



Charlotte Hawkes

Unwrapping the Neurosurgeon's
HEART



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MEDICAL

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**Unwrapping The
Neurosurgeon's Heart**

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At the heart of a playboy... ...is the man of her dreams. ER doc Anouk Hart wishes she could ignore her traitorous body's reaction to high-flying neurosurgeon Solomon Gunn. Yet beneath his playboy reputation, Anouk sees flashes of compassion which are even more dangerous than his charm! Especially when the warmth of Sol's Christmas spirit starts to make her long to unleash the real Solomon Gunn, and keep him by her side forever!

Содержание

Note to Readers	7
CHAPTER ONE	8
CHAPTER TWO	15
CHAPTER THREE	22
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	28

At the heart of a playboy...
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ER doc Anouk Hart wishes she could ignore her traitorous body's reaction to high-flying neurosurgeon Solomon Gunn. Yet beneath his playboy reputation, Anouk sees flashes of compassion, which are even more dangerous than his charm! Especially when the warmth of Sol's Christmas spirit starts to make her long to unleash the real Solomon Gunn and keep him by her side forever!

Born and raised on the Wirral Peninsula in England, **CHARLOTTE HAWKES** is mum to two intrepid boys who love her to play building block games with them and who object loudly to the amount of time she spends on the computer. When she isn't writing—or building with blocks—she is company director for a small Anglo/French construction firm. Charlotte loves to hear from readers, and you can contact her at her website: charlotte-hawkes.com.

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Unwrapping the Neurosurgeon's Heart
Charlotte Hawkes

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UNWRAPPING THE NEUROSURGEON'S HEART

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To my very first hero, who introduced me
to mountains, maths and Marmite—love you, Dad xx

Contents

[Cover](#)

[Back Cover Text](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Booklist](#)

[Title Page](#)

[Copyright](#)

[Note to Readers](#)

[Dedication](#)

[CHAPTER ONE](#)

[CHAPTER TWO](#)

[CHAPTER THREE](#)

[CHAPTER FOUR](#)

[CHAPTER FIVE](#)

[CHAPTER SIX](#)

[CHAPTER SEVEN](#)

[CHAPTER EIGHT](#)

[CHAPTER NINE](#)

[CHAPTER TEN](#)

[CHAPTER ELEVEN](#)

[CHAPTER TWELVE](#)

[CHAPTER THIRTEEN](#)

[CHAPTER FOURTEEN](#)

[Extract](#)

[About the Publisher](#)

CHAPTER ONE

‘ANOUK?’ THE RESUS WARD’S sister poked her head around the Resus bay curtain. ‘Are you running the seven-year-old casualty who fell off a climbing frame?’

‘I am.’ Anouk spun quickly around. ‘Is she in?’

‘Yes, the HEMS team are on the roof now.’

‘Thanks.’ Nodding grimly, Anouk turned back to her team for a final check. ‘Everyone happy? Got your gear?’

The only thing she was missing was the neurosurgeon. The department had been paged ten minutes ago but they must be swamped up there. Still, she needed a neurosurgeon for the young kid. Sucking in a steadying breath, she ducked out of the bay, and slammed straight into Moorlands General’s hottest commodity.

Solomon Gunn.

Six feet three of solid muscle, more suited to a Hollywood kickboxing stunt guy than the average neurosurgeon, didn’t even shift under her flexing palms as the faintest hint of a woody, citrusy scent filled her nostrils.

Her skin prickled instantly. *How could it not?* It was all Anouk could do to snatch her arms down to her sides and take a step back, telling herself that the alien sensation currently rolling through her was nothing more than a basic physiological reaction.

Instinct. Nothing more.

She couldn’t possibly be so unlucky as to have the Smoking Gun as the neurosurgeon on her case, could she? And, for the record, she didn’t think much of the idiot who had bestowed that moniker on him. Not that it would be unlucky for the poor girl who had fallen, of course. As he was one of the up-and-coming stars of the region, the girl couldn’t be in better hands than Sol’s.

If only the guy weren’t so devastating when it came to women who weren’t in his care.

He practically revelled in his reputation as a demigod neurosurgeon and out-of-hours playboy. And still it seemed that almost every woman in the hospital wanted him.

Including, to Anouk’s absolute shame, herself.

Not that she would ever, *ever* let another living soul know that fact. Solomon Gunn was the antithesis of absolutely everything she should want in a man.

Yet, caught in the rich, swirling, cognac-hued depth of his gaze, something inside her shifted and rolled deliciously, nonetheless.

