel. The pathway was lined with palm trees, which had always made him feel as if he was walking into an oasis of some kind. It still looked the same to him now, though all the memories made him feel more than

he had the first time he had seen it.

Now he thought about those days when they'd had breakfast on the patio, just as the sun went up. She had always moaned about getting up that early, but the peace on her face when she was curled up on a chair, a cup of coffee in her hand, made him think she'd thought it worth it. He remembered walking hand in hand with her through their garden, where the roses that were planted there were always the perfect gift for her. And he could still see her lying next to the pool, the slight swell of her stomach obvious in her swimming costume. Could still feel the surge of protectiveness that had gone through him when he'd looked at her.

'It looks the same...but it feels different,' she said beside him, and he looked down at her to see a mixture of emotions playing over her face that had him grabbing for her hand.

He could feel that she was shaking, and just like that he realised what he'd been missing in the car—why she'd been anxious about coming back.

'It reminds you of your fall, doesn't it?'

She didn't have to answer him—he could see the truth of his words on her face.

I'm an idiot, he thought, and wondered how he hadn't thought about it before.

His mind had been too focused on showing her the secret he'd kept since he'd found out that she was pregnant. He hadn't wanted today to end, hadn't wanted her guard to come up, and in the

process his actions to prevent it had hurt her.

He was a selfish man, he thought in disgust.

'I sometimes still dream about it,' she said quietly, and he immediately wanted to hold her in his arms.

But her words told him that she was forcing herself to face it—it was that fire he'd noticed in her when he'd returned again—and he told himself to be content with holding her hand.

'I can feel myself falling, reaching for a railing that wasn't there for support. And then the impact of rolling down the stairs.' She drew a shaky breath. 'I still feel foolish for falling down five steps.'

'It had been raining,' he said immediately, his heart clenching in pain at the anguish—the guilt—that he heard in her voice.

She ignored him. 'I lay there, my breath gone, with shock keeping me from feeling the true pain of what my body had just gone through, and I felt warmth between my legs and realised...'

Her hand was so tight on his that he could tell there was no blood flowing through it, but that didn't matter to him. Not when he could feel the pain of what she had gone through—what she had never spoken of before. Not when he could hear the quickness of her breath. He drew her in, though she didn't seem to notice.

'I realised that something was wrong...that I had done something wrong...and then I saw you, and your face told me that I was right.'

Tears fell from her eyes and he didn't care this time if he was

interrupting her. His arms went around her and she sobbed—heart-wrenching sobs that broke everything inside him each time he heard them.

'I'm sorry, Jordan. I'm sorry I wasn't more careful. I'm sorry I didn't slow down like you asked me to. I'm sorry I didn't look after him like I should have.'

'You didn't do anything wrong, Mila.' He felt his own tears as he said the words. 'I shouldn't have asked you to slow down. It was just...fear. My own. I think I was hoping to slow us down.' He paused, held her tightly. 'Everything was happening so quickly.'

He could feel her body shake, knew his words weren't having any effect. So he told her the facts, hoping their simplicity would help her.

'You were walking down stairs we'd both used a million times before. It had been raining—a light summer rain that had come from nowhere. You slipped. It was an accident.'

He said the words over and over again—to himself just as much as to her—until her shaking dissipated and everything went still. They stood in each other's arms longer than was necessary, their grief finally—finally—something they shared.

Not completely, a voice reminded him, and he stepped back. His heart thudded painfully in his chest as a reminder of what he needed to tell her—worse now that he knew about the guilt she felt. And the expression on her face—the completely exhausted expression—tempted him to ignore it, to tell her some other time.

But he knew that was just an excuse. He wouldn't ever get to that other time—not when he had been meaning to tell her since the accident. And now she had bared her soul to him he knew he couldn't keep it a secret from her any more.

'There's something I need to tell you.' He said it quickly, afraid that he wouldn't get through it otherwise. 'I had to give them permission to operate on you, Mila. You were bleeding from the abruption, losing consciousness...'

He shook his head.

'Waiting for the bleeding to subside would have put you and the baby at risk.' He took a shaky breath, not daring to look at her—not yet. 'I had to approve the C-section knowing there was a chance our baby wouldn't survive. But I couldn't take a chance on losing both of you...'

His voice had gone completely hoarse at this admission of something he had carried with him for what felt like for ever, and he forced himself to look at her before he lost his courage. She was staring at him, those eyes more haunting than ever before, carefully blank of all the emotion he wished he could read in her.

Her hand reached up, and he braced himself for the pain of a slap, but she only brushed away the remnants of her tears from her cheeks. Then she cleared her throat.

'I know.'

He looked at her, his eyes wide. 'What?'

'The doctor told me when I went back for my check-up. And then I asked Greg about it and he confirmed it.'

