

HOT SINGLEDOCS

3
BOOKS
IN ONE

Waiting
For You

SARAH
MORGAN

CAROL
MARINELLI

SCARLET
WILSON

CAROL MARINELLI

**Hot Single Docs: Waiting
For You: St Piran's: Prince
on the Children's Ward**

«HarperCollins»

MARINELLI C.

Hot Single Docs: Waiting For You: St Piran's: Prince on the Children's Ward / C. MARINELLI — «HarperCollins»,

Romance worth waiting for! For children's doctor Tasha O'Hara it seems bad things always happen to her... But sinfully sexy Prince Alessandro Cavaleri is about to change that! Leo Hunter, legendary playboy – equally at home in a tux as he is in his scrubs – always has a glamorous woman on his arm. So why is he drawn to his prim Lizzie Birch? Lexi Robbins is determined to badger sexy Scottish surgeon Iain MacKenzie till he co-operates with her PR plan! It's the last thing Iain wants, but could Lexi's dazzling smile be his redemption...?

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Hot Single Docs

COLLECTION



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About the Authors

USA Today bestselling author **SARAH MORGAN** writes lively, sexy stories for both the Mills & Boon Modern and Medical Romance lines, and women's fiction for HQ. As a child, Sarah dreamed of being a writer and, although she took a few interesting detours on the way, she is now living that dream. With her writing career, she has successfully combined business with pleasure and she firmly believes that reading romance is one of the most satisfying and fatfree escapist pleasures available.

CAROL MARINELLI recently filled in a form where she was asked for her job title and was thrilled, after all these years, to be able to put down her answer as 'writer'. Then it asked what Carol did for relaxation. After chewing her pen for a moment Carol put down the truth—'writing'. The third question asked—'What are your hobbies?' Well, not wanting to look obsessed or, worse still, boring, she crossed the fingers on her free hand and answered 'swimming and tennis'. But, given that the chlorine in the pool does terrible things to her highlights, and the closest she's got to a tennis racket in the last couple of years is watching the Australian Open, I'm sure you can guess the real answer.

SCARLET WILSON wrote her first story aged eight and has never stopped. Her family have fond memories of *Shirley and the Magic Purse*, with its army of mice, all with names beginning with the letter 'M'. An avid reader, Scarlet started with every Enid Blyton book, moved on to the *Chalet School* series and many years later found Mills & Boon.

She trained and worked as a nurse and health visitor, and currently works in public health. For her, finding Mills & Boon Medical Romances was a match made in heaven. She is delighted to find herself among the authors she has read for many years.

Scarlet lives on the West Coast of Scotland with her fiancé and their two sons.

Hot Single Docs: Waiting for You

St Piran's: Prince on the Children's Ward

Sarah Morgan

200 Harley Street: Surgeon in a Tux

Carol Marinelli

200 Harley Street: Girl from the Red Carpet

Scarlet Wilson

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HOT SINGLE DOCS: WAITING FOR YOU

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About the Publisher

St. Piran's: Prince on the Children's Ward

Sarah Morgan

For children's doctor Tasha O'Hara it seems bad things do happen in threes...

1. Her new job is looking after a sinfully gorgeous—but maddeningly arrogant!—Mediterranean prince, injured in a charity polo match.

2. This isn't just any prince, but incorrigible heartbreaker Prince Alessandro Cavaleri—the man she once threw away any shred of dignity for...and still can't think about without blushing from top to toe!

3. Alessandro's definition of No Physical Activity definitely goes against doctor's orders.... Only problem is, it's becoming impossible for Tasha not to succumb to temptation!

Alessandro couldn't be more wrong for her...but three wrongs could make the biggest right of all!

CHAPTER ONE

TASHA rehearsed her speech as she walked through the busy emergency department towards the on-call room. Inside she was panicking, but she was determined not to let that show.

Hello, dear darling brother, I know you're not expecting me, but I thought I'd just drop in and see how you're doing. No, she couldn't say that. He'd know instantly that something was wrong.

You're looking gorgeous today. No, way too creepy, and anyway they usually exchanged insults so he'd definitely know something was up.

Josh, of all my brothers, you've always been my favourite. No. She didn't have favourites.

You're the best doctor in the world and I've always admired you. That one just might work. Her brother certainly was an excellent doctor. He'd been her inspiration. And her rock. When their father had walked out, leaving his four children and his fragile, exhausted wife, it had been Josh, the eldest, who had taken charge. Wild, handsome Josh, whose own marriage was now in a terrible state.

But at least he'd had the courage to get married, Tasha thought gloomily. She couldn't ever imagine herself doing anything that brave.

Was it because of their parents, she wondered, that all the O'Haras were so bad at relationships?

Since her last relationship disaster, she'd given up and concentrated on her career. A career couldn't break your heart—or so she'd thought until a few weeks ago.

Now she knew differently.

Terror gripped her

She'd messed everything up.

Hating the feeling of vulnerability, Tasha stopped outside the door. Fiercely independent, it stuck in her throat that she needed to ask her brother for help, but she swallowed her pride and knocked. She needed someone else's perspective on what had happened and the one person whose judgement she trusted was her older brother.

Seconds later the door was jerked open and Josh stood there, buttoning up his shirt. His hair was dishevelled and he was badly in need of a shave. Clearly he'd had a night with no sleep but what really caught her attention was the stupid grin on his face. A grin that faded the instant he saw her.

'Tasha?' Astonishment was replaced by shock and he cast a fleeting glance over his shoulder before pushing her back into the corridor and closing the door firmly behind him. 'What are you doing here?'

'What sort of greeting is that?' Badly in need of a hug, Tasha heard her voice thicken and the bruises of the last month ached and throbbed inside her. 'I'm your little sister. You're supposed to be pleased to see me.'

'I am, of course, but—Tash, it's seven-thirty in the morning.' Josh let out a breath and rubbed his hand over his face to wake himself up. His free hand. The one that wasn't holding the doorhandle tightly. 'I wasn't expecting— You took me by surprise, that's all. How did you know where I was?'

'I asked one of the nurses. Someone said they thought you were in the on-call room. What's wrong with you? You look ruffled.' It was the first time she'd seen her cool, confident brother anything other than immaculate. Tasha looked from him to the door that he was holding tightly shut. 'Did I wake you?'

'No. I— Yes, but it doesn't matter.'

'Busy night?'

'Sort of.' His gaze darted to the corridor and back to her. 'What are you doing here, Tasha?'

Because she was watching his face, she saw the fevered expression in her brother's eyes and the way the flush spread across his cheekbones. The signs pointed to one thing...

He had a woman in the room.

But why be so secretive about the whole thing? His marriage to Rebecca was over—there was no reason why he shouldn't have a relationship. Surely he wasn't embarrassed about her knowing he had a sex life? It was no secret that women found her brother irresistible.

Still, it was a relief to find an explanation for his weird behaviour and she was about to tease him unmercifully when she remembered that she couldn't afford to antagonise him.

Instead, she gave him a playful punch on the arm. 'I thought I'd just drop in and see you.'

'Before breakfast?'

'I'm an early riser.'

'You mean you're in trouble.' His dry tone reminded her that her brother knew her too well.

Tasha thought about everything that had happened over the last month. Had she done the wrong thing? 'Not trouble exactly,' she hedged. 'I just thought it was a long time since we'd had a good chat. Is there somewhere we can talk?' She glanced at the on-call room but he jerked his head towards the corridor.

'My office. Let's go.'

Feeling like a schoolgirl on detention, Tasha slunk after him through the department, aware of the curious stares of the staff. The main area was packed with patients, including a young girl lying on a trolley, holding her mother's hand. Noticing that the child was struggling to breathe, Tasha moved instinctively towards her just as a doctor swept up in a white coat. With a murmur of apology, Tasha moved to one side, reminding herself that this wasn't her patient. Or even her hospital. She didn't work here, did she?

She didn't work anywhere.

Her stomach lurched. Had she been impulsive and hasty? Stupid?

It was all very well having principles, but was there a point where you should just swallow them?

Trapped by sudden panic, she paused. The conversation drifted towards her. 'Her hay fever has suddenly made her asthma worse,' the mother was telling the young doctor. 'Her breathing has been terrible and her eyes and face are all puffy.'

Tasha gave the child a sympathetic smile, wishing she was the one taking the history and searching for the problem. The fact that her hands ached to reach for a stethoscope simply renewed her feeling that she might have done the wrong thing.

Medicine, she thought. She loved medicine. It was part of her. Not working in a hospital made her feel like a plant dragged up by its roots and thrown aside. Without her little patients to care for, she was wilting.

Biting her tongue to stop herself intervening, she followed her brother down the corridor but something about the child nagged at her brain. Puffy eyes. Hay fever? Frustrated with herself for not being able to switch off, she quickened her pace. It wasn't her business. This wasn't even her department. And anyway, what did she know? She was feeling so battered and bruised by the events

of the past few weeks she didn't trust herself to pass opinion on anything, not even the adverse effects of a high pollen count. Feeling really dejected, she followed her brother into his office.

It was stacked with books and medical journals. In one corner was a desk with a computer and an overflowing tray of paper. Tasha noticed that the photograph of Rebecca had gone and she felt a stab of guilt that she hadn't asked how he was. Was she was turning into one of those awful people who only thought about themselves? 'How are you doing? How are things with Rebecca?'

'Cordial. Our separation is probably the first thing we've ever agreed on. It's all in the hands of the lawyers. Sit down.' Josh shifted a pile of medical journals from the chair to the floor but Tasha didn't feel like sitting down. She was filled with restless energy. The stability of her brother's life contrasted heavily with the instability of her own. She'd been sailing along nicely through life and now she'd capsized her boat and she had no idea where the tide was going to take her.

The lump in her throat came from nowhere and she swallowed hard.

Damn.

Not now.

As the only girl in a family of four older brothers, she'd learned that if you cried, you never heard the last of it.

Fighting the emotion, she walked to the window and opened it. 'I love Cornwall.' She closed her eyes and breathed deeply. 'I've lived in so many places since I became a doctor and yet this is still home. I can smell the sea. I can't wait to pick up my surfboard. I've been trapped in a city for too long.' The plaintive shriek of a seagull made her open her eyes and for a moment the memories threatened to choke her.

Home.

'So, what brings you banging on my door at this unearthly hour—what have you done?' Josh sounded distracted. 'Please tell me you haven't killed a patient.'

'No!' Outrage was sharp and hot, slicing through the last of her composure. 'Far from it. I saved a patient. Two patients, actually.' Tasha clenched her fists, horrified to realise just how badly she needed someone else to tell her she'd done the right thing. That she hadn't blown her career on a childish whim. 'I had an incident—sort of. You know when you just have a feeling about a patient? Perhaps you haven't actually had test results back from the lab, but sometimes you don't need tests to tell you what you already know. Well, I had one of my feelings—a really strong feeling. I know it wasn't exactly the way to go about things, but—'

'Tasha, I'm too tired to wade through hours of female waffle. Just tell me what you've done. Facts.'

'I'm not waffling. Medicine isn't always black and white. You should know that.' Tasha's voice was fierce as she told him about the twins, the decisions she'd made and the drug she'd used.

Josh listened and questioned her. 'You didn't wait for the results of the blood cultures? And if it wasn't on the hospital-approved formulary—'

'They had it in stock for a different indication. You remember I went to the conference of the American Academy of Pediatrics last year? I told you about it when we met for supper that night. The data is so strong, Josh. We should be using it in Britain, but it's all money, money, money—'

'Welcome to the reality of health-care provision.'

'The drug is at least fifty per cent more effective than the one I was supposed to use.'

'And three hundred per cent more expensive.'

'Because it's good,' Tasha snapped, 'and research of that quality comes at a price.'

'Don't lecture me on the economics of drug development.'

'Then don't lecture me on wanting to do the best for my patients. Those babies would have died, Josh! If I'd waited for the results or used a different drug, they would have died.' In her head she saw their tiny bodies as they lay with the life draining out of them. She heard their mother's heartbreaking sobs and saw the father, white faced and stoical, trying to be a rock while his world fell apart. And

she saw herself, facing the most difficult decision of her professional life. 'They lived.' She felt wrung out. Exhausted. But telling her brother had somehow made everything clearer. Whatever happened to her, whatever the future held, it had been worth the price. She didn't need anyone else to tell her that.

'The drug worked?'

'Like magic.' The scientist in her woke up and excitement fizzed through her veins. 'It could transform the management of neonatal sepsis.'

'Have you written it up for one of the journals?'

'I'm going to. I just need to find the time.' And now she had time, she thought gloomily. Oodles of it.

'But the hospital authorities didn't approve and now you're in trouble?'

'I didn't exactly follow protocol, that's true, but I'd do the same thing again in the same circumstances. Unfortunately, my boss didn't agree.' Tasha turned her head and stared out of the window. 'Which is why I resigned.' Saying the word made her heart plummet. It sounded so—final.

'You did what?' Josh sounded appalled. 'Please tell me you're kidding.'

'No. I resigned on principle.' The anger rose, as fresh and raw as it had been on that morning when she'd faced her boss after two nights without sleep. 'I said to him, What sort of department are you running when your budget comes before a baby's life?'

'And no doubt you went on to tell him what sort of department he was running. Tactful, Tasha.' Josh rubbed his hand over his jaw. 'So you questioned his professional judgement and dented his ego.'

'A man of his position shouldn't need to have his ego protected. He shouldn't be that pathetic.'

'Did you tell him that as well?'

'I told him the truth.'

Josh winced. 'So...I'm assuming, given that he was the sort of guy to protect his ego, that he didn't take it well?'

'He's the sort of person who would stand and watch someone drown if health and safety hadn't approved a procedure for saving them. He said the manufacturer did not present a sufficiently robust economic analysis.' Tasha felt the emotion rush down on her and forced herself to breathe. 'So then I asked him if he was going to be the one who told the parents they'd lost both their babies because some idiot in a suit sitting behind his desk had crunched the numbers and didn't think their children's lives were worth the money.'

Josh closed his eyes briefly. 'Tasha—'

'Sorry.' The lump in her throat was back and this time it wasn't going anywhere. 'I know I should have been unemotional about the whole thing but I just can't be. Honestly, I'm steaming mad.'

'You don't say? Are you about to cry on me?'

'No, absolutely not.'

'The only time I've ever seen you cry was when Cheapskate died.'

They shared a look. Cheapskate had been the dog their mother had bought after their father had walked out. Tasha remembered hugging his warm body and feeling his tail thumping against her leg. She remembered thinking, Don't ever leave me, and then being devastated when he'd done just that.

'He was a great dog.'

'He was a lunatic.' But Josh's eyes were gentle. 'Tell me about those babies you saved. Are they still doing well?'

'Discharged home. You should have seen it, Josh. You know what it's like, trying to calculate these paediatric doses—they never have trial data in the right age of child, but this...' She smiled, the doctor in her triumphant. 'It's why I trained. To push boundaries. To save a life.'

'And you saved two.'

'And lost my job.'

'You shouldn't have resigned.'

It was a question she'd asked herself over and over again. 'I couldn't work with the man a moment longer. He was the sort who thought women should be nurses, not doctors. Basically he's a—a—' She bit off the word and Josh gave a faint smile.

'I get the picture. Has it occurred to you that you might be too idealistic, Tasha?'

'No. Not too idealistic.' The conviction came from deep inside her. 'Isn't that why we're doctors? So that we can push things forward? If we all did what doctors have always done and no more, we wouldn't have progress.'

'There are systems—'

'And what if those systems are wrong? I can't work for someone like that. Sooner or later I would have had to inject him with something seriously toxic...' Tasha gave a cheeky smile '...but first I would, of course, have made sure it was approved by the formulary committee.'

'You're incorrigible.'

'No, I'm a doctor. I can accept that there are some patients I can't help. What I can't accept is that there are some patients I'm not allowed to help because someone has decided the treatment is too expensive! I mean, who decides what's important?' Tasha paced across his office, her head swirling with the same arguments that had tormented her for weeks. 'I told him that if the chief executive took a pay cut we'd be able to easily fund this drug for the few

babies likely to need it.'

'I'm beginning to see why you felt the need to resign.'

'Well, what would you have done?'

'I have no idea.' Her brother spread his hands. 'It's impossible to say if you're not in that situation. Why didn't you wait for the blood cultures? Or use the first-line choice?'

'Because the twins were getting sicker by the minute and I felt that time was crucial. If we'd waited for that one drug, only for it to fail... My instincts were shrieking at me, Josh. And even while I was running tests, my consultant was telling me it wasn't sepsis and that the twins were suffering from something non-specific caused by the stress of delivery.' And she'd spun it around in her head, over and over again, looking for answers. 'Sometimes you see a patient and you're going through the usual and it all seems fine, except you know it isn't fine because something in here...' she tapped her head '...something in here is sending you warnings loud and clear.'

'You can't practise medicine based on emotion.'

'I'm not talking about emotion. I'm talking about instinct. I tell you, Josh, I know when a child isn't well. Don't ask me how.' She held up her hand to silence him. 'I just know. And I was right with the twins. But apparently that didn't matter to Mr Tick-All-The-Boxes Consultant. He has to play things by the book and if the book is wrong, tough. Which is a lame way to practise medicine.'

'And no doubt you told him that, too?'

'Of course. By the time he'd had all his evidence, he would have had two dead bodies. And he was angry with me because I saved their lives. He could have had a lawsuit on his hands, but did he thank me?' The injustice of it was like a sharp knife in her side, digging, twisting. 'Haven't you ever used instinct when you treat a patient?'

'If by instinct you mean clinical judgement, then, yes, of course, but, Tasha—'

'Wait a minute.' Tasha interrupted him, her brain working and her eyes wide. 'That little girl—'

'What little girl?'

'The one waiting to be seen in the main area. I heard the mother say that hay fever was making her asthma worse, but her eyelids were swollen and her face was puffy. I thought at the time that something wasn't right—just didn't seem like allergy to me—and—'

'That little girl is not your patient, Tasha.'

'She was wheezing.'

'As she would if she had asthma.'

‘As she would if she had left-sided venous congestion. I knew there was something about her that bothered me.’ Tasha picked up his phone and thrust it at him. ‘Call the doctor in charge of her, Josh. Tell her to do the tests. Maybe she will anyway, but maybe she won’t. In my opinion, that child has an underlying heart condition. Undiagnosed congenital anomaly? She needs an ECG and an echo.’

‘Tasha—’

‘Just do it, Josh. Please. If I’m wrong, I’ll give up and get a job in a garden centre.’

With a sigh, Josh picked up his phone and called the doctor responsible for seeing the child.

While he talked, Tasha stood staring out of the window, wishing she didn’t always get so upset about everything. Why couldn’t she be emotionally detached, like so many of her colleagues? Why couldn’t she just switch off and do the job?

‘She’s going to do a full examination, although she thinks it’s asthma and allergy combined. We’ll see. And now you need to relax.’ Josh’s voice was soft. ‘You’re in a state, Tasha.’

‘I’m fine.’ It was a lie. She’d desperately wanted a hug but was afraid that if someone touched her she’d start crying and never stop. ‘But I do find myself with a lot of free time on my hands. I thought...’ She hesitated, hating having to crawl to her brother. ‘You’re important. Can you pull a few strings here? Get me a job? The paediatric department has a good reputation.’

‘Tasha—’

‘Paediatrics is my life. My career. I’m good, Josh. I’m good at what I do.’

‘I’m not debating that, but—’

‘Yes, you are. You’re worrying I’ll mess things up for you here.’

‘That isn’t true.’ Josh stood up and walked over to her. ‘Calm down, will you? You’re totally stressed out. Maybe what you need is a break from hospitals for a while.’

‘What I need is a job. I love working with kids. I love being a doctor. And then there’s the practical side. I was living in a hospital flat so now I’m homeless as well as jobless.’ Tasha felt as though she had an enormous mountain to climb. ‘Resigning seemed like the only option at the time. Now I realise why more people don’t resign on principle. It’s too expensive.’

‘I can’t pull strings to get you a job at the hospital, Tasha. Not at the moment. We’ve spent a fortune opening a new paediatric burns unit. There’s a head-count freeze.’