She’d only been at Moorlands General for a couple of months and been in Resus when Sol had, but so far they’d never worked together on the same casualty. A traitorous part of her almost hoped that tonight was different.

‘Dr Anouk Hart, I believe.’

‘Yes. Are you here for my case?’ Self-condemnation made her tone sharper than she might otherwise have intended.

‘I don’t know.’ He grinned, as though he could see right through her. ‘Which is your case?’

‘Seven-year-old girl; climbing frame,’ she bullet-pointed.

‘Then I’d say you’re in luck. I’m here for you.’

Her heart kicked. Anouk told herself it was frustration, nothing more.

‘Lucky me,’ she managed, rolling her eyes.

‘Lucky both of us.’

He flicked his eyes up and down her in frank appraisal. On another man it would have appeared arrogant, maybe even lewd. But Sol wasn’t *another man*; he pulled the act off in such a way that it left her body practically sizzling. An ache spearing its way right down through her until she felt it right *there*. Right between her legs.

What was the matter with her?

The man was damned near lethal.

'You might be accustomed to women throwing themselves at you.' She jerked her head over his shoulder to where a group of her colleagues was shamelessly clustered around the central desk and shooting him flirty smiles and applauding gestures. 'However, I certainly don't intend to be one of them.'

'Oh, they're just enjoying the home-made mince pies I brought in.'

'Sorry, what?'

'It is Christmas, Anouk.' His grin ramped up and she almost imagined she could feel those straight, white teeth against her skin. 'No need to be a Grinch.'

He couldn't have any idea quite how direct a hit his words were. She hated Christmas. It held no happy memories for her. It never had. Not that she was about to let Sol know that.

'Home-made? By whom? Your housekeeper?'

'My own fair hands.' He waggled them in her face and she tried not to notice how utterly masculine they looked. Not exactly the delicate hands people usually associated with a surgeon.

Those hands had worked magic on hundreds of patients. But it wasn't quite the same kind of magic she was imagining now.

Anouk blinked hard and tried to drag her mind back to the present.

'That's as may be, but I don't think it's your mince pies they're interested in.'

'Oh, I don't know. They're pretty good, if I do say so myself.'

'So modest.' She snorted. 'Well, if you've stopped playing *Great British Bake-Off* with your home-made mince pies...'

'"*Playing Great British Bake-Off*"?' He flashed a wolfish smile, which made her skin positively goosebump. 'I would ask if you're passive aggressive with everyone, or if it's just me, but, given the reputation you've already garnered amongst your colleagues in the few months you've been here, I fear I already know the answer.'

She shouldn't take the bait. She *mustn't*.

'And what reputation would that be?' she demanded, regretting it instantly.

His eyes gleamed mischievously. She half expected him not to answer her.

'Focussed, dedicated, a good doctor.'

'Oh.' She bit her lip. 'Well...then...thanks.'

'Even if you do walk around like you've got a stick up your behind.'

'I beg your pardon?' Heat flooded her cheeks. She could feel it.

'Sorry.' He held his hands up as though appeasing her. 'Their words, not mine. But you have to admit, you are a little bit uptight. A little *prim and proper*.'

She opened her mouth to reply, then snapped it closed again.

If she was honest, she'd heard worse about herself. At best, she was considered to be a good—even great—doctor to her patients, but cold and unapproachable to her colleagues. A bit aloof.

The only person who knew different was Saskia; her best friend since their Hollywood A-list mothers had declared each other their nemesis, over twenty-five years ago.

'Of course, *I* don't think that,' Sol continued, clearly enjoying himself. Not that she blamed him—he couldn't have any idea of her inner turmoil. 'But then, most women have a way of...melting around me.'

'How do you get away with that?' She shook her head. 'Do you actually enjoy living up to all the worst stereotypes of your own Lothario reputation?'

'Let me guess, in your book that's wrong?'

'Oh, you're incorrigible,' Anouk snapped. 'Though I assume you'll take that as a compliment.'

'You mean it wasn't?' He clasped his hand over his heart, laughing. 'I'm cut to the quick.'

A deep, rich, sinful sound, which had no right to flood through her the way it did. She hated how her body reacted to him, despite every order from her brain to do the opposite. Tipping her head back, she jutted her chin out a fraction and ignored him.

‘All we know so far is that we have a seven-year-old on her way having fallen approximately nine feet off a climbing frame in a park...’