'Your check-up was...' He sorted through the memories 'I was still here, Mila... Why didn't you tell me you knew?' He couldn't believe that the burden he had been carrying with him for such a long time wasn't a secret after all.

'I was waiting for you to tell me.'

The look she aimed at him made him feel like a schoolboy.

'I wanted to, but I was afraid—'

'That I would blame you for it?'

He nodded, and she folded her arms.

'I did. I thought it was your fault that I didn't get to see my son alive. Why do you think I asked for space?'

He was dumbfounded, the words of apology, of excuse, he'd prepared were wiped from his mind.

'I thought you would go and stay with your dad for a while, and I would be able to deal with all the feelings. I was raw, hurting and in more pain than I thought possible. I just needed time.'

She looked at him, and he saw her anger.

'But then you left me completely. And instead of space I got divorce papers.'

'You're angry with me...' But he'd known that, he thought. Deserved it.

'Yes, I am. But not about you giving them permission to operate. What choice did you have?' She shook her head. 'We both might not have survived if you hadn't.' She paused, kicked at a stone. 'I was angry about it. But only because I wished I could have held him during those seventeen minutes he was alive.'

Her breath caught at that, and Jordan wished he could hold her again.

'And then I thought that if it couldn't be me—and since I was still under anaesthesia then it couldn't have been—you were the only other person I would have wanted it to be. So after a while I forgave you.' She looked at him stonily. 'It wasn't your fault either, Jordan.'

'I can't believe you've known all along. I've been carrying this with me ever since I...' He trailed off when he saw her jaw set and she looked away. And then he realised that she'd said that she wasn't angry with him about that any more. 'Why are you angry at me, then?'

'You really don't know?'

He opened his mouth to answer, but she waved him away.

'If you can't figure it out then you don't deserve to know.' She set her jaw. 'Can we just leave now, please?'

'No, we can't.' He felt uncomfortable, but he said it because he'd shared one of his deepest secrets with her, which he wouldn't have done with anyone else, and now she was pulling away. Even though he didn't want to delve any further into emotion—his insides were raw and knotted from what had already been said—he persisted. 'I want you to tell me what else I've done wrong.'

'So you can continue with this victim mentality you seem to have going?'

Anger sparked, deep inside him, and pumped through his body with his blood. 'Excuse me?'

'Every tragedy that's happened to you, you somehow blame yourself for it.'

He could see the anger in her, too, but that only fuelled his own.

'You blame yourself for approving an operation that saved my life—that gave your son his best chance at living—and you blame yourself for your father's death. Oh, did you think I couldn't see the weight of guilt crushing you?'

He kept his face clear of the turmoil he felt—the anger and truth in her words were daggers piercing his insides—and wondered how she had realised what he felt about his father's death.

'You think that his heart attacks were because you left. Because you didn't keep in touch over the past year. You hate it that he died without fixing whatever was wrong between you.'

'Stop!' he said, his hands clenched into fists at his sides.

'Why?' she demanded, her face flushed from her tirade. 'You were the one who wanted me to continue, remember?' She didn't wait for his affirmation before continuing, as though she was purging herself of everything that she felt. 'Do you want to know what I'm really angry about, Jordan? It's because you ran away when I needed you the most.' She took a shaky breath. 'You made me feel like you left because I had lost our child.'

She was trembling, and he itched to touch her, to comfort her, even as her words shook him. 'Stop saying that! Stop blaming yourself for what happened. It wasn't your fault.' And she'd made

him see that it wasn't his either.

'If that's not the reason, then why did you go?'

'I was running—just like you said,' he shot out, and immediately stilled.

'Why?'

'Does it matter?' he said, exasperated. He couldn't deal with the emotion any more. 'I'm back now.'

Her eyes flashed. 'Yes, it matters, Jordan. And here's why.'

She grabbed the front of his top, and before he knew it her lips were on his.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

SHE'D DONE IT out of desperation, to pierce through that controlled façade he clung to even though she could see that he felt beneath the surface. She wanted him to feel the earthquake that was happening inside her, to know the emotions that sprang from the hole the quake had opened, and the only way she knew how to do that was to kiss him.

But as she sank into the kiss she thought that she was a fool for being so impulsive, for letting go of the control she'd fought for around him. And then she stopped thinking, pressing her body closer to his as she tasted him.

The same...he tasted the same. Of fire and home and pure man.

Her anger had turned into passion, so there was no gentle sliding back into the heat they had always shared. No, they jumped straight into the fire, greedily taking each other, their

hands moving over bodies that had changed yet were somehow still the same.

When he lifted her from the ground she went willingly, her arms around him, refusing to lose contact with him. She barely felt the wall that he pressed her against, her senses captivated by what his hands were doing. He pushed aside the jacket she had on, his tongue playing with hers in a way that had her moaning, and the sound seemed to burn away the last of his patience with her clothing.

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