‘Oh.’ Her stomach swooped and fell as another door slammed shut in her face. ‘No worries. I’ll sort something out.’ She tried to subdue the niggling worry that her last consultant wouldn’t give her a decent reference. ‘Sorry, I shouldn’t have asked you. I shouldn’t have just shown up here.’ The list of things she shouldn’t have done was growing.

‘I’m glad you did. It’s been too long since I saw you. All you’ve done for the past three years is work. Since things ended with Hugo, in fact.’

Hugo? Shrinking, Tasha wondered why her brother had chosen that particular moment to bring up her disastrous love life. Could the day get any worse? ‘I love my work.’ Why was he looking at her like that? ‘What’s wrong with loving my work?’

‘No need to get defensive. Maybe it’s time to take a break. Rediscover a social life.’

‘Social life? What’s that?’

‘It’s part of work-life balance. You were going to get married once.’

The reminder scraped like sandpaper over sensitive skin. ‘A moment of madness.’ Tasha spoke through her teeth. ‘Do you mind if we don’t talk about it? Just thinking about Hugo makes me want to put my fist through something and at the moment I can’t afford to pay for the damage. Anyway, you’re a fine one to talk. You’re a total workaholic.’ But he’d spent the night with a woman.

Tasha wondered if he’d confide in her, but Josh was flicking through some papers on his desk.

‘How flexible are you?’

‘I can touch my toes and do a back flip.’ Her joke earned her an ironic glance.

‘The job,’ he drawled. ‘How would you feel about a break from paediatrics?’

'I love paediatrics, but...' But she was desperate. She needed something. Not just for the money but to stop herself thinking and going slowly mad. She needed to be active. 'What do you have in mind?'

'I happen to know a man in desperate need of twenty-four-hour nursing care for the next month or so. He's asked me to sort something out for him.'

Tasha instinctively recoiled. 'You want me to give bed baths to some dirty old man who's going to pinch my bottom?' She frowned at the laughter in her brother's eyes. 'What's so funny about that? You have a sick sense of humour.'

'What if I tell you the guy in question happens to be seriously rich.'

'Who cares?' Tasha thrust her hands into the back pockets of her jeans, wondering what Josh was finding so funny. Her brother was clearly enjoying a joke at her expense and she felt a flash of irritation that he could laugh when she was in such a mess. 'What's the relevance of his financial status? You think I'll nurse him, he'll fall in love and marry me, then I'll kill him off and inherit his millions? When you suggested a job change, I didn't realise you were talking about a sugar daddy.'

'He's too young to be your sugar daddy.'

'And I'm not interested in marriage. I'm a cold-hearted career-woman, remember? I'm dedicating my life to my patients. So far my longest and most successful relationship has been with my stethoscope.'

'This guy isn't interested in marriage either, so you'll make a good pair. Strictly speaking, he should be in hospital for at least another week but he's creating hell so they're happy to discharge him providing he arranges professional help. He needs someone medical to deliver quality care at home and he's willing to pay premium rates.' He named a figure that made Tasha's jaw drop.

'He obviously has more money than sense. What's the catch?'

'The catch is that he's an athletic, super-fit guy who isn't used to being stuck in bed. As a result his temper is somewhat volatile and he's terrifying everyone who comes within a metre of him. But I'm sure you'll cope with that. I'm guessing it will take you about—oh—five minutes before you point out his shortcomings.'

'As jobs go it doesn't sound appealing...' But it was a job. And it was just for a couple of weeks. 'I suppose it would give me something to do while I look for a more progressive paediatric department. A place where the patient takes priority over paperwork and protocol.' Tasha frowned as she weighed up the pros and cons. 'So basically I have to help Mr Grumpy Guy with his physio, say There, there when he's cranky, feed him antibiotics and check he's not weight bearing. Anything else I need to know? Like his name?'

Josh smiled. 'His name, little sister, is Alessandro Cavaliere.'

Tasha felt the strength drain from her legs. Her heart pounded with a rhythm that would have concerned her had she not been too busy staring at her brother. 'Alessandro? The Alessandro?'

'The very same. His Royal Highness.'

She hadn't thought it was possible for the whole body to blush. Suddenly she was a teenager again and sobbing her heart out. 'The answer is no.' The words stumbled out of her mouth, disjointed, shaky. 'No! And don't look at me like that.'

'I thought you'd jump at the chance. You were crazy about him. He was all you ever talked about—Alessandro, Alessandro, Alessandro.' Josh mimicked her tone and Tasha felt the flush of mortification spread from her neck to her ears.

'I was seventeen,' she snapped. 'It may have escaped your notice but I've grown up since then.' But not enough. Not enough to be cool and detached. Not Alessandro. No, no, no. The humiliation crawled over her skin.

'I know you've grown up. That's why I'm offering you the job. If you still felt the same way you felt about him back then, you wouldn't be safe.' Josh's eyes teased her. 'Oh, boy, were you dangerous. Teenage hormones on legs. You threw yourself at him. Being royalty, he travelled everywhere with an

armed guard but the person he really needed protection from was you. Every time he turned round, there you were in another minuscule bikini. I seem to remember he told you to come back when you'd grown a chest.'

Tasha relived humiliation and discovered it was no better the second time around. Dying inside, she folded her arms and gave her brother a mocking smile. 'Laugh it up, why don't you?'

'My little sister and the prince. You used to scribble his name all over your school books. I particularly liked the Princess Tasha you carved on the apple tree in the garden, although the heart was a weird shape.' Josh was clearly enjoying himself hugely and Tasha tapped her foot on the floor, irritated on the outside and squirming on the inside as she remembered those horrible, hideous months.

She'd been a little girl with very big dreams. And when those dreams had burst... 'Have you quite finished?'

'For now. Good job you were a late developer or he might have taken you up on your offer. Alessandro has always had a wicked reputation with women.'

And her brother clearly had no idea just how well deserved that reputation was, Tasha thought desperately, trying to block out images she just couldn't face.

Josh was still smiling. 'Anyway, he's been nagging me to find him someone to nurse him but it's been a nightmare because of the security clearance. And I have to be careful who I give him because if they're pretty he'll seduce them. It's unbelievably complicated. You have no idea how much red tape we're trying to cut through. If we wait for the palace to approve someone, the guy will be in hospital for at least six months and that can't happen because the press are disrupting the place.'

'Why is security a problem?'

'He's the crown prince. Don't you watch the news? His older brother was killed in an accident. All very tragic.' Josh rummaged through the papers on his desk and pulled out a newspaper. 'Here. Your teenage crush is now officially Europe's most eligible bachelor.'

Tasha snatched the newspaper from him. Her

head was filled with unsettling images of Alessandro playing in the garden with her brothers. Alessandro stripped to the waist, a sheen of sweat on his bronzed chest as he kicked a ball into the goal with lethal accuracy. 'I read about his brother. It was completely awful.' She tried to imagine bad boy Alessandro as Crown Prince. Nothing about the way he'd treated her had been princely. 'He was the black sheep of the family.'

'Alessandro always had a difficult relationship with his parents but he was close to his brother. It's been hard for him. And he's now heir to a throne he doesn't really want. He prefers his freedom.'

Freedom to break hearts all over the world. 'I can't imagine Alessandro in a position of responsibility.' And that was the attraction. Restless, edgy, a danger-seeker. The devil in him had drawn her.

'He wasn't given any choice. It's a matter of succession. He's the heir, whether he likes it or not. So what do you think? I'd say it's the perfect job for you.' Josh was looking pleased with himself. 'You idolised him.'

'I did not idolise him. And the last thing I want to do is act as nurse to Alessandro Cavaleri,' she snapped. 'He's arrogant, full of himself...' Super-bright, scorching hot and sexy as hell.

He'd—and she'd—

Oh, God.

Feeling the blood rush into her cheeks, Tasha turned to look out of the window. She couldn't face him.

Sexual awareness shot through her, as unexpected as it was unwelcome. The man wasn't even in the room, she thought angrily, so why did she feel hot all over?

It was just her memory playing tricks.

What you found sexy at seventeen just made you angry at twenty-eight.

This was the man who had destroyed her dreams. He could have treated her kindly and let her down gently, but instead he'd been brutal. Cruel.

She should thank him, Tasha thought numbly. He'd screwed up her confidence and her relationships with men, but he'd done wonders for her career. When she'd finally emerged from under the rubble of her fantasies she'd given up on relationships and focused on her studies. Instead of parties, she'd spent her evenings with books. And her family hadn't questioned it. Her brothers had just been relieved that wild Tasha had finally settled down to study. They had no idea what had happened that night.

Thank goodness.

Josh would have killed him.

Her brother was idly flicking through correspondence, apparently unaware of her trauma. 'He was pretty arrogant, I suppose...' Josh signed a letter. 'But that was hardly surprising. When we were at university, women couldn't leave him alone.'

Tasha stood stiff as a board. 'Really?'

'You were crazy about him.' Josh dropped the letter in his in tray. 'Are you embarrassed to face him again?'

'No! Of course not! I just—have better things to do with my time, that's all. I'm a paediatrician. I need a job in paediatrics. I need to think of my CV.'

'Because it's just that it occurred to me that you did flirt with him a lot.'

I want it to be you, Alessandro. I want you to be the first.

Tasha felt as though she'd been plunged head first into a furnace. 'I was a teenage girl. I flirted with everyone.' Why was she reacting like this when it had happened almost ten years ago? Get over it, Tasha.

But humiliation wasn't so easily forgotten. Neither was Alessandro, which was crazy because she probably wouldn't even find him attractive any more. It had just been the whole prince thing and her impressionable, romantic teenage brain.

She knew better now.

Tasha leaned against the wall, forcing herself to breathe slowly. Unfinished business, she thought. He'd walked away and left her wounded. She'd never had the opportunity to defend herself, to tell him how much he'd hurt her.

Anger flashed through her, sharp and bright.

There was no way she could nurse him through a broken ankle. She was more likely to break the other one for him.

Tasha opened her mouth to turn her brother down and then a thought flitted into her brain. Shocked, she shook her head. No. She couldn't do that. It would be juvenile. Shallow. It would be...

Fun?

Satisfying?

It would teach him a lesson.

'This nursing job...' Her lips moved and she heard herself speaking. 'Does it involve moving in with him?'

'Yes, of course. He needs someone there day and night for a month or so. Maybe a bit longer.'

Day and night.

That was plenty of time to drive a man out of his mind.

To make him sorry.

She'd show him that he no longer had any effect on her and at the same time she'd finally purge him from her mind. The spectacular man in her head was the product of a teenage fantasy. Living with the reality would cure her of that once and for all. And it would give her a chance to restore her dignity.

Josh put his pen down slowly. 'You're thinking about it? A moment ago you were telling me he was arrogant and full of himself.'

'He was young. He's probably changed.' She didn't believe it for a minute. A man like Alessandro would never change. Looks, wealth and influence were welded together. 'It would be great to see him again. I'd like to help him.' Tasha tapped her foot on the floor as she considered the various forms that 'help' could take.

'You're sure you won't find it awkward? You were crazy about him.'

'Awkward? Gosh, no.' She told herself that whatever awkwardness she was going to feel would be eclipsed by his. And she'd be so dignified and mature about the whole thing, that would make him feel even worse. The plan grew in her head. 'I have to warn you, I'm not much of a nurse, Josh. I'm good with kids but moaning adults with man-flu drive me up the wall. I just want to tell them to pull themselves together.'

'It isn't man-flu. His ankle shattered and so far he's been back to Theatre four times. On top of that he has a couple of broken ribs and countless bruises.'

'So you're saying he's pretty much helpless?'

Better and better...

'Completely helpless. That's why it's important that we find the right person. He doesn't want to find himself trapped with someone who doesn't understand him.'

'Right. Well, that's good because I do understand him.' She understood him perfectly. He was a rich, handsome playboy who treated women like flashy accessories. His idea of permanency was two dates.

'It's important that whoever looks after him knows what he needs.'

Tasha looked sympathetic. 'I know exactly what he needs.' A wake-up call. A lesson in how to treat women properly. He was used to fawning women treating him with deference. And she needed to finally prove to herself that Alessandro Cavaliere was well and truly in her past. 'I'm very good at persuading patients to take their medicine, so I think I'm just the woman for the job.'

'I'm sure you are. You have good instincts and you're not scared of him. The staff here are intimidated by his status and afraid to tell him what he needs to do. He's walking all over them.'

'That can't be good for his broken ankle,' Tasha said lightly. 'Don't worry. I won't let him walk over me.' Not this time. This time she was going to be the one doing the walking.

She looked down at her trainers and wished she was wearing heels.

Josh was watching her. 'You're not going to fall for him again, are you?'

Tasha's laugh was genuine. 'Absolutely no chance of that.' She wasn't that stupid, was she? 'The only thing on my mind is my next job.'

'OK. Good—so you'll do it? Nag him about his physio and make sure he doesn't sneak women into his bed when he's supposed to be resting? Take care of him? That's great. Why don't you pop and see him right now? He's in a private room. I can give you directions.'

Right now?

Tasha's smile faltered. Her heart trebled its rhythm. No, not right now. She'd just lost her job. Well, not exactly lost it as such—she'd thrown it away. The last thing she needed was to heap on the humiliation. Facing Alessandro took serious preparation. She needed to get her head together. She needed to look her best.

Aware that Josh was looking at her, Tasha breathed slowly and tried to slow her pulse rate. If she said no, her brother would ask questions. And the longer she waited, the more the anticipation would eat into her. And the advantage of doing it right away was that Alessandro wasn't forewarned. He wasn't expecting to see her.

Tasha strolled to the mirror in the corner of the office and stared at her reflection. Green eyes stared back at her. Green eyes that showed lack of sleep and stress. Doctor's eyes.

Apart from the shadows and the obvious exhaustion, she didn't look that bad, did she?

Mouth too big, she thought. Freckles. Dark hair that twisted and curled over her shoulders. All wrong. As a teenager, she'd been horribly conscious of her gypsy looks. She'd envied the girls with sleek blonde hair and china-blue eyes.

Insecurity crawled through her belly and she glared at her reflection, refusing to allow herself to think like that. At least she had a brain, which was more than could be said for most of Alessandro's women.

But there was no doubt that there was work to be done before she faced her past. Alessandro Cavalieri spent his time with the most beautiful women in the world. Facing him with confidence required more than an emergency repair job, but it would have to do.

With a sense of purpose, Tasha pulled her make-up case out of her bag.

'Poor Alessandro.' She darkened her lashes and added blusher to her cheeks. Not much. Just enough to help the 'natural' look. 'He must be going crazy, stuck in bed. You're right. What he needs is personal attention.'

And she was going to give him personal attention.

By the time she'd finished with him, a shattered ankle was going to be the least of his worries.

She was going to make him writhe with guilt for crushing her dreams so brutally. It was time he realised that women had feelings.

Josh was watching her in bemusement. 'Why are you putting on make-up?'

'Because I care how I look and because I want to look professional.' Staring into her bag, she selected a subtle gloss lipstick. 'Last time we met, I was a teenager. That's how he's going to remember me. I need to look like an adult—like someone capable of taking care of him.'

'You look very happy all of a sudden for someone who has just lost their job. A few moments ago I thought you were going to cry.'

'Me? Cry? Don't be ridiculous. Don't worry, Josh. I'll take good care of your friend.' Tasha tugged at the clip and her hair tumbled long and loose around her shoulders. Smiling to herself, she gave her head a shake. 'I'll take extremely good care of him.'

Alessandro Cavalieri had taken her fragile teenage heart and ground it under his feet.

Payback time, she thought as she added the high-shine gloss to her lips.

It was going to be her pleasure to give him exactly what he deserved.

And maybe, just maybe, once he'd given her a big, fat grovelling apology, she'd be able to put the whole episode behind her.

CHAPTER TWO

'YOUR Highness, you can't use your phone in the hospital.'

Alessandro turned frustrated dark eyes onto the nervous nurse, his temper reaching combustion point. 'Then get me out of hospital,' he said silkily, and watched as she bit her lip nervously.

'I'm really sorry but I don't have the authority to do that. You have an infection, Your Highness, and—'

'Stop calling me Your Highness.' The snap of the words was accompanied by a rush of guilt. She was just a kid. It wasn't her fault that he wanted the rank and title about as much as he wanted a badly smashed ankle and bruised ribs. 'I apologise,' he growled. 'Being stuck in here hasn't done much for my mood. I'm used to being active.' And lying in bed gave him too much time to think about things he spent his life trying to forget.

The darkness licked at the edges of his mind threatening to engulf him. With a huge effort of will, he pushed it back.

Not now.

The nurse stood rigid, clearly overawed by her royal patient. 'The Chief Executive of the hospital called while you were with the consultant and asked me to tell you that he's increased security so that there's no repeat of yesterday's fiasco—he apologised profusely, Your Highness. We have no idea how that journalist managed to climb up the drainpipe to your room.' She all but curtseyed but this

time Alessandro kept his temper on a tight leash. It was obvious that she wasn't going to be able to behave naturally with him, and he'd encountered that all too often in his life to be surprised. No one behaved naturally with him. Everyone had an agenda.

'I'm used to journalists climbing drainpipes and crawling through the windows. It's a fact of life.' He reached for a glass of water, gritting his teeth against the agonising pain that shot through his body.

'Let me help you, sir.'

'I can manage.' Alessandro growled the words just as his shaking hand deposited most of the water over his chest. He switched to Italian, his native tongue, and swore long and fluently while the flustered nurse quietly removed the glass from his white fingers, refilled it and handed it to him.

She stared at his T-shirt, now clinging to his chest. 'Do you want me to—?'

'No. I'm fine.'

Dragging her eyes away from his muscles, the girl swallowed. 'Your senior adviser called, sir. He wanted you to call him urgently.'

Alessandro leaned his head back against the pillow and suppressed the urge to laugh out loud. That was the one good thing about this mess—his advisers were climbing the walls. The wicked side of him revelled in the chaos his accident had caused. 'I can't call him,' he drawled. 'You've just told me I'm not allowed to use my phone.'

'There's a phone by your bed, sir—Your Highness.'

For God's sake— 'You can call me Alessandro. And I think we've both just established that I can't reach anything that's by my bed.'

'There were a few other calls, Your Highness.' She gave him a nervous glance. 'Five journalists and four—er—women. None of them left their names. And Her Highness Princess Eleanor called when you were in the bathroom. She said not to bother calling her back but she left you a message.'

'Which was?'

'She saw on the news that the hospital is besieged by journalists and she asked that you be discreet about what you say to them.'

Alessandro gave a humourless smile.

The dull ache inside him turned into a dark black hole that threatened to suck him down.

So his mother had finally called.

Not when his accident had been announced as a newsflash and no one had known his condition. Not out of concern when he'd been rushed into Theatre for emergency surgery. Not to ask how he was or send love. No, his mother had called because she was worried about his image. Or rather she was worried about her image.

You have to think about how you present yourself, Alessandro. It affects all of us.

Wiping the cold, disapproving tone from his head, Alessandro sought distraction. The nurse was pretty, he realised, and he hadn't even noticed. Which said a great deal about his current state of mind. He had a wicked impulse to drag her to the window and kiss her senseless in front of the crowd of hopeful photographers.

But that wouldn't be fair on the girl.

Or on Miranda.

Thinking of Miranda was enough to kill his mood.

He was going to have to make a decision. They couldn't go on like this any longer. It wasn't fair on either of them.

'I don't suppose I can bribe you to smuggle me out of here?' He tried to look as non-threatening as possible. 'I own a home up the coast. Incredible views from the master bedroom.'

The nurse flushed scarlet and her eyes met his. He saw the excitement there and the way her lips parted as she caught her breath. Unfortunately he could also read her mind, which was busy spinning dreams ending with 'nurse marries Prince'.

Thinking of his parents' dutiful, entirely loveless marriage, he felt suddenly cold.

He had no idea why marriage was the ultimate goal for so many people. To him it seemed like the road to hell. He'd rather be trampled by a whole herd of horses than commit to one woman for the rest of his life. Especially a woman whose only interest in him was the fact he had royal blood.

'You understand that this is a purely indecent proposal.' He shifted his leg, but it did nothing to ease the pain. 'My house has amazing sea views from every room and a hot tub on the deck. You can scrub my back and give me a private physio session.'