‘She landed on her head and suffered loss of consciousness for a minute or so,’ he concluded. ‘The heli-med team are on the roof now and our response team has gone to meet them.’

‘Right.’ She didn’t do a very good job of covering her surprise. ‘So, if you could just stop making eyes at the female contingent of our team long enough to concentrate on the casualty, that would be great.’

The amusement disappeared from his face in a split second. His tone was more than a little cool.

‘I *always* put my patients ahead of anything else.’

She actually felt chastened.

‘Yes... I... I know that.’ Anouk flicked out a tongue to moisten her lips. ‘I apologise, and I take it back. Your professional reputation is faultless.’

Better than faultless. He was an esteemed neurosurgeon, rapidly heading to the top of his field.

‘It’s just my personal reputation that languishes in muddier waters?’ he asked, apparently reading her thoughts.

But at least the smile was back, his previous disapproval seemingly forgotten. Still, Anouk was grateful when the doors at the far end of the trauma area pulled open with a hiss and the helicopter team brought their patient in.

In an instant, Anouk was across the room and in the Resus bay, vaguely aware that Sol had fallen in quickly beside her.

‘This is Isobel, she’s seven years old and normally fit and well. No allergies or medications, and up to date with her jabs. Around one hour ago she was climbing on a rope basket climbing frame and was approximately nine feet up when she had an altercation with another child and fell, landing on her face or head with a loss of consciousness of perhaps one minute. She has a laceration above her left eyebrow and she has also lost two of her teeth.’

‘Okay.’ Anouk nodded, stepping forward. ‘Thanks.’

‘This is Isobel’s sister, Katie.’ The doctor turned to where another young girl was standing, and Anouk didn’t know when Sol had moved but he was next to her. ‘Katie was with her sister when she fell, and has accompanied her whilst Mum is on her way.’

Strangely, Katie lifted her head to Sol and offered a tiny, almost imperceptible shake of her head, but Anouk didn’t have time to dwell on that; she needed to help her patient.

‘Hi, Isobel, I’m Anouk, the doctor who is going to be looking after you. Do you remember what happened, sweetheart?’ She turned to her team, who had already stepped into action. ‘Two drips in, guys?’

Isobel muttered something incoherent.

‘Can you open your eyes for me, Isobel?’ Anouk asked, checking her young patient’s pupils. ‘Good, that’s a good girl. Now, can you take a really big, deep breath and hold it for me?’

She palpitated the girl’s chest and stomach.

‘You’re doing really well, sweetheart. Can you talk to me? Have you got any pain in your tummy?’

‘No,’ Isobel managed tearfully. ‘Katie?’

‘Your sister is right here, my love. We just need to check you over to see if you hurt yourself when you fell, and then she’ll be able to come and talk to you.’

‘Yep, got blood,’ one of her team confirmed.

‘Great. Okay, and let’s give her two point five milligrams of morphine.’ She looked back at the child. ‘That will help with the pain, all right, sweetheart? Good girl.’

Quickly and efficiently Anouk and her team continued to deal with their patient, settling the girl, doing their observations, and making her as comfortable as they could. Finally, Anouk had a chance to update the girl's mum, but it was still only the sister, who couldn't have been more than ten or eleven herself, who was waiting outside the bay. Anouk remembered how Isobel had asked for Katie, and not her mum.

'Katie, isn't it?' Anouk asked softly, going over to the worried little girl and sitting on the plastic seat next to her.

The girl nodded.

'Mum isn't here yet?'

'No.' Katie shook her head before fixing Anouk with a direct gaze, her voice holding a level of maturity that set warning bells off in Anouk's head. 'But you can talk to me. I'm eleven and I can answer any questions you need me to about my sister. I'm responsible for her.'

An image of Sol and Katie exchanging a concerned look crossed her mind.

Was the girls' mum at work? Uninterested? She knew those feelings all too well. Still, she had her own protocol to follow now.

'I understand that, and you seem like a very good sister,' Anouk confirmed, standing back up. 'But I think it's better if I talk to your mum when she gets here.'

'No, wait.' Katie stood up quickly, glancing at her and then across to the team.

It took a moment for Anouk to realise that she wasn't looking at her sister so much as looking at Sol.

'You know each other?'

'I need to speak to him.' Katie nodded.

'He's just looking after your sister right now.'

'I know, he's a neurosurgeon.' The young girl clucked her tongue impatiently as though she thought Anouk was treating her like a baby. 'And you're probably going to be taking Izzy to scan her head and see if there is any damage from her fall.'