'This is Cornwall.' A crisp female voice came from the doorway. 'If she uses the hot tub in April, she'll catch pneumonia. Hello, Alessandro. You look as though you're in a filthy mood. Hope I'm not supposed to bow or curtsy.'

It was a voice he hadn't heard for more than a decade, but the recognition was immediate and powerful. His body tightened in a reaction so basic, so elemental that he was relieved that he was confined to bed, with all the privacy that afforded. Temptation, he thought, wasn't something a man easily forgot. And Natasha O'Hara had been temptation on legs. A girl, desperate to become a woman. At seventeen, she'd tried everything to get him to notice her.

And he'd noticed.

Oh, yes, he'd noticed.

Remembering, Alessandro felt his muscles tighten. Sweat dampened his brow. He wasn't sure whether the pain in his chest was due to fractured ribs or guilt.

He'd treated her badly.

She strolled into the room with a confidence that told him the awkward teenager was long gone. There was no sign of the stiff formality that everyone else displayed around him. She didn't blush, call him 'Your Highness', or look as though she was about to bow and scrape at his feet. Her gaze was direct and challenging and he would have laughed with relief if it hadn't been for the uncomfortable feeling deep inside him. Tasha had always shown guts and intelligence. If someone had told her to bow or curtsy, her response would have been to ask why. One of the reasons he'd loved spending time with her was because she'd treated him as a normal human being.

And in return he'd broken her heart.

He shifted uncomfortably in the bed, but the guilt stayed with him.

Was she the sort of woman who bore grudges? Not for a moment did he think she would have forgotten that summer any more than he had.

'Are you going to pretend you don't recognise me?' Her tone was light and friendly and if she was bearing a grudge there was no sign of it.

Alessandro relaxed slightly. Maybe the guilt was misplaced. She'd been very young, he reasoned. He'd probably barely featured on her adolescent landscape. Everything healed quickly in childhood—broken bones and broken hearts.

Still watching him, she paused beside the bed. Her top was a vivid scarlet and she wore it tucked into skinny jeans, her dark hair tumbling down her back in snaky black curls. She looked like a cross between a gypsy and a flamenco dancer and Alessandro felt his mouth dry and his body harden in an all-male reaction.

The wild child had grown up.

'You've spilt water on your T-shirt.' She eyed his damp chest and he felt something stir inside him.

'It isn't easy manoeuvring with a broken ankle and two broken ribs.'

'Poor Alessandro.' Her voice poured over him like honey, soft and sympathetic. 'So that's why you're so cranky. It must be awful to feel so helpless.'

Pain gnawed at his temper, fraying his control. He'd kept his mind off the pain by thinking of ways to get himself out of the hospital, but her presence disturbed his focus. And the way she was looking at him felt wrong. He would have expected her to be angry with him or, if not angry, then

at least a little shy? Or maybe embarrassed. After all, he'd— Alessandro moved awkwardly and pain rocketed through him. 'What are you doing here?' He ruthlessly ignored the pain. 'Josh mentioned that you worked at a hospital miles away.'

'Not any more. I'm...' she paused and then smiled '...in between jobs.'

Their eyes met and held and Alessandro wondered what the hell he'd done to deserve this extra punishment. 'You're looking good, Natasha.' Too good, he thought, noticing in that single reluctant glance that her body had fulfilled its teenage promise. As a girl, she'd been teenage temptation. As a woman, Natasha O'Hara was a vision of glorious curves that made a man think of nothing but wild sex. And thinking of wild sex made him ache in the only place that wasn't already aching, so he looked away from those smooth arms, tried to block out the image of those slender limbs and told himself that the last glossy mouth he'd kissed had led to nothing but trouble.

'Thanks, Nurse...er...' She squinted at the name badge. 'Carpenter. You've taken enough abuse from this patient for one day. I'll take it from here.'

Nurse Carpenter's face fell. 'But I've just come on duty and His Highness needs—'

'I know exactly what His Highness needs.' The words were a polite but firm dismissal and Alessandro tried to remember whether she'd had that air of command as a teenager. No, definitely not. She'd been full of wide-eyed, barely repressed excitement and optimism. 'Hopeless romantic' hadn't begun to describe her.

The nurse gave Alessandro a final wistful look and melted away.

Tasha closed the door firmly, leaving the two of them enclosed in the private room. 'Yes, Your Highness, no, Your Highness—it must drive you crazy. Or do you like your women servile?'

She was such a contrast to all the other people he'd come into contact with since he'd crashed into the mud on the polo field that Alessandro found himself laughing for the first time in weeks. 'Definitely not servile.'

'Good, because if I have to call you Your Highness every two minutes, this is never going to work.'

Alessandro watched as she strolled across the room. Something about the way she was looking at him made him uneasy. Or maybe it was just the guilt, he thought. It was definitely there, shimmering underneath the surface. 'What are you talking about?'

'You have to stop eating the nurses for breakfast, Alessandro. They're all terrified of you.'

'I'm a pussy cat.'

Her mouth flickered. 'Right.'

'Maybe I'm a little cranky, but I'm not good at lying in bed, doing nothing.'

'Then you'd better get used to it.' Her gaze was frank and direct. 'I looked at your X-rays. You won't be walking on that ankle for a while. You've made a mess of your bones.'

'Not me. The horse.' But it had been his fault and the knowledge gnawed at him. He'd been distracted. To take his mind off that, he studied her closely. Was she taller or was it the way she held herself? There was a confidence about her that hadn't been there a decade before. A knowledge of herself as a woman. It showed itself in the way her hips swayed when she walked and the hint of cleavage revealed by the neck of her casual top. Trapped and immobile, unaccustomed to feeling helpless in any situation, Alessandro set his teeth and tried to think cold thoughts. 'What are you doing here, Tasha?' He hadn't seen her since that night—the night when he'd left her sobbing, her make-up streaked over her beautiful face.

He pushed the memory aside, trying to lose it in the darkness of everything else he was trying to forget.

'Rumour is you're looking for a nurse so you can escape from this place.'

'In this case rumour is correct.' But he was starting to wonder whether being trapped at home with a star-struck nurse who called him Your Highness every two minutes might not be just as irritating as being in hospital.

'I can't imagine who would want the job. As temperaments go, yours is pretty volatile.'

'Once I'm out of here my temper will be just fine. Josh promised to find me a nurse by the end of the day. Do you know if he's had any luck?'

'Depends on your definition of luck.' She picked up the phone that he'd slung on the bedcover. 'You shouldn't be using this in the hospital. It's breaking the rules.'

'So I've been told. Trouble is, I've never been much good with rules.'

Her beautiful mouth flickered into a tiny smile of mutual understanding. 'That's one thing we have in common, then. But while you're in here, you have to behave.'

'Discharge me and I'll behave. So—has he found me a nurse?'

'Not a nurse, exactly.'

'What's that supposed to mean? I have to have someone who knows what they're talking about. And preferably someone who doesn't call me Your Highness at the end of every sentence.' He needed to get out of here before lying here trapped with his own thoughts drove him crazy. He needed distraction.

Tasha lifted her head. Her gaze connected with his. 'I know what I'm talking about. And I have no intention of calling you Your Highness.'

'You?' Alessandro felt shock thud through his gut. 'You're a children's doctor.' She was also someone he'd carefully avoided for over a decade.

'I'm a doctor. My speciality just happens to be children. But I have all the skills necessary to assist your rehabilitation. I can nag you to do your exercises, throw away the junk food and make sure you take lots of healing early nights—' humour lightened her voice '—on your own. I've never been anyone's nurse before but I'm a quick study.'

His mouth felt dry but he was in too much pain to try and reach for his glass again. 'You're offering to nurse me?'

'We're old friends, Alessandro. It's the least I can do.' Her smile was warm and genuine, so why did he feel so uneasy?

Something didn't feel right.

He decided that this was one of those occasions that merited the direct approach. 'You and I, we didn't exactly part on good terms.'

'No. You were a complete bastard,' she said frankly, 'but that was a long time ago. I was at an impressionable age. Do you honestly think I'm still bothered about something that happened almost ten years ago? That would be ridiculous, don't you think?'

Would it?

He looked at her for a long moment, his eyes searching out the true sentiment behind the lightly spoken words. 'Tasha—'

She leaned towards him, mockery in her gaze. 'I was seventeen years old. I had no taste, and I was overwhelmed by the fact that you were a prince. And now we've got that out of the way, can we just forget it? No girl should be made to feel embarrassed about the foolish crushes she had as a teenager. So what do you say, Alessandro? Am I hired?'

* * *

Josh opened the front door of his house, his mood swerving between elation and guilt.

He tried to push the guilt back where it belonged.

His marriage to Rebecca was over. She was the one who had called time on their relationship and moved out. They'd wanted different things. Right through their relationship, they'd wanted different things.

As he hung up his jacket Megan's fragrance engulfed him, wrapping him in memories.

Maybe he'd moved on a bit quickly, but he was human, and when it came to Megan...

Just thinking about her lifted his mood, and he closed the front door, relieved that Tasha had refused his invitation to come home with him. He needed time to think, but already his mind was

racing ahead, thinking of the future. He wanted Megan here, with him, all the time. He wanted to laugh with her over a meal, he wanted to sleep with her and wake up with her. They were adults, weren't they? He was past the age of wanting to creep around like a teenager. Snatched moments in the on-call room would never be enough for him. He knew what he wanted now.

He wanted Megan. In his life. For ever.

Energised by a certainty he'd never felt before, Josh checked his phone, hoping to find a message from her, but there was nothing and he was surprised by the strength of the disappointment that thudded through him.

Had she gone back to sleep after he'd received the call that his sister was in the department? He imagined her still lying there, in sheets tangled from the heat of their loving, dreaming about what they'd shared.

Was she planning even as he was planning?

Pondering that question, he threw his keys on the table, feeling lighter than he had in months. Smiling slightly, he retrieved the post from the floor and strolled into the kitchen, lured by the promise of strong coffee.

'Hello, Josh.' Rebecca sat there, her beautiful face pale, her eyes sharp with accusation.

Reality slapped his dreams in the face.

Josh felt the lightness evaporate and a sick dread that he couldn't identify settled around him like a dark cloak. 'What are you doing here?'

'I'm your wife, Josh.' Her tone was brittle. 'This is still my home.'

Guilt churned inside him. It was hard to remember they'd ever been close. Hard to remember that once they'd chosen each other.

'Where were you last night?'

He bit back the urge to tell her to mind her own business. 'At the hospital. It's where I work.'

'But you weren't working, were you? And don't bother lying to me because I phoned the hospital to ask where you were.' She gave a thin smile. 'Consultant's wife's privileges. No one knew where you were, but they did know you weren't on duty.'

Josh felt as though the walls of the house were closing in on him. Moments ago his future had seemed so clear. Now all he saw was murky black. 'Rebecca—'

'Am I supposed to be grateful that you didn't have sex with her in our bed?' Her fury snapped chunks out of the fragile remains of their relationship. 'Who is she, Josh? And don't bother denying there's someone else because I can see it in your eyes.'

It wasn't just in his eyes. It was in his heart. It was all through him and it gave him strength to do the right thing. To fight.

Josh straightened his shoulders. 'There is someone. You and I—our relationship is over, Rebecca. We've agreed that, and—'

'I'm pregnant.'

The silence in the room was absolute. It was as if the words had stopped time but he knew it wasn't the case because the hands of the kitchen clock were still moving.

Pregnant. A baby.

Josh felt strangely detached. The words floated through his numb brain but didn't settle. Pregnant. It was as if he was outside himself, looking in. And then reality punched him in the gut. Denial burst to the surface, driven by a desperate need to hold onto the dream. 'No.' The word was dragged from deep inside him. 'You can't be. That isn't possible.'

'Why? Because it isn't convenient for you? Because it isn't what you want?' Her voice rose. 'I've got news for you, Josh. Babies don't always come along at the most convenient moment in your life.'

He knew that. Just hours ago Megan had finally confirmed that the baby she'd lost so traumatically eight years earlier had been his—a cruel epilogue to the night both of them had spent

in hell. His decision to save Megan's life all those years before had cost her a child. Their child. The knowledge intensified a guilt and pain that had never left him.

When he and Rebecca had split, his first thought had been, Thank goodness we didn't have kids. And now...

'You know I don't want children.'

Rebecca's laugh was devoid of humour. 'Maybe you should have thought about that before you had sex with me.' There was a coarseness to her declaration that made him feel like scrubbing his skin.

'That was a mistake.' Josh stood still, the ache in his heart more painful than anything physical that she could inflict on him. Now, with some distance, he couldn't imagine why they'd had sex again. What had driven him back into her bed? His brain tried to drag out details from that night but all he remembered was her, urging him on... 'Did you do it on purpose?' Blind with pain, he shot the words at her, wanting the truth even though he knew it wouldn't change the facts. The colour in her cheeks answered his question and he swallowed down the bitter taste of contempt. 'You chose to bring a child into a dead, loveless marriage?'

'You chose to have sex with me,' she said acidly. 'So it's not completely dead, is it? Or maybe you've conveniently forgotten that night.'

No, he hadn't forgotten. The memory sat in his gut, the regret hard and undigested. Of all the mistakes he'd made in his life, that was the biggest. If he could rewind the clock... 'You were taking the Pill.'

'I'm pregnant, Josh. Nothing either of us does or says is going to change that. So before you get too deeply embedded in this exciting new relationship of yours, we need to think what we're going to do. You're going to be a father.'

CHAPTER THREE

AS IDEAS went, this had been one of her worst.

Tense and on edge, Tasha paced around Alessandro's stunning, contemporary clifftop home, wishing she'd never agreed to the plan. But refusing would have invited awkward questions from Josh. And anyway, she hadn't thought for a moment that she'd feel anything for Alessandro except mild contempt.

She'd planned to wash the boy out of her hair—she'd forgotten that the boy was now a man. A man who oozed sex appeal and natural authority even when badly injured. From the moment she'd walked into his private room and seen him watching the nurse through those slanting, slightly mocking eyes she'd known she was in trouble.

The nerves jumped in her stomach and she realised how long it had been since she'd been around a man who had that effect on her. The few relationships she had, she was careful to keep light and casual. She preferred it that way.

Her usual confidence deserting her, Tasha kept her back to him and focused her attention on the house. The place was incredible. Built on one level, floor-to-ceiling glass wrapped itself around the house, giving uninterrupted views over the beach from every angle of the living room. Deep soft sofas in ocean colours grouped around a large blue-and-white-striped rug and there were touches of the sea everywhere. Elegant pieces of driftwood. An old anchor. And then there were the paintings and the books.

Tasha glanced in envy at the bookshelves and wished she had a free month to read her way through the collection while lying on one of those squashy sofas and occasionally looking at the view. Somehow the place managed to be stylish and contemporary while maintaining a cosy, intimate feel.

'How on earth did you find this place?'

'I knew where I wanted to live. When this house came up, someone tipped me off.'

Knowing how much property cost in this part of the world, Tasha gave a wry smile. 'I dread to think how much you paid.'

'The real problem was planning permission. The original house was structurally unsound and we had to persuade them that this would enhance the landscape.'

Tasha glanced up at the double height living room, awash with light. 'Your architect was clever.'

The view alone would have fetched millions. Outside, a wide deck curved around the house, a glass balustrade offering some protection while ensuring that not a single element of the outdoors was lost. The home shrieked style and sophistication. And then there were the gadgets...

It was a contemporary palace, she thought, fit for a playboy prince.

The evidence of wealth was everywhere and the high-tech security meant there was no forgetting the identity of her patient. From the moment the electronic gates had opened onto the long winding drive that led up to the clifftop house, she'd been aware of the security cameras. And then there was the team of highly trained security staff who worked shifts protecting the prince.

Tasha risked a glance at him and thought to herself that he didn't look like a man who needed anyone's protection. From the dark stubble on his jaw to the dangerous gleam of his eyes, he was more pirate than prince.

It occurred to her that she'd only ever met him in her world. Never in his. She'd never thought of him like this, with protection officers on twenty-four-hour rotation.

At seventeen she'd been in awe of the fact that he was actually a prince, but she'd never thought about what that really meant. To her, the word 'prince' made her think of fairy-tales. Of chivalry, bravery and honour. To a little girl whose father had walked out, those qualities had seemed like riches. She still remembered her reaction when Josh had told her his university friend was coming to stay. Her mouth had dropped open and she'd said those words that afterwards she'd regretted for years. 'A real, live prince?' From that moment onwards she'd been doomed to a lifetime of teasing by her older brothers, but at the time she hadn't even cared. Meeting a prince had been the ultimate romantic experience for a teenager just discovering boys. Her brain had taken up permanent residence in dreamland. Right from the day he'd stepped out of his armoured car, the sun gleaming off his glossy dark hair, she'd carried on dreaming. At twenty, Alessandro Cavalieri had been insanely handsome, but what had really drawn her had been his charm. Used to being on the receiving end of nothing but verbal abuse from her brothers and their friends, his charisma had been fascinating and compelling. Instead of treating her as a tomboy, he'd treated her as a woman. She'd never stood a chance.

She'd dreamed her way through countless lessons, concocting scenarios where Alessandro ignored all the beautiful girls who threw themselves at him because he couldn't look at anyone but her. The reality had been so far removed from the fantasy that the inevitable crash between the two had been catastrophic.

Reminding herself of that fact settled the nerves in her stomach. True, he was even more spectacular to look at now, but she was no longer a dreamy, romantic teenager. Neither was she interested in a relationship with a man whose only commitment was to his own ego. She was past the age when a handsome face was the only thing she noticed.

Relieved to have rationalised the situation, Tasha started to relax. 'The view of the beach is good. The surfing here is some of the best in Cornwall and it's never busy because of the rocks. You have to know what you're doing.'

'Josh told me you all used to spend hours surfing here when you were kids.'

'It used to drive our mother out of her mind with worry.' She rested her head against the glass. 'It's been so long since I surfed.'

'That surprises me. I can't imagine you working in a city.'

'That's where the job was.' Was. Tasha felt a ripple of panic but masked it quickly. 'Anyway, it feels good to be home. Familiar.'

'There's a private path from the terrace that leads straight down onto the beach. It's the reason I bought this property. You can surf from the front door. Did you bring your wetsuit?'

‘Of course.’ Tasha thought about the suitcases in her car. She was like a snail, she thought, carrying her world around on her back. And what was she doing, talking surfing with him? The point of this wasn’t to be intimate or cosy. Deciding that it was never too soon to start inflicting a little extra pain, she gave a sympathetic smile. ‘Shame you can’t join me.’

‘Thanks for the reminder.’ The irritation in Alessandro’s voice confirmed that her arrow had found its target.

‘At least I’ll be able to get out there and surf, and I’ll give you a report,’ Tasha said kindly, feeling a flash of satisfaction as she saw his jaw tighten. Oh, boy, are you going to suffer. She was about to twist the knife again when he shifted position and she saw pain flicker in his eyes. His naturally olive skin was several shades paler than usual and she could see the strain in his face. The physician in her at war with the woman, Tasha strolled over to him. ‘Moving you from the hospital to here must have been a painful experience.’

‘It was fine.’

He hadn’t uttered a word of complaint but she knew that he must have been in agonising pain. ‘I’ll try and help you find a comfortable position.’

‘I’m perfectly comfortable. And I don’t need your help.’

‘That’s why you’re paying me, remember? To help you. You need a nurse to look after you.’

‘I needed a nurse because they wouldn’t discharge me from hospital without one. Not for any other reason.’ Jaw clenched, Alessandro manoeuvred himself onto the sofa, the pain involved leaving him white-faced. The muscles of his shoulders bunched as he took his weight on the crutches. ‘I don’t need to be looked after.’

Tasha found herself looking at those muscles. Pumped up. Sleek and hard. She frowned. So what? It took more than muscles to make a real man. ‘So if you don’t need to be looked after, what am I expected to do? File my nails?’

‘You can do whatever you like. Read a book. Watch TV. Surf—although if that’s how you spend your day, I’d rather you didn’t tell me about it.’ He dropped the crutches onto the floor with a clatter that said as much about his mood as the black frown on his face. ‘Do whatever you like. Consider it an all-expenses-paid holiday.’

But she wouldn’t choose to take a holiday with him, would she?

Ten years had done nothing but add to his physical attractions, she thought irritably. It was all very well reminding herself that looks didn’t count, but everything about him was unapologetically masculine and being alone with him made her feel jittery. Which was ridiculous, she told herself, given that he could barely walk. He was hardly going to leap on her, was he? Anyway, he’d made it clear years before that he didn’t find her attractive.

Reminded of the ‘flat-chested’ comment by her brother, it was all she could do to stop herself thrusting her chest forward. ‘Now that I’m here, you might as well at least let me fetch you a drink.’

‘Thanks. A drink would be good.’ The tension

in his voice reflected the pain he was fighting. ‘Whisky is in the cupboard in the kitchen and you’ll find glasses on the top shelf. Join me. We’ll have drinks on the terrace if I can get myself there.’

Drinks on the terrace?

Tasha felt a flash of alarm. No way. Lounging on the deck, watching the sun go down over golden sand was far too intimate a scenario. That wasn’t what she had in mind at all. This was about inflicting pain, not taking pleasure. Not that she thought she was in any danger of falling for him again, but as a scientist reviewing the evidence she had to concede that it had happened before.

‘A drink sounds like a good idea, but forget the terrace. You only just sat down, and if you keep moving you’ll just make the pain worse.’ Whisky, she thought, laced with arsenic or something equally poisonous. Or maybe just whisky along with the powerful painkiller and antibiotics he’d been prescribed. It would knock him unconscious and then she wouldn’t need to worry about falling for his dangerous charm.

Not that he seemed charming right now. Pain had made him irritable and moody and he leaned his head back against the sofa, jaw clenched, eyes closed. 'I'll have it straight. No water. No ice.'

In other words, nothing to dilute the effects of the alcohol.

Tasha walked into the kitchen, knowing that every movement she made was being followed by those fierce black eyes. She remembered him telling her that his ancestors had been warriors, descendents of the Romans who had once colonised the Mediterranean island of San Savarre that was his home. It was all too easy to imagine Alessandro Cavalieri in warrior mode.

Irritated with herself, shrugging off those thoughts, she opened cupboards until she found whisky. Closing her hand around the bottle, she hesitated. It would be really bad for him to drink with the tablets, but Alessandro didn't seem to care. Clearly he was seeking oblivion. He'd drink whisky and to hell with the consequences. In fact, he'd probably enjoy the experience of alcohol and painkillers. Tasha put the bottle back. She wasn't here to do what he wanted. She wasn't here to make his life comfortable. It was already comfortable enough.

She glanced around her. The kitchen was like something from an upmarket show home. Light poured through a glass atrium and reflected off shiny black granite work surfaces. It was smooth and streamlined, designed for practicality as well as show.

'I could almost want to cook in a place like this,' Tasha muttered, yanking open the door of the tall American fridge and staring at the contents. 'Nothing but champagne and beer—typical man. What about food?' Exploring the lower shelves, she found some mouldy cheese and a dead lettuce, which she removed and dropped in the bin. 'Good job I went to the supermarket.'

While the ambulance crew had been preparing Alessandro for the transfer home, she'd taken herself into St Piran on a shopping trip for provisions. She'd spent several hours carefully selecting items to help her with her plan, thinking carefully about what would help her cause. Abandoning the idea of using anything from his fridge, she reached for her bag of supplies and pulled out a packet of herbal tea.

Perfect.

She'd yet to meet a man who enjoyed herbal tea.

Humming happily, Tasha boiled water and found two mugs.

Carrying the tea back to the living area, she put the tray down on the low glass table and waited expectantly.

The wait was worth it. His reaction was everything she'd hoped for.

Alessandro stared in disbelief at the pale yellow liquid steaming in the mugs. 'What the hell is that?'

'Herbal tea,' Tasha said earnestly. She groped around for something convincing to say about it. 'It will be good for you. It boosts the immune system and works as a—as a—as an internal cleanser.' As a highly trained clinician, she couldn't believe she was spouting such unscientific nonsense and she braced herself for Alessandro to burst out laughing and demand she show him the data to support her claims, but he didn't. Instead he glowered at her, his eyes narrowing to two dangerous slits.

'Is this a joke? This is your idea of taking care of me?'

'Absolutely. I'm doing what's good for you.'

'Whisky would be good for me.'

Tasha made an attempt at a timid smile. Given that she'd never done 'timid' before in her life, she was reasonably pleased with the result. 'Don't be angry,' she coaxed. 'I remembered afterwards that the whisky won't go well with painkillers and antibiotics so I went for tea instead. I'm supposed to be looking after your health, remember? That's why I'm here. Try it. It's delicious. Caffeine-free and so healthy.'

His gaze slid from her eyes to the contents of the mug. 'It looks like something that's come straight from the drains.'

‘Really? I find it delicious.’ To prove her point, Tasha took an enormous gulp of hers and just about managed not to spit it out. Utterly vile. ‘Mmm. Are you sure I can’t tempt you?’

‘Is that a serious question?’ The dangerous gleam in his eyes was a reminder to Tasha not to underestimate him. He wasn’t tame. And he wasn’t a pussy cat. He was a man who was used to controlling everyone and everything around him.

And it was clear to her now that he really didn’t want anyone there. He’d only agreed to it to facilitate his early discharge.

She gave a faint smile. That was good, wasn’t it? She didn’t want him to want her here. That was the whole point. She was here to make his life difficult and uncomfortable while proving to herself that his charm had just been the creation of her hormonal teenage brain. So far she was doing well.

Apart from that initial jolt she’d felt when she’d first seen him lounging in the hospital bed, she had herself well under control.

She ignored the tiny voice inside herself that warned her she was playing with fire—that however dangerous he’d been as a boy, the threat was magnified now he was a man.

Handing him a glass of water, she kept up the sympathy. ‘Take your antibiotics and painkillers now and then you can have another lot before you go to bed.’ Unable to switch off the doctor inside her, she frowned at his leg. ‘You should keep that elevated. Wait a minute...’ She grabbed three cushions from one of the sofas and carefully repositioned his leg. Although she was gentle, she knew the pain had to be agonising, but Alessandro didn’t murmur and she felt a flash of grudging respect. At least he wasn’t a wimp or a whiner. ‘How does that feel?’

‘As if a horse trampled on it?’ His dry humour bought a smile to her lips but she killed it instantly, unsettled by the ease with which the smile had come. She didn’t want to find him amusing any more than she wanted to find him attractive. And then her eyes met his and the desire to smile faded instantly.

Sexual tension punched through her, stealing her breath and clouding her mind. The power of it shook her.

‘Take your tablets,’ she croaked. She wanted to look away but there was something about those sexy dark eyes that wouldn’t allow it.

How long they would have stayed like that she didn’t know because the phone suddenly buzzed, breaking the spell.

‘Leave it,’ he said roughly, but Tasha was relieved and grateful for anything that gave her an excuse to turn her back on him. She felt dizzy. Light-headed—as if she were floating.

‘It could be someone important.’ Her hand shook slightly as she picked up the phone. Note to self, she thought. Don’t look at the guy unless you have to. ‘Hello?’

A woman’s voice came down the phone, smooth and sultry.

The dizziness faded in an instant and Tasha thrust the phone at him, plummeting back to earth with a bump. ‘It’s for you. Someone called Analisa. She doesn’t sound too happy.’ And that made two of them. Clearing the tray, Tasha stomped back into the kitchen.

What the hell was she playing at? Staring at a guy like some sort of dreamy teenager!

Scowling, she tipped the herbal tea down the sink.

If she’d needed reminding what Alessandro was like, it was that phone call.

She didn’t understand the language, but it was obvious that Alessandro wasn’t spending time placating the woman. Judging from his bored tone, it wasn’t going to bother him if Analisa or whatever her name was didn’t phone back.

And that, Tasha thought angrily, summed up Alessandro Cavaleri. He didn’t care how many women he hurt. Flirt today, dump tomorrow.

She took her time in the kitchen and by the time she strolled back into the living room, Alessandro was no longer on the phone. ‘Did you take those tablets?’

‘Yes. They would have gone down more easily with whisky.’

'You're going to need a clear head to handle all those women who keep calling you.'

'Are you jealous?'

'Oh, please!' Tasha moved the crutches out of the way before he tripped and did more damage. 'Don't flatter yourself. Fortunately for both of us, I've grown out of the girl-meets-prince fantasy.'

'Good, because girl-meets-prince has never done anything for me. It's all fake.' His tone was irascible and suddenly she wished she'd stayed in the kitchen.

The house was huge, and yet suddenly it seemed small.

It was all too intimate, too—terrifying?

'You're very bad-tempered. That's probably because you're hungry. If you're sure I can't tempt you with some of my lovely, delicious tea, I'll go and make us some supper instead.'

'You'd better phone for a take-away because there isn't anything in the fridge.'

'Actually, there was, but most of it looked ready for a post mortem so I threw it away. The only thing within use-by date in your fridge is the champagne, and last time I looked that wasn't listed as one of the five major food groups.' Ignoring the empty space on the sofa next to him, she sprawled in one of the chairs, curling her legs underneath her. 'I gather you don't cook.'

'I have a chef, but while I've been in hospital I gave him time off.'

A chef? 'Yes, well, next time tell him to clean the dead bodies out of the fridge before he leaves. Lucky for you I had the foresight to pick up some food on the way so we're not going to starve.'

'I don't expect you to cook. That isn't why you're here.' His face was paper white and she could see that the slightest movement caused him agony. 'Anyway, I'm not hungry.'

'If you don't eat, you won't recover. Why do you have a chef?'

'I'm a useless cook. And I'm usually too busy to cook. I eat out a lot.'

With women like the sultry Analisa. 'Well, that's not a problem. It will be my pleasure to make you delicious treats.' Generally she hated cooking, but Tasha decided not to share that with him. She'd already decided what she was cooking him for dinner. 'In fact, why don't I get started? You ought to have an early night.'

'I'm not big on early nights.' Those dark eyes found hers. 'Unless there's a reason.'

'A broken ankle and bruised ribs are a reason.' Rejecting the chemistry, Tasha uncurled her legs and stood up. 'The body heals better when it's rested.'

'So you're good in the kitchen?'

'I'm good in every room, Alessandro.' Leaving him to dwell on that comment, Tasha walked back to the kitchen and closed the door firmly behind her.

The irony didn't escape her. Normally she avoided the kitchen. Here, it felt like a refuge from Alessandro.

Trying not to think about him, she emptied her bags over the shiny black work surface and picked up a small bag of extra-hot chillies.

Stir-fry, she thought, with a kick.

She couldn't kick him herself, but this should do the job for her.

But as she chopped and sliced she discovered that it was impossible not to think about him. And thinking made her wonder about the dark clouds she saw in his eyes. She'd been a doctor long enough to recognise when someone was suffering. And she didn't think the dark emotions swirling around him had anything to do with the accident.

Might have caused the accident, though, she mused, slicing onion with surgical precision.

Minutes later she had noodles cooking in boiling water and she was stir-frying a generous quantity of garlic, red chilli and ginger. Making a guess at the timing, Tasha gamely tipped in vegetables and juicy prawns and finally added the noodles.

As it sizzled, she turned to the other pan and stirred the contents. It looked identical except for one ingredient—it lacked the copious amounts of red chilli.

Just don't mix them up, she reminded herself as she plated the meal, adding a touch of garnish to make the dish extra appetising.

Pleased with the result, she walked through to the light, airy living room. The sun had dipped below the horizon and the evening was cool. Alessandro lay sprawled on the low sofa where she'd left him, staring with brooding concentration at the waves crashing onto the shore.

'The first time I surfed here I was twenty. Josh brought me.'

And she'd followed them. Egged on by her best friend from school, they'd hidden, giggling, behind the rocks, watching as her brother and his sexy friend stripped down to board shorts.

Tasha put the plates down on the table with a clatter. 'I would have thought a playboy with a private jet and your surfing skills would have chosen North Beach, Hawaii, or Jeffreys Bay in South Africa.'

'I love Cornwall. Staying with your family was one of the happiest times of my life.'

The words pushed her control off centre and Tasha felt her stomach lurch. It had been the happiest time of her life, too. Which had made the abrupt ending even harder. 'Our home wasn't exactly big—it must have felt like a shoebox to you after palace life.'

'It felt like a proper home. And I envied the way you could all just get on with your lives without having to think about crowds and security.'

As a teenager she'd thought it was impossibly glamorous having security guards, but now she could see that it might be an inconvenience, especially for an active, athletic guy like Alessandro.

'I guess Cornwall is a pretty low-profile place.'

'It's not bad. Fortunately this house isn't too accessible. How often do you surf?'

'Me?' Tasha handed him cutlery. 'Not as often as I'd like to because I generally work long hours. Normally, that's the way I like it. I'm a career girl. But now that I'm looking after you...' she shrugged '...I intend to make up for lost time.'

'So if you're a career girl, how come you're not working right now?'

Unwittingly he'd tapped into her deepest fears. That she might not be able to find another job. That her altercation with her last boss might have blown her reputation to smithereens.

Tasha opened her mouth and closed it again, unsettled by the sudden desire to confide. She stifled it, knowing that confiding was the first step towards intimacy. And she didn't want intimacy with this man. 'I'm in between jobs. I've cooked a stir-fry. I hope that's all right with you.'

'Looks delicious.' He picked up a fork. 'I can imagine you as a children's doctor.'

'I'll take that as a compliment. Do you want to try and eat at the table?'

'No, this is fine. You're right that moving around hurts. I think the journey to the bedroom will be enough of a challenge for one evening.'

As he shifted position, her eyes were drawn to his body.

No man had a right to be so good looking, Tasha thought as she registered the strength in those wide shoulders. It should have been enough that he was a prince. And rich. Looking like a sex god as well was just too many gifts for one person.

She might have been irritated if it hadn't been for the fact he was about to eat her food. And that was going to be a real test of manhood.

Hiding a smile, Tasha turned her attention back to her own plate. 'I love your kitchen. The design is fantastic. A whole different experience for me. Dinner for me is usually a cardboard sandwich from the hospital cafeteria at three in the morning.'

'It didn't look anything like this when I bought it. The rooms were small and the whole place was pretty dark. I worked with an excellent architect and we knocked down almost every wall, put in the skylights...' He glanced up at the roof of the double-height sitting room. 'We decided it was worth gutting the place because it had such potential. We opened it up, let the light flow in. This is delicious, by the way. You're a good cook.'

Delicious? He thought it was delicious?

Tasha stared at him in disbelief. 'You like it?'

'After two weeks of hospital food?' He twisted noodles around his fork with skill and precision. 'This is heaven.'

He had to be kidding. It had to be a double bluff. Unless...

Tasha stared down at her own plate. Had she mixed them up?

Cautiously, she took a mouthful, waiting for her mouth to explode into flames from the chilli, but the flavours in her food were subtle and she knew instantly she didn't have the wrong plate. Which meant he clearly had a mouth lined with asbestos.

'Is there any more?' Alessandro speared the last prawn. 'You don't seem to be eating yours.'

'I am. And there isn't any more.' She hadn't thought for a moment he'd eat what she'd served him. Clearly his mouth was as tough as the rest of him.

Feeling aggravated, Tasha finished her food. 'Why did you fall anyway? Was the horse too difficult for you?'

He accepted the slight with a flicker of a smile. 'The horse wasn't difficult. I lost concentration for a moment, but that was long enough for the guy on the opposite team to bring us down. My ankle took most of the weight. My ribs took the rest.' He leaned back against the sofa, his eyes closed.

She wondered why he'd lost concentration.

'You were trapped under the horse? Ouch. So no physical activity for the rest of the summer?'

His eyes opened and he studied her from underneath lush, dark lashes. 'Depends what you mean by physical activity.'

Staring into those dangerous dark eyes, her mouth dried. 'I meant polo and surfing.' Tasha felt the heat slowly spread through her body and wished she'd never mentioned physical activity. Even injured, the man was deadly. 'You look tired. Do you want me to call your security team to help you from the sofa to the bed?'

'No. I have the crutches and I can manage.'

'Independent, aren't you?'

'You could say that.'

Torn between wanting to see him suffer and not wanting him to exacerbate his injuries, Tasha tilted her head. 'The crutches won't be much use while your ribs are so bruised. We might need to think of other options.'

'This is fine.' Shifting to the edge of the sofa, Alessandro picked up the crutches and stood up, taking his weight on his good leg.

Tasha flinched.

That had to hurt.

'Alessandro—'

'I can do it. Just give me space.' There was a stubbornness in his tone. A grim determination to succeed despite the agonising pain. Reluctantly impressed, Tasha stood there, careful not to touch him and distinctly unsettled by how much she wanted to do just that.

'Look, I could call one of those burly security guards—'

'It would help if you could check the route to my bedroom is clear. So far I haven't mastered doing this with obstacles.' His face was chalk-white as he slowly eased his way forward. 'I'll just use the bathroom on the way so that I don't have to make two journeys.'

Tasha watched as the muscles in his powerful shoulders flexed and knew that every movement had to be causing him agony. 'I think you need help.'

He cast her a look that told her he'd be long dead before he'd accept help from anyone. A crooked smile flickered at the corners of his mouth. 'You're offering to assist me in the bathroom? Now, that could be interesting.'

Trying to work out how the atmosphere had shifted to intimate, Tasha felt her face turn scarlet. 'I just don't see how you're going to manage to do what you have to do without help.'

His eyes lingered on hers for a long moment. Mockery mingled with something else that she didn't even want to put a name to. 'You want to come and watch how it's done, tesoro?'

He'd called her that at seventeen and her heart rushed forward, doubling its rhythm. 'Don't speak Italian.'

'Why not?'

'Because...' Her mouth was dry. 'Because I don't speak it and it's rude to talk a language someone doesn't understand.'

'It's my native tongue.'

'I know. But you're fluent in English so that's no excuse.' She scowled at him. 'I just don't want you falling and fracturing more bones. I'm not sure my patience with this whole nursing thing is going to last that long, so you'd better heal quickly.'

He shifted the position of the crutch. His knuckles were white where they gripped the handles. 'I won't lock the door. If I find myself in trouble, I'll shout and you can come to my rescue. But not on a white charger. I've had enough of horses for one week.'

Pinned to the spot by that dark, sexy gaze, Tasha felt as if she were the one who had eaten the chilli. Her entire body was caught in a fiery rush of heat and suddenly she didn't feel like the one in control. 'Fine,' she croaked, 'leave the door unlocked. Good idea.'

Feeling the heat in her face, she moved through to his bedroom and cleared the suitcase off the bed. His bed was enormous and faced out towards the sea.

How many hearts had he broken in that bed?

Trying to push aside disturbing images of Alessandro's strong body tangled with a slender female frame, Tasha ripped the duvet back so that he could get into the bed and wondered why on earth she'd volunteered for this job. Why had she ever thought she could make his life difficult? The herbal tea had been moderately irritating but the chilli hadn't even registered on his taste buds, and all her digs about surfing hadn't had much impact either.

And now she was stuck here with a man who made her think things she didn't want to think. It had always been like that, she remembered crossly, even as a teenager. When Alessandro had walked into the room there had never been any confusion. She'd known she was a woman.

If she really wanted him to suffer then she needed to do something drastic.

What was a man like Alessandro likely to be missing more than anything?

Tasha gave a slow smile as she thought about the other items in her shopping bags.

Time for Plan B.

* * *

The pain in his ribs was excruciating. Even small movements resulted in blinding agony, as if a burning-hot poker was being forced into his chest.

But at least it distracted him from the parts of his life he was trying to forget.

Taking advantage of the privacy of the bathroom, Alessandro gave in to the pain.

He balanced himself against the washbasin and reached for a glass. To add to the pain in his ribs and his ankle, his mouth felt as though someone had started a bonfire. Chilli, he thought, gulping down water. When he'd taken the first mouthful of food he'd thought she must have made a mistake but then he'd seen her eating hers happily. Clearly she liked her food hot. Not wanting to offend her, he'd forced his down, eating it as quickly as possible. If she walked out, he'd be back in hospital and there was no way he was going back to hospital. So he'd forced himself to eat with enthusiasm the food she'd prepared.

He drank deeply, wondering how long it took nerve-endings to recover. There wasn't a single part of his body that wasn't burning.

Frustrated by his own weakness, accustomed to being at the peak of physical fitness, Alessandro used the bathroom and then clenched his jaw against the pain and hobbled back towards the bedroom,

trying in vain to find some way of distributing his weight so that the movement didn't exacerbate his injuries.

Tasha had turned back the duvet and smoothed the sheets.

Never before had his bed looked so inviting, but the short distance from the door felt like running a marathon. It didn't help that she was watching him, those cool eyes steady on his face.

'Aren't you taking your nursing duties a little too seriously?' He wished she'd turn away so that he could give in to the pain. 'You're off duty once I go to bed.'

'I'd better help you undress.'

Was she serious? Marvelling at the discovery that extreme pain didn't seem to interfere with sexual arousal, Alessandro gritted his teeth. For his own sanity he knew he didn't dare let her touch him. 'I'll manage.'

'How? At least let me help you change your shirt for pyjamas.'

'I don't own pyjamas.'

'I thought you might say that, so I bought you some when I was out shopping.' Pleased with herself, she picked up a bag and produced a pair of pyjamas.

Distracted from the ache in his loins by the flash of vivid colour, Alessandro blinked. 'Pink?'

'It was the only colour they had.' Her expression was anxious. 'Oh, dear. Are you one of those guys who believes wearing pink makes them less masculine? Sorry. I hadn't thought of that. Only I know some guys wear pink shirts these days and I thought these might be OK...'

Was she winding him up? His swift glance at her face suggested nothing but concern. Wondering just how far he was going to have to go not to offend her, Alessandro reminded himself that without her he'd be back in hospital.

Her generosity was the reason he'd be sleeping in his own bed tonight.

All he had to do was keep his hands off her. Which shouldn't be that hard, surely, given that every movement was agony.

'I don't have a problem with pink.' He eyed the pyjamas in disbelief, wondering which idiot had thought there was a market for such a vile creation. 'But I don't think they'll fit over the cast.'

'Leave that to me.' Beaming at him, she picked up a pair of scissors and cut a slit down one of the legs. 'There. Simple.'

Reflecting on the fact that the wretched garment now looked more like a dress than trousers, Alessandro manoeuvred himself onto the bed and let the crutches fall to the floor. Pain lanced his side and he sat still, breathing slowly, hoping it would pass. The helplessness was driving him mad.

'I'll help you take off your shirt.' Tasha sat next to him on the bed and gently eased off his shirt. As she exposed his chest, the breath hissed through her teeth. 'I've never seen bruises like those, Alessandro. How are you still walking around?' Her tone altered dramatically. Light and flirty gave way to crisp concern.

'I'm fine. To be honest, walking isn't any more painful than breathing.' He was taken aback by the change in her. The girl had gone and in her place was a doctor. A concerned doctor. Her fingers gently traced the bruises and when he glanced at her face he saw that her expression was serious.

'Does this hurt?'

'No.'

She gave him an impatient look. 'Honest answers only, please. A man wearing pink is allowed to express his true emotions even if the resulting language is colourful.'

'All right. It hurts like crazy and I want to punch something?'

'And when I do this?' She pressed lower down and Alessandro swore long and fluently.

'OK.' She didn't blink. 'Now I know you're telling the truth.'

The pain was a blinding, agonising flash. Once again he had that sick dread that the doctors might have missed something. Something that was going to keep him bedridden for longer than a

fractured ankle and a few broken ribs. 'Are you trying to kill me?' He spoke through his teeth and she straightened, her hair sliding over her shoulders.

'Actually, no. I'm checking you over. I don't like the look of those bruises. Just sit still. I'm going to check your breath sounds.'

'I've already been examined by about a hundred doctors. They kept wheeling in yet another expert to give an opinion.'

'Sorry, but the only opinion I trust is my own.' She disappeared and reappeared a moment later with a stethoscope in her hand. 'Good job I packed this in my box of tricks, although I haven't listened to an adult's chest for quite a while.'

'If that's supposed to fill me with confidence, it doesn't.' It was a lie. Strangely enough, he was relieved to have her opinion. He remembered Josh telling him that Tasha had astonishing instincts to go with her sharp brain. He had no doubt that she was a skilled doctor. Unfortunately that didn't make things any easier and he sat still while she touched the bruising, trying not to think about how her fingers felt on his skin. 'Do you have to prod me?'

'I'm checking there's no underlying trauma. Those bruises are very impressive. Must hurt a lot.'

Alessandro spoke through his teeth. 'Not at all.' As if the pain wasn't enough, he also had the extra hit of sexual arousal. As she tilted her head, her hair slid forward and brushed against his arm. He tried to move backwards but every movement felt as though he were being slammed into a wall.

'Bones have a lot of nerve-endings,' she murmured. 'That's why it's painful.'

'Thanks for the explanation.'

'Generally, when someone breaks a bone, the treatment is to immobilise it. We can put your ankle in a cast to protect it. Unfortunately we can't do the same thing for your ribs.' Tasha put the stethoscope in her ears. 'Every time you breathe, you hurt yourself again.'

'Can't they strap my chest or something?'

'No. Now stop talking while I listen.' She narrowed her eyes and moved the stethoscope on his chest. Her hair whispered across his arm. 'Breathe in for me.'

Alessandro did and almost passed out. Pain skewered him and darkness flickered around the edges of his vision, muting the lust.

Her eyes locked on his. 'Breathe in and out through your mouth.'

Was she trying to torture him?

But when she finally removed the stethoscope from her ears, her expression was serious. 'Your breath sounds are fine, but I'm going to keep an eye on you. To answer your question, they actually did used to strap chests in the old days, but not any more. It impedes movement and stops you breathing deeply—you can't shift the secretions in your lungs and you can end up with a vile infection. Then you're back in hospital on yet more antibiotics.'

The word 'hospital' was enough to make him ride the pain and breathe deeply. 'I get the message.'

'Don't worry—a young, fit guy like you can cope with a couple of broken ribs and heal quickly. It's older patients who suffer.' Digging her hand into her pocket, she pulled out her phone. 'I'm just going to call your doctor. I want to add in a drug.'

'I'm already swallowing the contents of a pharmacy.'

'I want to give you a non-steroidal alongside your painkillers. I don't know why he didn't give you that. You don't suffer from stomach problems, do you?'

'I've never suffered from anything,' Alessandro growled, 'until a horse fell on me.' Watching Tasha talk on the phone, he found his eyes lingering on the curve of her cheek and the thickness of her eyelashes. She was brisk and professional, giving her opinion bluntly and firmly to a man at least twice her age. Impressive, he thought. And he could imagine her working with children. As a teenager, she'd had an irrepressible sense of fun. Remembering some of the tricks she'd played on her brothers, he allowed himself a faint smile.

‘OK, so that’s done.’ She slid the phone back into her pocket. ‘In the morning I’m going to pick you up some extra tablets. I think it will help and so do the guys at the hospital. They should have thought of it, but sometimes it takes a woman to get these things right. Now, then—pyjamas.’

‘I can dress without your help.’ Alessandro, who had never felt awkward with a woman in his life before, suddenly felt awkward. She was behaving as if they had no history. As if—

Tasha picked up the pink pyjamas and dangled them in front of him, her expression bored.

‘I’ve seen it all before, Alessandro. I’m a doctor.’

‘You haven’t seen m—’ He was about to say that she hadn’t seen his body before, but then he remembered that she had. And he’d seen hers. All of hers.

And he didn’t want to mention that. If she was going to act as if nothing had happened, so was he.

He looked at her cautiously, but her face revealed nothing but professional concern.

‘I want to examine the rest of you. Lie back for me.’ Her expression serious, her hands moved down his body, sliding and pressing. ‘Does this hurt?’

‘Everything hurts.’ Feeling her cool fingers on his abdomen, Alessandro sucked in a breath. How low did she intend to go?

Lust slammed through him and Alessandro grabbed the duvet and pulled it higher, ignoring the avalanche of pain that rained down on him. ‘I’m fine. I can manage. Go to bed. You must be tired.’ He wished she’d step back a bit. Her scent was playing havoc with his libido and this close he could see the smoothness of her skin. How the hell could a guy be aroused when his broken ribs were virtually impaling his lungs? ‘Goodnight, Tasha. Thanks for all your help.’

‘If the pain changes, let me know.’

The pain had changed. Suddenly it was all concentrated below his waist and it had nothing to do with being trampled by a four-legged animal. ‘Get some sleep.’

‘Don’t hesitate to wake me up if you need to.’ She walked briskly across the room to close the blinds.

‘Leave them—I prefer to keep the doors open.’

‘You won’t be able to sleep.’

He didn’t tell her that he rarely slept. ‘I’ll be fine. I like the fresh air.’

‘Well, if you change your mind, just shout out.’ Her hips swayed as she walked from window to door. She held a stethoscope in her hand but she walked like a seductress. ‘I hope you have a really good night’s sleep. I’ve chosen the bedroom right across the hall and I’ll leave the door open so I’ll hear you if you shout.’

Great. There were three guest bedrooms, the other two at the far end of the house. Couldn’t she have chosen one of those?

After she left, Alessandro spent a frustrating and agonising fifteen minutes removing his shorts. Exhausted, he didn’t bother replacing them with the pyjamas. Instead he flopped back against the pillows, drained of energy.

He lay without moving until a noise from across the corridor made him look up.

Tasha was walking across the guest room towards the en suite bathroom, undressing as she walked. First she pulled off the scarlet jumper and dropped it in a heap. Her full breasts pushed against a silken wisp of a bra. When her hands moved to the snap of her jeans, Alessandro wanted to groan out a request that she stop, but he couldn’t make a sound and the jeans went the way of the jumper and this time the lace was so brief it was almost irrelevant.

His muscles tensed, sending spasms of pain shooting down his bruised body.

Finding it impossible to breathe, Alessandro wondered if one of his broken ribs had suddenly punctured his lung. There was no air in the room. He was suffocating. He lifted his hand to undo his collar and then remembered that he was naked.

As he watched, she stretched upwards to clip her hair on top of her head, the movement accentuating her lean, flat stomach and her long, slim legs. He felt like a voyeur at an erotic floor show. Clearly she'd forgotten that she had both doors open. Either that or she was just assuming he was asleep.

If he called out, he'd embarrass her, and he couldn't look away because his head refused to move.

Telling himself that any moment now she was going to lock the bathroom door, Alessandro kept watching. And he was still watching when she turned her back to him, unfastened her bra and stepped out of her knickers.

CHAPTER FOUR

MEGAN'S hand shook as she opened the door that led to the neonatal intensive care unit.

All day she'd been in a daze of happiness. A daze of happiness that nothing could blunt—not even the knowledge that technically she'd slept with a married man.

Married, but not together, she told herself, wondering why the fact that Josh and Rebecca were almost divorced didn't make her feel any better.

Her head was in a spin and she'd found it almost impossible to concentrate.

She'd thought of nothing else all day, ever since that knock on the door that had sent Josh springing from the bed before they'd had the opportunity to talk about what they'd shared. She had no idea who had been at the door, but whoever it was had been important enough to make sure that Josh didn't return.

Megan had waited for twenty minutes then dressed quickly and exited the on-call room quietly. Her heart had been working double time all the way back to the paediatric ward but she was fairly confident that no one had seen her.

She'd spent the rest of her day stopping herself from checking her phone every two minutes to see if Josh had called. It was like being a teenager all over again.

The extended silence made her jittery and sent her imagination into overdrive.

Was he embarrassed? Did he regret what they'd done?

Reminding herself that Josh was a senior doctor whose working day was ridiculously intense and demanding, she tried to rationalise the fact that he hadn't called. She told herself that it wasn't surprising that he didn't want to publicise their relationship. They were colleagues after all, and affairs between colleagues could so easily become messy.

Having convinced herself that she wasn't likely to see him that day, it came as a shock to see Josh sitting at the computer at the nurses' station.

Megan felt a tiny thrill of excitement bloom inside her.

He wasn't avoiding her. He was here, on her ward.

Her heart pounded against her chest and she was relieved that the other staff appeared to be occupied elsewhere.

Just for this first encounter she wanted to be alone with him. She didn't want to share the memories of the night with anyone but Josh.

Remembering the look he'd given her just before he'd left the on-call room, she gave a little smile and her stomach fluttered with anticipation.

'Hello, Josh.'

'Ah, Megan, I'm glad you're here. We had an emergency delivery in the department. Thirty-four-weeker.' He turned to her, his tone crisp and professional. 'Showing signs of respiratory distress, so we've transferred him to you.'

There was nothing intimate in his gaze—nothing to hint that they'd spent the night together.

Taken aback, Megan glanced behind her but there was no one within earshot.

The baby was ill, she reasoned, and he was an exceptional doctor. Josh would never put his personal life before the well-being of a patient.

Slowly, she put her bag on the floor, controlling her disappointment. 'Was it a normal delivery?'

As he told her, she found herself looking at his hands and the dark hairs dusting his forearms. Those same hands had touched her. Everywhere. Held her. It had been genuine, she had no doubt about that. She still remembered the look in his eyes as he'd driven her wild.

That knowledge gave her confidence. 'Josh—'

'I need to get back.' He rose quickly to his feet, interrupting her before she could finish her sentence. 'You might want to spend some time with the mother. She's very upset. The whole thing took

about twenty minutes from start to finish. Precipitate doesn't begin to describe it.'

It was a verbal dismissal but it may as well have been a physical slap for the pain it caused.

'Of course.' Megan pushed the words through stiff lips and stood frozen to the spot as he walked past her, careful not to touch. He was as cold as he'd been eight years before. It was as if their night together hadn't happened.

She wanted to say something. She wanted to grab his arm and demand to know what was going on in his head. She wanted to know why he was hurting her like this.

But his face was a frozen mask and her pride kept her hands by her sides as she let him walk away.

* * *

Tasha took her time strolling towards the shower.

He was watching her. She could almost feel the heat of his eyes on her back.

Get a load of that, she thought happily as she stepped into the shower. Flat-chested? I don't think so.

From the moment she'd decided to do her striptease, her heart had been hammering. First she'd checked he was awake through the crack in the door, then she'd choreographed her walk across the room to ensure that he witnessed every move.

After that all she'd had to do was not give in to temptation and look round. She'd done everything in her power to push up his blood pressure. What she hadn't done was ask herself why she would want to.

Until now.

Muttering to herself, she turned the shower to cold.

Ten years hadn't done anything to make him less attractive. Unfortunately. In fact, he'd filled out in places where it counted. His shoulders were wider, his chest stronger and his arms thickened with muscle. Less of the boy and more of the man. Too much more of the man.

Despite the cold water, her body felt scorching hot again and she wondered why on earth she'd agreed to this.

Another one of her stupid ideas.

She'd thought her feelings for him had been no more than a childish crush. She'd thought the pain he'd caused would have inoculated her against his lethal charm. She'd thought she was immune. If you'd been infected with something once, you shouldn't catch it again, should you?

So why the explosion of chemistry?

Tasha gave a groan of frustration and turned off the shower.

Her brother was right. She needed to get out more.

Wrapping herself in a huge towel, she opened the bathroom door and risked a glance towards his bedroom. It was in darkness. The feeling of superiority drained out of her. If he'd been watching her, he wasn't now. He wasn't lying there tortured with unfulfilled desire after seeing her in her underwear.

He was asleep.

Which said it all. You couldn't torment a man who didn't even bother looking.

Feeling cross and hot and all sorts of things she didn't want to feel, Tasha flopped onto the bed and rolled onto her stomach, burying her face in the pillow. It wasn't supposed to be this way.

She was supposed to have taken one look at him and wondered what she'd seen in him. She wasn't supposed to be having the thoughts she was having now. Why couldn't he be a total wimp like all the other men she met on a daily basis? Her last relationship had floundered after less than a week when the doctor in question had taken to his bed with a dose of man-flu. Tasha, who had endless patience with sick children, had been exasperated by his dying-duck impression but she'd dutifully made hot drinks, dished out tablets and made sympathetic noises until finally calling a halt, reasoning that there was no future in a relationship where one of the partners wanted to strangle the other.

Why couldn't Alessandro provoke the same feelings of irritation?

Why didn't she want to strangle him?

'Ugh.' Blocking out images of his broad shoulders, she burrowed under the pillow. The man had to be in agony. The bruises on his chest were the worst she'd ever seen. But had he uttered a murmur of complaint? No. In fact, he'd been so stoical about the whole thing it had been a struggle to persuade him to take painkillers. She wanted him to be a wimp, but he was anything but. And as for the chilli...

Clearly he liked his food hot.

Tasha thumped the pillow angrily and rolled onto her back. So he was tough. So what? That just proved the man had no nerve-endings and she already knew that. A man with the slightest sensitivity wouldn't have treated her the way Alessandro had treated her.

Had she seen a flicker of remorse?

Had he apologised?

No. And she hadn't exactly progressed in her plan to make him suffer. In fact, so far her plan had totally failed to get off the ground.

Wishing she hadn't wasted her limited finances on sexy underwear, Tasha rolled onto her back and stared at the ceiling.

So far she'd failed spectacularly to make him feel remotely guilty for the way he'd treated her, but she couldn't very well back out now without exposing herself to relentless questioning and teasing by her insensitive brother. Which meant she was stuck here.

She lay in the dark, unable to sleep, wondering how someone with a chest that bruised had somehow managed to get himself to and from the bathroom without help. It hadn't just been the physical strength that had impressed her, it was the mental strength. Somehow he'd pushed through the pain.

He didn't just look like a warrior, he had warrior mentality.

There was a hardness to him that hadn't been there ten years before. He wasn't the same person. And neither was she.

Tasha was pondering on that when a loud crash echoed around the house.

She was out of bed in a flash, her mind already working through various scenarios. If he'd fallen out of bed, it could have seriously aggravated his injuries. They'd need an ambulance. Paramedics... 'Alessandro?' Sprinting into his bedroom, she saw a lamp lying on the floor where he'd knocked it off the bedside table. On the wall in front of him a football match was being played out on the wide-screen TV and he was watching avidly, his hand locked around the remote control.

'Tash, you're standing in front of the screen!'

'You're watching sport?' Her heart was hammering and she felt weak at the knees. 'You frighten the life out of me and then all you can say is "You're standing in front of the screen"?' Incredulous, she rescued the lamp and waited for her heartbeat to reach a normal level. 'I thought you'd fallen out of bed. I thought you'd broken the rest of your ribs and your skull to go with it.'

'I knocked the lamp off when I was reaching for the remote control.'

'It's two in the morning. What is it with men and the remote control?'

'I wanted to watch sport. I couldn't sleep.'

Him too?

Only she'd been lying there thinking about him while he'd been thinking about football. The knowledge scraped at her nerves and strengthened her resolve. 'Is it the pain?' Tasha straightened the lamp. 'I thought you'd fallen.' And she'd been terrified of what a fall could do to his broken ribs. Not that she cared, she told herself quickly, but she didn't want to be stuck here nursing him any longer than she had to be.

'It isn't pain. Go back to bed, Tasha. I'm sorry I disturbed you.' He didn't shift his gaze from the screen, watching unblinking as the crowd roared its approval. He was a typical man, obsessed with sport, just like her three brothers. She could walk across the room naked and he wouldn't look up because some feat of sporting prowess was being enacted on the giant plasma screen.

Why had she bothered buying expensive lingerie to drive him wild? she thought crossly. She may as well have worn her ancient Mickey Mouse T-shirt.

The glass doors were still open onto the terrace and a cool breeze wafted into the room. 'Shall I close these now?' She walked across the room. 'You must be freezing.'

'I like the cold air.' Something in his tone made her look at him closely and it was only because she was trained to notice subtle clues that she realised he wasn't actually watching the game. True, his eyes were fixed on the screen, but they were blank. Empty.

And suddenly she knew that the football was an excuse.

Tasha switched on the other lamp and for a fleeting second saw the expression on his face. The humour was gone and in its place was exhaustion and pain. She hesitated and then sat down on the chair, hating herself for not just being able to walk away. It wasn't that she cared, she told herself quickly. It was because he was in pain. She'd never been any good at watching someone in pain. 'You look rough.'

'Go to bed, Tasha.' It was a dismissal she chose to ignore.

She wondered whether he was thinking about his injury or the loss of his brother.

'Things always seem worse at night,' she said casually. 'I see it on the ward with both the kids and the parents. There's something about being in the dark. It makes you think too much.' And she knew that sometimes it helped to talk to pass the time. She'd spent hours keeping frightened kids company at night, playing cards, chatting quietly while the rest of the ward slept. 'What were you doing back in Cornwall anyway? I imagined you in some gilded palace, doing prince-like things.'

'You imagined me?' His head turned and she wanted to bite her tongue. Suddenly she was staring into those dark eyes and everything inside her melted, just as it had when she was a teenager.

'Just a figure of speech. You're the crown prince.' Suddenly she felt awkward, and she wondered why she found it so much easier to talk to children than adults. 'I was sorry to hear about your brother. That must have been very hard for all of you.'

'It's life.' His voice was hard and she floundered, wondering how it was possible to want to comfort and run at the same time. 'What are you doing here, Tasha? Why did you really volunteer to look after me?'

Her heart jumped in her chest. So he wasn't just brave, he was as sharp as a blade.

It wouldn't do to forget that.

'I wanted to help.'

'Really?' The bleak, cold look in his eyes had been replaced by smouldering sexuality that made it impossible to breathe or think. Time was suspended. In the background the crowd roared its approval at some amazing feat of sportsmanship but neither of them looked towards the screen. They were looking at each other, the chemistry a magnetic force between them, drawing them together.

And then he turned his head and closed his eyes. 'Go to bed, Tasha.'

Embarrassment drove her to her feet. Another minute and she would have kissed that mouth. She would have leaned forward and—

Oh, God.

'Right. Yes. Good. Well—try not to knock over any more lamps.' She fled to the door, wondering what it was about this man that affected her so badly.

She was a career-woman. She was dedicating her life to her little patients. The only thing she was interested in was getting another job as fast as possible.

This time when she walked into her bedroom she closed the door firmly behind her.

* * *

The dark rage inside him mingled with frustration. The inactivity was driving him crazy. Almost as crazy as living with Tasha. Even when she wasn't there, she was there. He smelt her perfume, spied a pair of feminine shoes discarded next to a chair.

And now she was surfing. Alessandro watched from the terrace as she carved into the wave, graceful and perfectly balanced. It was like watching a dancer. Some bolder tourists had chosen to visit the beach to take lessons on the soft sand and then try the bigger surf created by the rocks. They huddled in groups, learning to stand on the board, learning to balance, practising the 'pop-up'. Then they ventured into the water and spent the time falling off their boards in the shallows.

Tasha had none of those problems.

Watching her was sheer poetry. He turned away from the window, envying her the opportunity to push herself physically. Before the accident he would have been out there with her. Or maybe not with her, exactly. He frowned, not sure how he felt about having her there. She was the reason he was home, and those new painkillers had certainly taken the edge off the agony. But other parts of him weren't faring so well. The inactivity was driving him mad.

As were the phone calls from Miranda.

She wanted to visit.

But he wasn't ready to see her.

Wasn't ready to make the decision everyone wanted him to make.

Driven by a burning desire to recover as fast as possible, he hauled himself to the bed and started the exercises the physio had shown him.

He worked without rest, channelling all his anger and frustration into each movement, pushing himself hard.

By the time Tasha arrived back in the apartment, he was in agony. Still in her wetsuit, her feet bare, she stood and looked at him.

'Did you take your painkillers before you started?'

It cost him to speak. 'No.'

'That's what I thought. Let me tell you something about pain—once it comes back, it's harder to manage. The trick is to head it off before it returns. You should have waited for me. I was going to do the physio with you.' Dropping her towel and her bag on the floor, she walked over to him. Her hair lay in a damp rope over her shoulder and she smelt of the sea. 'The surf is fantastic.'

Her enthusiasm and sheer vitality sprinkled salt into his wounds. 'I saw you. You took a risk with that last wave.'

'I don't think you're in a position to lecture me about risk given that you lay down under a horse.' She glanced down at his ankle. 'How's that feeling?'

'It's fine, thanks.' Speaking required energy he didn't possess and she gave him a knowing smile.

'Fine? Yeah, I bet. Why don't you sit down and I'll check you over.'

Despite the agony, his entire body heated and he reflected on the fact that having Tasha as his private nurse was the worst torture anyone could have invented. 'You already checked me over.' And he'd had a sleepless night as a result.

'Sorry, but while I'm in charge, I'll check you whenever I feel it's necessary.' Cool and calm, she faced him down. 'You're my responsibility. No one dies on my shift, got that?'

'I have no intention of dying.'

‘You might, if you carry on being uncooperative.’ Her smile managed to be both threatening and sweet as she gestured to the bed. ‘Lie down.’

It was an awkward manoeuvre. ‘When will they take this damn thing off?’

‘That cast is holding your joints in the right position while they heal. When the surgeon is happy that your bones are healing, they’ll remove it. Usually about six to eight weeks. So that gives you at least another month. Better get used to it.’

‘And once it’s removed?’

‘Intensive physio—hydrotherapy—’

‘Hydrotherapy?’

‘Basically exercising in the water.’ Gently, she pushed him back against the stack of pillows. ‘Good for strengthening muscle without stressing bone and joint.’

Alessandro lay on the bed and tried to ignore the pain licking through his body. He wondered if she planned to change out of the black stretchy wetsuit before she examined him. She looked like Catwoman. ‘I just want to be fit.’

‘You will be, but it’s going to take time.’ Tasha reached behind her and unzipped the back of her wetsuit slightly. ‘If you’re worried that you’ll never be fit again, don’t be. I’ve seen your X-rays and I’ve talked to your surgeon. There’s no reason why you won’t be back to normal in a few months providing you’re sensible. If you do the wrong thing now—if you push it when you should be resting—you’ll just do damage. You need to take it steadily and do as you’re told.’

Relief mingled with humiliation that she’d read him so easily. ‘I’m not good at doing as I’m told.’

If he were, then he’d have bowed to pressure and married.

‘I know, but if you want to be fully fit again, that’s what you’re going to have to do.’ Tasha dropped her hands from the zip. ‘I need to get out of this gear and take a shower. Then I’ll give you a massage to try and relax those muscles of yours. Don’t move until I come back.’

‘Shower.’ Alessandro closed his eyes, not daring to think about the word ‘massage’. ‘Now you’re torturing me.’

She paused, her hand on the doorhandle, a frown in her eyes. ‘You could take a shower if you wanted to.’

He gave a sardonic smile and gestured to his cast. ‘Oh, yeah—easy as anything.’

‘Not easy, but possible. We just have to cover it in plastic to protect it.’

There was a long, pulsing silence. ‘You’re offering to help me in the shower?’

‘That’s why I’m here.’

Alessandro wondered if he was the only one feeling warm. Suddenly he wished he hadn’t suggested it. Nurse, he told himself. She was offering as a nurse, not anything else. ‘I was joking. I can manage.’

‘Well, you can’t shower on your own, no matter how macho you are.’ Her voice was mild. ‘But if you don’t want a shower, that’s fine. I don’t want to push you if you’re shy.’

Shy?

It had nothing to do with being shy and everything to do with the fact that she was standing in front of him wearing a form-fitting black wetsuit.

‘Yeah.’ His voice was a hoarse croak. ‘That’s right. I’m shy. So we’ll give the shower a miss for now.’

As she strolled away from him he took comfort in the fact that at least there was one part of his body that appeared to be working normally.

* * *

By the end of two weeks, Tasha had reached screaming pitch.

As plans went, this one had backfired big time.

The tension that had been there on the first day seemed to grow with each passing minute.

If revenge was supposed to be pleasurable then she was definitely doing something wrong because she was in agony. The only one suffering was her.

Instead of giving her the opportunity to be aloof and distant, she was being sucked deeper and deeper into his life. His lack of mobility inevitably meant that she did everything from physio to answering the phone.

Even as she had that thought, the phone rang again and Tasha rolled her eyes and answered it, wondering which of Alessandro's many female friends it would be this time.

A brisk voice informed her that the Princess Eleanor wished to speak to her son, but before Tasha could hand over the phone a cool, cultured voice came down the line.

'Are you his nurse?'

Tasha frowned. 'Well, no, actually, I'm a—'

'Never mind. I'm better off not knowing.' In a cold, unemotional tone she demanded to speak to her son and Tasha passed the phone over without question, feeling defensive and irritated and about as small as a bacterium.

Just what was his mother implying?

She'd been expecting to be asked for a clinical update on progress, but clearly his mother didn't consider her worth speaking to.

Angry with herself for caring, Tasha busied herself tidying up and tried not to listen to the conversation, but it was impossible not to pick up the tension between the two of them, even though the conversation was conducted in Italian.

Alessandro replied to what appeared to be a barrage of questions in a similar clipped, perfunctory tone and afterwards he flung the phone down onto the sofa, picked up the crutches and struggled onto the terrace. The loud thump of the sticks told her everything she needed to know about his mood.

Startled by the lack of affection between mother and son, Tasha stared at his rigid shoulders for a while and then followed him outside. Was she supposed to say something or pretend it hadn't happened? This wasn't her business, was it? And she wasn't supposed to care...

Torn, she stood awkwardly. 'Can I get you anything?'

'No. Thanks.' He kept his gaze fixed on the surfers in the bay. 'Not unless you can conjure up a new, fit body. I need to heal instantly so that I can get back to my life.'

A life he clearly hated.

'I know it feels frustrating, but if you rush things you'll just do more damage.' She tried to put herself in his mother's shoes. Alessandro was her only surviving son. To hear about his accident must have given her a shock. Perhaps it was anxiety that had put that chill in her tone. 'Your mother must be worried.'

'She's worried I'm not doing my duty. Apparently while I'm "lounging" here, enjoying myself with pretty nurses in attendance—that's you, by the way...' he threw her a mocking smile '...my image is suffering.'

So that explained Princess Eleanor's frigid tone on the phone. She'd assumed there was something going on between the 'nurse' and her son. Irritated rather than embarrassed, Tasha glanced at the bruises visible through the open neck of his polo shirt. 'Does she know how badly you were hurt?'

'Yes. Josh called her while I was in Theatre the first time.'

'And?'

'And she said it was no more than I deserved for indulging in high-risk sports. My accident is badly timed. I had fifty official engagements scheduled over the next month, including opening the annual May ball at the palace.'

'Oh. Well, perhaps she's worried that—'

'Tasha, she isn't worried.' He cut through her platitudes, his dark eyes hard and cold. 'My mother only worries about two things—duty and responsibility. My love of polo was bad enough. Having injured myself, I've committed the cardinal sin of making life very inconvenient for her.'

'You're her son and I'm sure that—'

'Let's get one thing straight.' Alessandro shifted his position so that he was facing her. 'As far as my mother is concerned, the wrong son died. It's because of me that Antonio is no longer Crown Prince. I can't bring him back so I'm expected to fill his shoes...' He hesitated and then muttered something under his breath. 'In every way.'

Tasha frowned. In every way. What did he mean by that? 'It wasn't your fault. Why are you blaming yourself?'

He turned away abruptly and Tasha felt the tension flowing from him. Darkness surrounded him like a force field and suddenly she knew that the change in him, the hardness, was all to do with the death of his brother.

Her insides softened. 'Do you want to talk about it?'

'No.'

'But—'

'Not everything can be healed by good nursing, Natasha.' The bitterness sliced through her own defences and she stretched out her hand and touched his arm.

'Is that why she rang? To tell you you've made her life difficult?' Anger glowed inside her and suddenly Tasha wished she hadn't passed him the phone.

She should have screened the call.

'She rang to order me to see my advisers, who apparently have a plan for, and I quote, "pulling something positive" out of this disastrous mess I've made.' A cynical smile tilted his mouth. 'Apparently an injured prince may appeal to a certain age group, so she thinks there may be some mileage in media interviews. So that's my contribution to society—providing entertainment for bored housewives.'

'Next time I'm going to tell her you're asleep and can't be disturbed.' Part of her wondered why she felt the urge to rush to his defence and clearly he was asking himself the same question because he stared at her for a long moment. The hardness left his eyes and he lifted a hand and touched her face. The attraction flickered between them, live and dangerous.

Tasha tried to speak, tried to move, but her body seemed to have shut down and Alessandro gave a low groan, slid his hand behind her head and brought her mouth down on his in a hungry, explosive kiss.

Heat burst through her. Last time she'd kissed him it had been a childish experiment, a desperate desire to grow up fast. There was nothing experimental about this kiss. It was hot and sexual and the explosion of desire gripped her so fiercely that she moaned against his seeking mouth and dug her fingers in the front of his shirt.

It was only as she felt him flinch that she realised how much she must be hurting him. The backs of her fingers were pressed against his bruised chest and she'd leaned into him, instinctively drawing herself closer to his hard body. Closer to heartbreak.

'Damn you—no.' Angry with herself, and even more angry with him, she pulled back quickly. 'I didn't want you to do that. I came out here to give you sympathy and support.'

'I don't want sympathy or support. I want you.' He spoke with the assurance and conviction of someone who'd never been turned down by a woman in his life, and she started to shake.

'Don't start that, Alessandro.' She virtually spat the words. 'Don't start all that smooth talk, seduction thing—I'm not interested.'

'Tasha—'

'Age may have given you wider shoulders and longer legs but it obviously hasn't given you a conscience. Do you honestly think I'd put myself through that a second time? Do you think I'm that

much of a masochist?' Her voice rose and she saw his dark brows rise in astonishment. 'I'm not interested, Alessandro. I don't want you to kiss me, I don't want you to touch me—' She broke off, aware that her voice was shaking as much as the rest of her. And he was looking at her as if she'd gone mad. Oh, God, she was overreacting. She should have laughed it off. Or said she didn't feel anything. Or... Her hands raised, she backed away. 'Coming here was such a mistake. I should have said no when Josh asked me. I should have...' She breathed deeply, struggling for control. 'I should have said no.'

'Tasha, wait a minute.' He reached for her but she slapped his hand away and he was forced to grab the rail to regain his balance.

It was a measure of her dedication as a doctor that she made sure he was stable before she walked away.

'Touch me again and I'll break your other leg.' She turned and stalked out off the terrace, her heart crashing against her ribs and terror in her heart.

CHAPTER FIVE

TASHA sat on the bed, her knees drawn up against her chest like a child protecting herself. Her heart was pounding with reaction to the adrenaline surging around her body. The doctor in her recognised the physiological process.

Fight or flight.

The kiss licked like fire through her body, as if that one single touch had set in motion something that couldn't be stopped. She rubbed her hands down her legs, trying to kill the sensations that engulfed her. Why had she let him do that? Why?

It wasn't as if she was short on self-discipline. She could say no to chocolate, she'd never been drunk in her life and she'd worked relentlessly to achieve the highest grades possible in her exams. So why couldn't she apply that same single-minded focus to staying detached from Alessandro?

Furious with herself, Tasha thumped her fist on the mattress.

There was something about him that just drew her in. She felt out of her control and that part of it infuriated her more than anything.

Impulse was her greatest fault, she thought savagely. She was a scientist, wasn't she? Impulse shouldn't be part of her make-up, and yet she couldn't seem to stop herself acting on her instincts. First she'd resigned from a job she loved and now she was getting herself involved with the last man in the world any woman in her right mind would get involved with.

So what was she supposed to do next?

She couldn't carry on nursing him, could she? She didn't trust herself.

She was going to have to leave.

She was going to have to make some excuse and—

The door slammed open with a violence that sent it crashing into the wall. Alessandro stood there, his eyes dark as a storm, one hand against the doorframe to balance himself. 'What the hell is going on, Tash? If you feel like that, why did you agree to help me?'

'Get out!' She wasn't ready to face him. Didn't trust herself to keep him at a distance.

'I'm not going anywhere. Not until we've had an honest conversation.'

'Honest? What do you know about honest?' It was a struggle to keep her voice even. 'One minute you—you—make a woman feel as though she's the only female alive in the world and then the next minute you—'

'The next minute I...?'

'Just forget it. I don't know why we're even talking about this. I don't want to talk about this.'

'We're talking about it because it's obviously on your mind. And it seems to have been on your mind for a long time.' He hobbled into the room, his jaw clenched against the pain, his muscles pumped up and hard. 'That first day in the hospital, I asked you if the past was going to be a problem and you said—'

'I know what I said.' Her voice rose. 'I don't need you to repeat it.'

His gaze was steady on hers. 'If you hate me that much, why did you agree to help me?'

'I don't hate you. I don't have any feelings for you whatsoever.' She threw out the words, knowing them to be untrue. But she badly wanted them to be true. She badly wanted to have no feelings for him. In fact, it was essential for her emotional well-being that she had no feelings for him.

'Which brings me back to the same question—why did you agree to help me?'

'Because I'd messed up my job and I was at a loose end. Because I wanted to prove that you didn't mean anything to me any more, and...' she breathed deeply '...I wanted to see if you were sorry.'

He looked at her for a long moment and then his eyes narrowed and he gave a humourless laugh. 'Ah. Now I understand. You thought you'd punish me, is that it? The strip show was for my benefit. All the "look at me" surfing sessions were designed to make me suffer. All of it was designed to make me suffer. What we shared wasn't water under the bridge. You weren't indifferent. You were getting revenge.'

'It wasn't revenge.' Tasha felt her face grow scarlet as she defended herself. 'I wanted to prove to myself that you were nothing more than a childish crush. The way I felt about you back then was — Actually, I don't even want to think about it. It's just too embarrassing. And, yes, I was angry with you. You behaved like a complete and utter bastard.'

'I know.'

'And then you—' His words penetrated her brain and she broke off and stared at him. 'What did you say?'

'I said I know. I know I treated you horribly.'

'Y-You do?' Stunned by his blunt admission, she stared at him. 'You knew that?'

'Of course. That's why I was so surprised when you waltzed blithely into my hospital room and offered to help me out. Frankly, I was expecting a black eye from you, not assistance.' He watched her cautiously. 'Clearly I was right to be suspicious of your motives.'

'But—' Anger shot through her. 'If you knew you'd behaved horribly, why didn't you ever say anything? You could at least have said sorry.'

'That would have defeated the purpose.'

'The purpose?' Tasha stared at him blankly. 'I don't get it.'

'The purpose was to make you hate me,' he said gently. 'If I'd apologised, it wouldn't have worked, would it?'

'You—you wanted me to hate you? Why?'

He gave a crooked smile. 'Because every time I walked into a room you looked at me as though I was the only person there. Because you thought you were in love with me. You were crazy about me, and—'

'All right, all right.' She held up her hand like a stop sign. 'Can this get any more embarrassing? Enough! I know exactly how I behaved. There's no need to rub it in.'

'I was going to say, "and I was crazy about you".' He spoke the words so softly she wondered if she'd misheard.

'You—'

'I'd never been with anyone who behaved as normally around me as you did.'

'I hero-worshiped you.'

'I know, and that was sweet, but the best part was that you were such fun. You were so unselfconscious. The first time I visited you kept trying to remember to call me Your Highness and then you just gave up and called me Sandro, and you were the first person who had ever done that. And you were so beautiful...' He shifted position awkwardly, unconsciously trying to ease the pain. 'Too beautiful. Josh introduced you as his kid sister but it didn't take me long to realise you weren't a kid. Especially when you wore those bikinis.'

Tasha watched him, her heart thumping. 'I wanted you to notice me.'

The corners of his mouth flickered. 'I noticed you.'

‘And then there was the ballgown.’

‘I wondered when we were going to talk about that. That night at the ball—’ his eyes glittered ‘—I couldn’t believe Josh had agreed to take you. The only way I’d kept my distance was because I kept telling myself you were a kid. And Josh kept telling me you were a kid. And then suddenly you were standing there in this scarlet dress that made you look like a sex goddess—’

‘You remember what I was wearing?’

‘And suddenly telling myself that you were a kid didn’t seem to be working.’ His eyes were very dark. ‘It didn’t help that you were so wildly determined to lose your virginity that night. To me.’

Mortified at the memory of how brazen she’d been, Tasha covered her face with her hands. ‘Do we have to talk about this? Isn’t there just a nice deep hole I can jump into?’

‘I wanted you, too.’

‘Oh, sure.’ Still cringing, she shook her head. ‘Which is why you kissed me senseless and...’ He’d touched her, she remembered. Everywhere. The memory sent fiery heat streaking through her. ‘And then you walked away.’

‘And why do you think I walked away, Tash?’

His intimate use of her name made her heart thud. ‘Because you discovered I was flat-chested? Because I had no idea what I was doing?’ His skill had left her trembling and boneless whereas she’d fumbled awkwardly, unsure of herself and of him.

‘I stopped because it was the right thing to do, and that is probably the only time in my life I’ve done the right thing, so you should be grateful, not angry,’ he confessed in a raw tone. ‘I didn’t know if you were a child or a woman. Damn it, I went into your bedroom to give you a message one day and your bed was covered in stuffed toys! One minute you were doing your homework, the next you were wearing a tight red dress designed to drive a man out of his mind. I wanted—well, never mind what I wanted. But I knew I had to do something drastic. That night of the ball I’d promised myself I was going to behave like a real prince. I was going to dance with you and not do anything else. But then we went out to the garden to get some fresh air and the next minute—’

‘You don’t need to spell it out.’

‘Believe me, walking away without looking back was the hardest thing I’ve ever had to do. And for what it’s worth, I’m sorry I hurt you, but at the time I couldn’t see any other way. I wanted you to hate me.’

‘You could have just told me you weren’t interested.’

‘I was interested. There was a chemistry between us I’d never experienced before. It was crazy, and—’ He broke off. ‘You were seventeen. Apart from anything else, it was barely legal.’

A warm glow burned low in her stomach. He’d wanted her, too. Tasha wrapped her arms around herself. ‘Plenty of people have sex at seventeen.’

‘You had your head in the clouds and your eyes on the stars. You were still more of a child than a woman and I had no idea how to handle someone like you. The women I mixed with were usually my age or older—heiresses, society princesses who’d been fed cynicism and experience with baby milk. You were different.’

‘And it didn’t occur to you to have that conversation with me?’ Tasha swung her legs off the bed and stalked over to him, her eyes boring into his. ‘I had a brain, Sandro. And a mind of my own.’

‘I did the decent thing.’

‘Decent? You broke my heart, Sandro. You...’ She spread her hands, appalled. ‘What the hell is decent about making a girl feel totally rubbish about herself? Please tell me that.’

‘I didn’t make you feel rubbish. I saved you from making a big mistake.’

‘Saved me? Do you think you could have “saved” me before you ripped off my red dress?’ Her face was scarlet at the memory. The humiliation. ‘Then when I was totally vulnerable and ready to trust you with anything and everything, you suddenly backed away and told me to come back when I’d grown a chest. But that wasn’t the worst of it. The worst of it wasn’t struggling to get my ballgown

back on so that a bunch of strangers didn't see me naked—and you broke the zip, by the way, so I never actually managed to get it back on—the worst was when you walked away from me straight into the arms of a tall, skinny blonde. When you kissed her I thought I was going to die.' It was good to remind herself what had happened, she thought grimly. Good to remind herself why she wasn't going to be seduced by the chemistry again.

'Tasha—'

'You knew I was watching, didn't you? At the time I assumed you didn't know I was still there, but now I see you did it for my benefit. You wanted me to see you kiss her.'

There was a stillness about him. A hardness about his eyes that she hadn't seen before. 'I've told you—I wanted you to hate me and forget about me. You were a kid.'

'Did I feel like a kid when you stripped me naked?'

'What do you think would have happened if I'd taken you that night?' His tone savage, he took her chin in his fingers and lifted her face to his. 'Think.'

'We would have made love,' she whispered. 'You would have been the first.'

His fingers tightened on her face. For a moment they stared at each other, sharing the memories through that single look. 'I would have broken your heart.'

The air dragged through her lungs and each beat of her heart felt painful. 'You did that anyway. But I should be grateful. Because of you I buried myself in my books. I gave up on men.'

'That's not what I heard.' His eyes were fixed on hers, his breathing heavy. 'Josh told me you were engaged once—'

Great. More humiliation. 'That didn't work out.' Trying not to think about the fact he'd obviously discussed her with Josh, Tasha pulled away from him. 'I'm not great with relationships. I'm the first to admit it.'

'That makes two of us.'

'You have endless relationships. I read about them all the time in the paper.'

'Those aren't relationships.'

'Right.'

'For what it's worth, I'm sorry I hurt you, Tash. I should have handled it a different way.' He adjusted his balance. 'Forgive me?'

'No! I don't forgive you.'

He was standing close to her. 'There's always been something between us and it hasn't gone away.'

'I'm older and wiser now.'

'You're still the same Tasha,' he breathed. 'Feisty, emotional, warm, giving—'

'Be quiet. I don't trust you when you're nice.'

'I'm always nice, tesoro.' His soft, velvety voice wrapped itself around her senses and she felt her willpower crumble.

'I'm still really angry with you,' she choked. 'I'm always going to be angry with you.'

'Even if I say sorry? Mi dispiace.'

She felt the warmth of his hand against her head and the heat of his body close to hers. He was a breath away from kissing her again and her eyes closed.

'No, Alessandro—please don't...' There was a tense silence and all she could hear was the sound of her own breathing. 'I mean it—I don't want you to touch me.'

For a moment she thought he was going to ignore her and then she felt his hand drop and he moved away. 'All right.' His voice was hoarse. 'I won't touch you until you ask me to.'

Disappointment mingled with relief, and the confusion of it infuriated her.

It wasn't logical to be disappointed when she was the one who'd asked him to move away.

'That will be never.' Tasha opened her eyes and looked at him, feeling as though the whole centre of her balance had shifted. 'I'd better find you another nurse.'

‘Why? Last time I looked my leg was still in a cast and my ribs were still bruised.’

‘I don’t think I can do this,’ she said desperately. ‘I thought it would be easy, but it isn’t. We’re — You’re...’

He was still standing close to her. The warmth of him, the scent of him, wound itself around her insides and sent anticipation skittering through her.

She swayed towards him and then she saw the dangerous burn of heat in his dark eyes and remembered how long it had taken her to recover last time she’d fallen for this man.

She was hopeless at relationships, wasn’t she? She didn’t want one. She had a career she loved. And she had to concentrate on sorting out the mess she’d made of her professional life.

‘You hurt me, Alessandro.’ Tasha forced the words past her lips. ‘I have more self-respect than to let you do it again. I’ll stay and look after you because I gave my word, but it’s not going to be any more than that.’

* * *

‘We thought maybe a carefully placed interview with a celebrity magazine, Your Highness, focusing on your hopes for the future...’

As his advisers droned on, Alessandro stared out of the window towards the waves. It was early morning and there was only one surfer in the waves.

Tasha. She was out there again, enjoying the swell beneath her board and the spray on her face. Seeking distraction...

It had been three days since their conversation and she’d kept their interaction on a strictly professional level, but that didn’t alter the tension that added an edge to the atmosphere whenever they were in a room together.

‘Your Highness?’

Alessandro dragged his gaze from contemplation of the surfer. ‘Sorry?’

His advisers exchanged glances. ‘We were suggesting ways in which you could potentially raise your profile even though you’re...’ one of them cleared his throat and looked at Alessandro’s leg ‘...incapacitated.’

‘Featuring in a celebrity magazine?’ Alessandro didn’t bother to conceal his contempt for the idea. ‘I don’t think so.’

‘It would be—’

‘Shallow and useless,’ Alessandro snapped. ‘I don’t want to be portrayed as some royal layabout. I run a successful multimillion-dollar business.’ Or he had until his brother’s death. Now a select team ran it in his place and he was only involved in the major decisions.

‘The important thing is that the people want to see you, Your Highness. They want to know their prince. They’ll pay an enormous sum for the interview.’ His chief adviser named a figure that made Alessandro shake his head in disbelief.

‘They’ll pay that much to take pictures of me lying on the sofa with my leg in plaster? The world has gone mad.’

‘The money would be given to your favourite charity, Your Highness, and that would be excellent publicity.’

‘And both contrived and manipulative.’ Alessandro felt bitter distaste for the workings of the media. ‘If they have that kind of money to throw around then let them just donate it to the charity in the first place. Cut out the middle man.’

‘Her Highness, the Princess Eleanor wants—’

‘I know what my mother wants.’ His tone cold, Alessandro stared at the thick file they’d brought with them. ‘What do you have there?’

‘We’ve outlined proposals for various ways of supporting charity and generally raising your profile in these...’ the man’s hands trembled slightly as he pushed the file across the table ‘...difficult

and limiting circumstances. The ideas have been approved by the palace. The one that Her Highness particularly wanted us to draw your attention to is—' He broke off, a sheen of sweat on his brow.

'Is?' Alessandro's silken prompt made the man flinch.

'Is the suggestion that you announce your engagement, sir.'

It was like being caught in an avalanche. The cold slammed into him, suffocating him and chilling him right to the bone.

When he didn't speak, the man cleared his throat. 'It's been a while, Your Highness, and everyone assumes—'

'I know what everyone assumes.' Alessandro barely recognised his own voice. He leaned back against the sofa, suddenly exhausted. 'Leave the file. I'll read it and tell you what I intend to do.'

'Yes, Your Highness.'

They left and Alessandro stayed where he was. The file remained unopened.

The thought of allowing sycophantic journalists and photographers into his private life made him cold inside. But the thing that made him coldest of all was the prospect of announcing his engagement. The last thing he wanted was marriage. Given the choice he would have stayed single rather than risk the sort of relationship his parents had. But he didn't have the choice, did he? It was up to him to produce the next generation to rule the Mediterranean island of San Savarre. It didn't matter whether he liked it or not.

Filling his brother's shoes.

He needed to talk to Miranda. He needed to see Miranda. But instead of seeing Miranda's sleek blonde hair and elegant clothes, he saw Tasha putting chilli in his food, undaunted by royal protocol. Hope I'm not supposed to bow or curtsy.

Tasha, walking away from him.

Since their heated, tense exchange they had hardly seen each other and Alessandro knew that she was staying out in the surf as long as possible to avoid him.

Telling himself that it was probably a good thing, Alessandro hobbled through to the bedroom and turned on the television in the hope of distraction.

By the time she arrived back from her session in the waves, he'd pulled himself together and he focused hard on the screen as she whirled through the apartment like a tornado, singing to herself as if nothing had happened between them.

Alessandro watched her steadily. She was putting on an act.

'Hi, there, hopalong!' she called to him as she stripped off the jacket she'd put on over her wetsuit and walked jauntily towards her bedroom. 'Surf's up today and this time I'm not saying that to make you want to thump me.'

'Tasha—'

'Need to get out of my wet things!'

He had to admire her performance. If he hadn't known better he would have said she was indifferent. But he knew she was far from indifferent. Watching her breeze through the house, he wondered how long she was going to keep up the pretence that nothing was happening between them. 'When I finally get this damn plaster off my leg, I'll join you.' They were going through the motions. Talking about surfing, even though that wasn't the topic uppermost in their thoughts.

He heard the soft hiss of water as she turned on the shower and immediately he started thinking about Tasha naked. And thinking about Tasha naked—

Cursing softly, he picked up the remote control and flicked on the sports channel.

'How did your meeting go?' She was standing in the doorway, wearing a T-shirt and a pair of shorts. Her hair was still wet from the shower and her feet bare. 'What do they want you to do?'

Get married.

'The usual stuff. Palace promotion. I'm afraid I'm not very good at being told what to do. I've always been a bit of a rebel that way. Antonio was the dutiful one. He was the Good Son.' He felt the bed give as she sat down next to him.

'You must miss him terribly. I know you were close.' Her voice was soft and for the time being she seemed to have abandoned her act. 'I can't begin to imagine how I'd cope if I lost a brother.'

'We both had our roles. I was the bad boy. Even as kids it was the same. It never occurred to me I'd have to play his role. The truth is, I'm not good at it. No matter how much my parents would like me to be, I'm not my brother.' Alessandro wondered why he was telling her this. He never talked about it. Not to anyone.

But talking to Tasha had always been easy. She had a way of making a person spill the contents of their minds.

'No, you're not your brother. You're you, an individual.' She hesitated. 'I suppose you have to find a way to do it that suits you. A way you're OK with. I mean, Josh and I are both doctors but we're not the same. We don't approach things the same way. He's very analytical whereas I'm more emotional. But I don't think either one of us is better or worse than the other. We're just different.'

'The problem is, my parents don't want different. If they could have chosen, I would have been the one who died in that car.'

'Don't say that.' She sounded shocked and then her forehead creased into a tiny frown. 'The other night when we were talking—you said it was your fault...'

Had he said that to her? 'Forget it.'

'But—'

'If you want to help me, you can fetch that big fat file from the table in the living room.' Alessandro gave a humourless laugh. 'I have to go through it and pick out which duties I'm up to performing. I need to kiss some babies in public.'

And he needed to finally announce his engagement.

'Kiss babies? Sounds like a recipe for disease transmission to me. I'll warn infection control. Now, lie back and let me take a look at your ribs to see how quickly you're healing. It will give me some idea of what you're capable of doing. It's no good opening a hospital and then finding yourself as a patient.'

Remembering what had happened the last time she'd touched him, Alessandro's eyes narrowed warily. 'No need. I'm fine.'

'I'm the one who's going to tell you if you're fine.' She pushed him back with the palm of her hand. 'And wipe that look off your face. I'm in doctor mode. I don't think about sex when I'm in doctor mode. And, anyway, I told you I'm not interested.' Ignoring his protests, she unbuttoned his shirt with brisk fingers. The fact that there was nothing lover-like about her expression did nothing to lessen his libido.

'What about the patient?' Alessandro gritted his teeth. 'What if the patient starts thinking about sex?'

'That would be seriously perverted. After all, I'm hurting you. The bruising is better.' Frowning, she trailed her fingers lightly over his chest. 'Does this hurt?'

'It depends which part of me you're asking about.'

'Don't be disgusting. This is why I chose to be a children's doctor.' But her voice was mild as she slid her fingers up to his shoulders and pressed. 'Does this hurt?'

'If I say yes, will you stop?'

'It obviously doesn't hurt as much as before because you're not doing that clenched-teeth thing. I think you're definitely on the mend.'

'Good, then can we—?'

'I just want to listen to your breath sounds.' She'd left her stethoscope on the table by his bed and as she reached for it her hair tumbled forward, brushing over his arm. 'I'm just going to—'

'So am I.' Driven past the point of control, Alessandro cupped her face in his hands and brought her mouth down on his. Her lips opened under his and he tasted shock mingled with sweetness. For a moment he thought she was going to pull away, but as his tongue slid against hers he felt her moan and tighten her grip on his shoulders. There was a delicious inevitability to the kiss that simply added to the excitement. It was the culmination of the tension and anticipation that had been building between them since the morning she'd walked into his hospital room.

Apparently forgetting all her protests about not wanting him to touch her, Tasha ripped at his shirt, hesitating as he gave a grunt of pain when her fingers made contact with bruised flesh. 'Sorry...' She panted the word against his mouth and pulled back but he grabbed her, his fingers hard on her arms.

'Don't stop. For God's sake, don't stop,' he groaned, his mind at war with his senses. 'Do you want to stop? You didn't want to do this—'

'Changed my mind—' Their mouths clashed, the kiss exciting and erotic, and he rolled her onto her back and then swore fluently as pain overtook him.

'This is—'

'A challenge. I have a better idea.' Desperate, she pushed him back gently and straddled him, her hair falling forward, brushing his bare chest. Her eyes were like dark, dangerous pools. 'I'm the one in charge. If I hurt you, tell me.'

'I think that's supposed to be my line.' Alessandro pulled her head down to his and took her mouth with explicit intent, tasting sweetness and a desperation that matched his.

'God, you're beautiful.' He groaned the words against her lips. 'How did I keep my hands off you all those years ago?'

'You didn't.' Frantic, she tore at his clothes and he tore at hers until only flimsy underwear separated them.

Panting, breathless, they kissed like two crazy people. They were so wrapped up in each other that they were oblivious to anything but the heat they were creating. Which was why they didn't hear the sound in the distance.

'Tasha? Alessandro? Anyone there?' Josh's voice came from the living room of the house and Tasha froze as if she'd been shot. Her eyes flew open and she dragged her mouth from the seductive pressure of his.

'Ohmigod!'

'Oops.' Hiding his frustration, Alessandro gave her a crooked smile and stroked her hair back from her face. 'It's your brother. That's not great timing. You might want to put your clothes on, tesoro. I don't want him to see you naked.'

CHAPTER SIX

'THIS is all your fault! I told you not to kiss me.' Tasha yanked her top back over her head and freed her hair. 'Stay there. You're not safe to be around. I was in doctor mode. How the hell did we end up naked?'

'Because the chemistry doesn't go away just because you're clutching a stethoscope. I want you, Tasha. Make no mistake about that.' His smooth, possessive declaration stopped her breathing. For an injured man he was far too threatening.

'I...' confused, she tumbled off the bed, grabbing her clothes. Glancing briefly at him, she collided with dark, burning eyes and felt her insides melt. 'No.' It was both a plea and a protest. 'Just—no.'

She'd promised herself that she wasn't going to do this. That she wasn't going to fall under his spell again.

She was a career-woman. She had a five-year plan and it didn't include falling for a wicked, sexy prince. She'd had herself under control. She'd been doing really well.

Until he'd kissed her...

'Damn you, Sandro. I need to get dressed before he comes looking for us.' Her face burning, Tasha grabbed the rest of her clothes, desperately conscious of those coal-black eyes following her every move. The heat was still in the room, simmering between them like a blast from the sun.

If he was bothered by the fact that her brother was in his house, he didn't show it. But Alessandro wasn't the sort to run from anything, she knew that. In fact, that was part of the problem. He had too much of the devil in him.

And that devil had drawn her just as it had when she was a teenager.

In her haste to drag on her clothes, Tasha couldn't untangle her jeans and they were halfway up her legs when her brother tapped on the door and opened it.

Tasha gave a whimper of horror. She didn't know which was worse—her brother seeing her semi-naked, or her brother seeing her semi-naked with Alessandro.

'Hey, you guys—I thought I'd drop by and see if you've killed each other yet...' His voice faded as he saw them and for a moment Tasha stared like a rabbit at oncoming headlights.

Oh, dear...

'Hi, Josh.' Hands shaking, she finally managed to zip her jeans. She felt as mortified as she had when Josh had caught her kissing the captain of the football team when she was sixteen. 'We weren't expecting you.' She tried to sound casual, as if dressing in Alessandro's room was an everyday occurrence. With any luck Josh would decide to turn a blind eye.

But one look at the flat, disapproving line of her brother's mouth told her this wasn't going to be her lucky day.

'What the hell are you doing?' Josh's voice was tight and the shock in his eyes turned dark as approaching storm clouds as he turned his gaze on Alessandro, who stared right back at him.

'Seducing your sister. If you have a problem with that, take it out on me, not her.'

'You—' Josh was across the room in a flash and Tasha hastily planted herself in front of Alessandro.

'No!' Her legs were shaking and she was mortified at being caught kissing, but most of all she was mortified that she'd been kissing Alessandro in the first place.

That definitely hadn't been part of the master plan.

'Josh, calm down! It's nothing to get into a sweat over.' Actually, it was, but the sweating was going to have to wait for another time because at the moment her brother looked dangerous and she felt a twinge of real fear.

'Calm down? Calm down?' Josh closed his hands over her arms and moved her bodily to one side, his voice thick with anger as he confronted his friend. 'I arrange for my sister to nurse you and this is how you repay me?'

Tasha bristled. 'Excuse me! I do have a mind of my own, you know. You might have been the one who suggested it, but—'

'Shut up, Tasha.' Josh growled the words. 'This isn't your business.'

Alessandro shifted his leg. 'It certainly isn't yours, my friend.'

He should have looked vulnerable, but he didn't. In fact, somehow he managed to look physically intimidating, even with broken bones and bruised ribs, Tasha thought absently. She wondered whether his natural air of command was something to do with being royalty or whether it was just the man.

Warrior Prince.

Josh was red in the face. 'It has everything to do with me. She's my sister!'

Tasha opened her mouth to protest again and realised that neither man was taking any notice of her.

Their eyes were fixed on each other in full combat mode. Alessandro stared Josh straight in the eye, the challenge blatant. 'And this time she's way above the age of consent. I repeat—it has nothing to do with you.'

This time? Tasha frowned at that remark but she didn't have time to dwell on it because the two men were squaring up for a fight.

Josh stepped forward, his expression ugly, his hands clenched. 'And that's all it takes for you, is it? She's old enough so that makes it OK? Well, I've got news for you, Alessandro, it doesn't make it OK. And she's leaving here right now.' Without turning his head, Josh pointed his finger at the door. 'Pack your bags, Tasha.'

Tasha raised her eyebrows, assuming he was joking. When she realised he wasn't, she put her hands on her hips and threw her head back. 'I will not pack my bags! Are you deranged? Listen to you!' Her own temper spilled over. 'I'm not six years old, Josh. I'm a grown woman, and if I want to kiss a man, I'll kiss him and I don't have to ask your permission first.' She vented her anger on Josh, even though she knew deep down that most of it should be directed at herself.

She'd been stupid, stupid, stupid...

'You're my sister.' His tone was raw and angry. 'Don't argue with me. Go and pack. This is between Alessandro and I.'

'Oh, for God's sake, will you listen to yourself? "This is between Alessandro and I,"' Tasha mimicked his tone. 'What are you going to do, Josh? Challenge him to a duel? Pistols at dawn? This is the twenty-first century. Get over yourself.'

'This isn't your business, Natasha.'

'Well, excuse me—' she emphasised each word '—but I was the one naked with him, not you. I think that makes it my business, not yours.'

Josh gave a low growl. 'You were naked with him?'

Yes, and she had no idea how it had happened. Clearly at some point during the burn of chemistry, her brain had disconnected itself from her body. But she didn't want to think about that right now. 'So what if I was? What is your problem? You do not just barge in here and tell me what to do. Do I ask you what's happening in your love life? Do I lecture you or ask you who you got naked with last night? When I saw you coming out of that on-call room a couple of weeks ago, having had a night of hot sex, did I demand to know who was in the room with you?'

Alessandro raised an eyebrow. 'Hey, Josh, you had a night of hot sex? Good man.'

'Shut up!' Brother and sister spoke simultaneously and Tasha stabbed Josh in the chest with her finger.

'I wanted to ask who she was, but I didn't because I respect your privacy and your ability to make your own decisions. I understand that you're an adult. If you want to have a one-night stand in the on-call room, that's up to you.'

There was a tense, frozen silence.

Josh's face had turned from scarlet to grey. 'It wasn't a one-night stand. And this isn't about me, it's about you.'

'Precisely.' Tasha folded her arms and pursed her lips. 'Which makes it my business, not yours. If I want to sleep with a man, I'll sleep with him. I don't need your permission.'

Josh's shoulders sagged and suddenly he looked exhausted. 'Fine.' His voice was brittle. 'You're right, of course. I apologise.'

Startled by the sudden change in him, Tasha frowned. One minute he was yelling at her and the next he looked as though his brain was on another planet. 'So—when I need a knight in shining armour, I'll text you.'

Alessandro started to laugh. 'I hate to break it to you, Josh, but I think your baby sister is all grown up and slaying her own dragons.'

Josh was still looking at Tasha. A tiny muscle flickered in his cheek and he shook his head slightly, as if trying to focus. 'Just as long as you know he will break your heart,' he said shakily. 'You'll fall in love, because that's what you do, and he'll smash you to pieces. I don't want that for

you. I don't want you loving someone you can't be with. I wouldn't wish that on anyone.' There was an anguished note to his tone that killed Tasha's anger like water on flame.

Instinct told her there was more to her brother's words than a throw-away comment.

I don't want you loving someone you can't be with.

Suddenly she knew that his explosion of emotion was driven by something deeper than her own indiscretion. Something much more personal.

'Josh...' Her voice faltered. 'I—'

'I'm just telling you to be careful, that's all.' Cutting her dead, he blanked the emotion and walked to the door. 'I'll leave the two of you alone. I'm sorry I interrupted. And who am I to give advice on relationships? It's a subject I know nothing about.'

His departure was more painful than his arrival.

Tasha felt her heart clench. Her brother was suffering and she sensed that his anguish went much deeper than concern about her.

Was this about the woman in the on-call room?

'Wait!' Tasha sprinted after him. 'Don't just walk off—for crying out loud, Josh, will you wait?'

He kept walking, talking over his shoulder as he strode through Alessandro's double-height living room. 'I need breakfast. I've been working all night. I have to get back to the hospital.'

'I'll make you breakfast.' Catching up with him, she caught his arm. 'The kitchen here is like a spaceship and I can do amazing things with eggs. Please.'

'I need to be on my own.' He shook her off and she saw the emptiness in his eyes as he detached from her. 'I'm sorry I disturbed you.'

Tasha felt a flash of exasperation but this time it was fuelled by real concern for her brother. 'It wasn't like that, Josh—honestly, it was nothing.' She didn't know what it was and she hadn't had time to work it out, but at the moment her priority was Josh. 'I want you to stay. I haven't seen you properly since I arrived. Let's chat. Catch up.'

'Sit down, Josh.' Alessandro's slightly accented drawl came from behind them. Tasha realised that while she and Josh had been arguing Alessandro had hauled himself from the bed and was now gripping the doorframe. His shirt—the shirt she'd ripped—hung loose around his body, exposing his bronzed muscled chest. 'I'm going mad trapped in this place. I need male conversation.'

Tasha gave a faint smile. 'Men don't have conversations. They just exchange sporting results.' But she was relieved that Alessandro had added his voice to hers.

Josh looked undecided and the look he gave Alessandro was cold. 'I should go—'

'There's a wealth of difference between what one should do and what one chooses to do,' Alessandro drawled. 'Sit down. Your sister isn't a bad cook, providing you keep her away from chilli.'

Tasha opened her mouth and closed it again. This wasn't the time to give him a lecture on the emancipation of women.

Josh relaxed slightly. 'Are you going to promise not to touch my sister again?'

'No.' Alessandro's tone was calm and he lifted his hand as Josh's eyes flared. 'But I promise to stop if she asks me to. Fair enough?'

Josh's mouth was a tight line. 'I don't think—'

'Hello? I'm over here!' Exasperated, Tasha waved at both of them. 'You don't need to talk about me as if I don't exist. In fact, you don't need to talk about me at all. Let's just drop the whole subject.' She was relieved to see her brother sprawl on the deep leather sofa.

As he ran his hand over his face she realised that he hadn't slept in a long time.

The sunlight pouring through the floor-to-ceiling windows simply accentuated the shadows under his eyes and the pallor of his skin. Why had it taken her so long to notice how awful he looked?

Because she'd been too busy getting her clothes on.

'So...' She sank down on the sofa next to him and curled her legs underneath her. 'You look wrecked.'

‘Thanks.’

‘Have you been working nights or something?’ Even as she asked the question, she dismissed it. Josh never had any trouble coping with work volume, so it couldn’t be that. Which meant it must be a woman. But the split with Rebecca had been mutual...

Using a process of elimination, she mentally ticked off the options and decided that it had to be something to do with the woman he’d had in the on-call room.

She’d thought at the time that he was behaving oddly.

Suddenly she wished she could send Alessandro into the kitchen so that she could question her brother in private.

‘So how’s the leg?’ His expression slightly less black, Josh looked at his oldest friend. ‘Are you healing?’

‘Yes, but not fast enough.’ Alessandro limped over to the other sofa and sat down. He’d mastered the art of keeping his movements as smooth as possible to reduce jarring. ‘I’m hoping this cast will be off soon, then I can get back to normal duties.’

‘Palace giving you a hard time?’

‘They are not amused,’ Alessandro said lightly, a sardonic smile on his face. ‘I’m supposed to be earning my keep, not “lounging” around here.’

‘You can’t do much with your leg like that.’ Josh’s gaze flickered to Tasha. ‘Except mess with my sister.’

‘Let’s not go there again.’ Alessandro leaned back against the sofa. His shirt flopped open, revealing smooth bronzed skin and well-defined muscle. Feeling suddenly dizzy, Tasha was about to tell him to button it up when she realised that he couldn’t because she’d ripped the buttons.

Concern for her brother mingled with the realisation that the chemistry between her and Alessandro was as powerful as ever.

So much for the childish crush theory. So much for proving to him that she was indifferent.

Satisfied that they weren’t going to kill each other, Tasha used the excuse of breakfast to escape to the kitchen.

Behind the safety of the closed door, she took refuge in mindless cooking to keep her mind off Alessandro. She didn’t want to think about Alessandro. She wanted to know what was wrong with Josh.

People said women were complicated, but at least women usually talked about their problems. Frustrated and grumpy, she chopped fruit into a bowl and then remembered she was feeding men and fried a stack of bacon.

Walking back into the living room with a heaped tray, she found the two men deep in conversation about sport. The earlier argument might never have happened.

They were lifelong friends, of course, and the bond showed as they talked easily, barely acknowledging Tasha as she deposited the tray on the table.

‘Hello? Earth to Neanderthals,’ she said cheerfully. ‘I’ve cooked it, but I draw the line at actually forking the food into your mouths. That bit you can manage yourselves if you really concentrate.’

‘Thanks, Tasha.’ Josh sat forward and helped himself to bacon. ‘I can’t be long. They’re holding a prince-and-princess party on the children’s ward this afternoon and I promised to dress up as a prince. Which means I have a pile of work to get finished this morning.’

Tasha felt her insides tighten at the mention of the children’s ward. She missed it dreadfully.

Being with Alessandro had distracted her slightly from her life, but now reality was back with full force. What if she couldn’t find another job? What if she’d messed everything up for good?

Oblivious to her anxieties, Alessandro was laughing at Josh. ‘You trained for all those years to pretend to be a prince?’

‘It isn’t funny. I should have said no.’

‘So why didn’t you?’

He hesitated. 'Because a friend asked me. There are some kids who have been on the unit for ages—they're bored and need some distraction.' Josh bit into his sandwich. 'Someone came up with the idea of having a prince-and-princess tea party so that they can dress up. Tiaras—that sort of thing. Because I'm not officially working today, I'm supposed to arrive halfway through dressed as Prince Charming.'

Tasha slid her hands round her mug of tea. 'You're kidding.'

'I did Father Christmas last year.' Josh wiped his fingers on a napkin. 'What's the difference?'

'Is that a serious question?' Alessandro was still laughing. 'One is fat and wears a red coat. The other is suave and capable of slaying dragons.'

Tasha sat with the mug halfway to her mouth, watching the way Alessandro's eyes shone and his cheeks creased when he laughed.

He was the sexiest man she'd ever met.

It was just as well Josh couldn't read her mind.

'No dragons at our tea party. This bacon is good, Tasha. I can't remember when you last cooked for me. Usually you glare at me and tell me it's not women's work. Are you all right?' Josh frowned at his sister. 'Why are you staring at Alessandro?'

'I'm keeping an eye on his colour,' she said smoothly. 'If he does too much, he gets tired.'

'He didn't look that tired when I arrived.' His tone dry, Josh helped himself to more bacon. 'He looked as though he had all his faculties. He won't need you for much longer.'

Tasha wondered if her brother was having another dig. 'I'll stay until he's able to cope without help.'

'Have you applied for any jobs?'

Tasha leaned forward and stacked the plates. 'Not yet.'

'Why not?'

'Because I don't know what I'd say in the interview about why I left my last job. I'm worried everyone is going to think I'm a troublemaker.' Tasha rescued the ketchup before it could tumble onto the floor. 'I miss medicine. I miss the kids. I miss being part of a unit. I miss—all of it. I'm a doctor. I want patients.' Aware that Alessandro was no longer smiling, she suddenly wished she hadn't said anything. 'Sorry, it's just that I had this great career plan and then—poof—I managed to blow the whole thing. Well done, Tasha.' She knew that her light tone hadn't fooled them. 'Anyway, I don't know why we're talking about me. I already have a job for the time being. Preventing Alessandro from trying to run before he can walk.'

'I can tell you're a paediatric doctor. You're treating me like a kid.'

He wasn't a kid at all. He was a grown man and she was horribly aware of every bronzed, handsome inch of him. She'd thought her anger would keep her safe, but her anger had vanished. She'd thought her feelings were all from the past. But the explosion of passion that had erupted between them had nothing to do with the past and everything to do with the present.

Fear flashed through her. If she let him, he'd hurt her again. Just as he had the first time. And she wasn't going to let a man do that to her...

The sooner she found herself a paediatric job, the better.

'You shouldn't feel insecure. You're a good doctor, Tasha.' Josh stole the last piece of bacon. 'Remember that little girl you saw on the unit that day you came to my office to tell me you'd resigned? Turned out you were right. It wasn't hay fever. She had a congenital heart defect.'

Alessandro looked bemused. 'I didn't think Tasha worked on your unit.'

'She doesn't. But she walked past this girl and saw something that none of my doctors had seen.' Josh gave a smile. 'She's very intuitive, my baby sister.'

Snapping out of her dream, Tasha stared at him. 'The girl had a congenital heart defect? You're sure?'

'She's already seen the cardiologist. You probably saved her life.'

‘Oh.’ She felt an ache of sympathy for the child and the mother. ‘I wish it had just been hay fever. Poor little thing.’ Suddenly she missed her job even more. She wanted to be the one looking after the child, supporting her and helping her through a difficult time. She could make a difference, she knew she could.

‘This prince-and-princess party...’ Alessandro eased his leg into a more comfortable position. ‘That must be something I can help with.’

Josh glanced at him with a frown. ‘You?’

‘You should be saving lives, not dressing up as a prince. I don’t have your medical skills, but I can do the prince bit.’ His tone was loaded with irony. ‘I’ve never dressed up in a cloak or worn a crown, but if it would help the kids I can do it. Provided someone keeps the paparazzi at a distance. I’m doing it for the children, not the press.’

‘Why keep them at a distance?’ Tasha jumped to her feet. ‘It’s a brilliant idea. Your mother wants some good publicity—what better than the prince visiting the children’s ward? You can autograph stuff for them. They can have pictures taken with you. They’d love that. I’ll come with you.’ Better to be on the children’s ward as a visitor than not be there at all, she reasoned.

‘How far from the car to the ward? I can’t walk that far on this damn leg of mine.’

Tasha opened her mouth to suggest a wheelchair but took one look at the set of his jaw and closed her mouth again. Alessandro would drag himself across the ground by his fingernails before he’d agree to use a wheelchair.

‘It’s a great idea. We can drop you right outside. And Tasha can come with you.’ Josh nodded. ‘I’ll have a word with the staff and let them know you’re coming.’

‘I’ve been thinking about a job in NICU. Is there someone there I could talk to?’

Alessandro frowned. ‘What’s NICU?’

‘Neonatal intensive care unit.’ Josh shifted in his chair. ‘Talk to Megan Phillips.’

Tasha noticed that her brother’s tone had altered and wondered if it had anything to do with Megan. Glancing up, she met Alessandro’s steady dark gaze. Clearly he was thinking the same thing. He smiled and that slow, sexy smile connected straight to her insides. Her stomach swooped and plunged, the chemistry between them as electrifying and terrifying as ever. Staring into his mahogany eyes, she opened her mouth to speak but he spoke first.

‘You’ve got me through the worst bit. Thanks to you, they let me out of that hospital. I can manage now. If you want to leave, leave.’

He was giving her a choice. And she knew it wasn’t just about caring for him.

He was making her decide whether to leave or not.

Both men were looking at her expectantly and Tasha swallowed. She didn’t know how she was going to answer until the words left her mouth.

‘I’m not in the habit of letting people down. I’ll stay until you’re fully mobile, just as I promised.’ It was easy to convince herself that that was the reason she was staying. ‘But I do need to be looking for a full-time job. I thought I’d explore NICU—except that I’m not sure I’ll get a reference.’

‘You will. I made a few phone calls this week.’ Josh leaned back against the sofa. ‘Turns out you had a lot of support at the unit. Questions are being asked. People are enraged that you were allowed to resign.’

‘Really? Why didn’t you say so before?’ Tasha brightened. ‘Enraged? Oh, I’m so pleased.’

Alessandro lifted an eyebrow. ‘You want people to be enraged?’

‘I want them to care that I’ve gone, yes. I’m human enough to want that. And I’m human enough to need to be told I did the right thing—that others would have done the same. I would love an apology from him,’ she sniffed, ‘but I doubt I’ll get that.’

‘You won’t. They guy’s an idiot. Forget about him.’ Josh leaned forward. ‘So, about the prince-and-princess party...’

Energised by the knowledge that people were supporting her, Tasha reached for her handbag. 'Leave that to me. I'm going to pay a visit to the dressing-up shop in St Piran. Alessandro and I will see you back at the hospital.'

* * *

He'd given her the opportunity to leave and yet she'd chosen to stay.

Alessandro watched Tasha as she gathered bags and put them in the car. Her coat was buttoned from neck to hem and he wondered why she was wearing a long coat when it wasn't cold.

'I've bought tiaras and all sorts of props that should be useful.' She slid his crutches into the boot. 'Be careful as you get in. Sit down, then I'll move your legs.'

She gently moved his leg into the car and helped him with his seat belt. 'Is that comfortable?'

It was agony, but even agony wasn't enough to dampen his response to her.

'Alessandro?' She lifted her eyes to his face and chemistry immediately flickered between them. Flushing, she drew back sharply. 'Right. Well, if you're not too uncomfortable then we'll get going.'

'Tasha, listen—'

'The kids are waiting.' The car door slammed and Alessandro winced as pain rocked through his leg. Fine. So they'd go through the day pretending they hadn't stripped each other half-naked.

'Did you agree to stay with me just to annoy your brother?' He watched her as she slid into the driver's seat. 'If you want to take a job at the hospital, you should take it. I can manage.'

'I promised to look after you until you're out of the cast and that's what I'm going to do. And, anyway, I don't really want to work in the same hospital as Josh. You've seen what he's like. He'll be banging on my door, questioning every decision I make. We'd drive each other crazy.' She drove fast and Alessandro found himself clenching his teeth.

'Do you know these roads well?'

'Yes.'

'Good, because if there are any surprises behind that blind bend, you're about to smack into it head first.'

She shifted gears smoothly. 'Do I make you nervous? Big, tough guy like you?'

An image of tangled metal lodged itself in his head. 'I'm not a good passenger.' He didn't elaborate but she immediately trod on the brakes.

'Sorry,' she muttered. 'I didn't think.'

Her sensitivity surprised him, although it shouldn't have. She'd always been sensitive, hadn't she? Too sensitive.

He braced himself for her to question him about the accident that had killed his brother but instead she smoothly changed the subject.

'Did you notice anything strange about Josh?'

'Strange in what way?'

'You didn't think he was tense and on edge?'

'He'd just caught his sister naked with a man.' He watched as the colour bloomed in her cheeks. 'That was reason enough for him to be tense.'

'Yes, but it wasn't that. It was something else. Something personal. Did you see his face when he made that little speech about loving someone you couldn't be with?'

'He's worried about you.'

'I'm not sixteen years old.' This time her gear change was vicious. 'Why do men always think a woman has to be in love? This is the twenty-first century. I don't want love. The most important thing to me is my career. And, anyway, a woman can have sex without being in love.' The words spilled out of her and he watched her steadily, wondering why he wasn't convinced.

'We didn't have sex, Tasha.'

The gears crunched again. 'I'm well aware of that. All I'm saying is that if we had had sex then it wouldn't have had anything to do with being in love, and I can't imagine why you'd even

think that. Women can have sex like a man. Without emotional involvement. I don't want emotional involvement.'

'Right.' Alessandro tried to imagine Tasha doing anything without emotional involvement, and failed. Her emotions were involved in everything, from cooking chilli to handling her stethoscope. 'So, if that's the case, why are you worried about what Josh said?'

'There's something wrong with him. He's been acting really strangely since I caught him in the on-call room that day I came to see you...' Without breaking the conversation she flicked the indicator and turned into the hospital car park. 'And I know he had someone in the room with him, but he was hiding the fact. He didn't want me to know. But when I saw him, he looked all lit up inside. As if something special had happened. There was an energy about him that I haven't seen for years.'

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