Anouk tried not to show her surprise.

'We will be.'

'Well, when he is free, Sol will come and talk to me,' Katie said confidently, but Anouk didn't miss the fear that flashed briefly in the girl's eyes.

As if sensing the moment, Sol lifted his head and looked straight at them. Then, with a quick word to one of the senior nurses in the team, he made his way over.

'You doing okay, Katie?'

Quiet, professional, compassionate. It had been one thing to see Sol working from across a ward, to know of his reputation as a good doctor, a good neurosurgeon, but it was another actually to witness it first-hand.

Her mother had always ranted about the beauty of a brilliant actor playing a different role from the one the world was used to them adopting. That moment when the audience suddenly realised that it had forgotten who the actor was and got lost in the character.

Watching Sol at work made it almost impossible to remember his reputation as a womaniser.

And it certainly wasn't helping to smother her inconvenient crush on him.

'The doctor won't tell me anything,' Katie replied flatly.

'I'd rather explain to Mum.' Anouk bit back her irritation as Katie and Sol exchanged a glance, hating the feeling that she was missing a vital piece of information.

'Bad day?' he asked Katie simply.

She bit her lip. 'She can't even get up today. But she was resting so I thought Izzy and I could have an hour at the park before we went back and started our chores. There's no way she will be able to get here on her own.'

'I'm on call so I can't leave.' He rubbed his face thoughtfully. 'But I could call Malachi. He can help if she'd be happy about that?'

'Yes.' Katie's relief was evident. 'Please call him. I'll text Mum.'

Shifting her weight from one foot to the other, Anouk tried to control her heart, which had decided to pick up its pace as she listened to the conversation. It was aggravating feeling as though she wasn't entirely following, but the tone of it seemed all too painfully familiar. Or was she just reading too much into it?

Still, she had nowhere else to be for the moment; a nurse was with Isobel and they were waiting on a few results before they could move her to CT.

'In the meantime,' Sol's voice dragged her back to the moment, 'let me try to explain to Dr Anouk here why she can speak to you.'

Katie narrowed her eyes uncertainly.

'You're going to have to trust her,' Sol cajoled. 'I do.'

They were just words to ease the concerns of a kid, Anouk knew that, and yet she was helpless to stop a burst of...*something* from going off inside her chest.

'The more I understand, Katie, the more I can help.' She fixed her gaze on the young girl, whose penetrating stare was unsettling.

'Okay,' Katie conceded at last, before turning back to Sol. 'But you'll call Malachi?'

'Right now,' Sol confirmed.

For a moment it looked as though her face was about to crumple, the pressure of the decisions clearly getting to her. But then she pulled herself together, sinking down onto her chair and fishing out a mobile phone to begin texting. As if there wasn't time for self-indulgent emotions.

As if she was a lot older than her years with far too much adult responsibility.

Anouk fought back the wave of grief that swelled inside her. All too familiar. All too unwelcome. Coming out of nowhere.

'Anouk.'

She snapped her head up to find that Sol was beckoning her, his eyes on Katie to ensure she was preoccupied as he moved across the room.

Wordlessly, Anouk followed, letting him lead her around the curtain and into the central area, keeping his voice low.

'Katie and Isobel are young carers. They look after their mum, who suffers from multiple sclerosis. Some days are good, some not so good. Today, unfortunately, is a bad day, which means Michelle can't even get out of bed without their help.'

'I see.' Anouk breathed in as deeply and as unobtrusively as she could and tried to fight back the sense of nausea that rushed her. Her own situation had been vastly different from the girls', but the similarities were there. 'Dad?'

'Died in an RTA two years ago. He'd just popped out to get cough mixture.'

She exhaled sharply, the injustice of it scraping at her.

'Who's Malachi?'

'My brother. He'll go round and help Michelle. See if there's anything he can do to get her here. Otherwise you keep me informed throughout and we'll agree as much as we can tell Katie. She's mature, but she's still only eleven and she has enough to deal with.'

'Isn't there anyone else?' She already knew the answer, but she still had to ask. 'Any other family member?'

'No. Let me see what I can do but there are a few people I could call as a last resort. They're from the centre and they can at least sit with Katie so that she isn't alone until my shift finishes or I can get someone to cover for me.'

‘Why would you do that?’ She folded her arms across her chest as though the action could somehow contain the churn of...*feelings* that were swirling inside her, so close to the surface that she was afraid they might spill out.

She wanted to pretend that it was just empathy for Katie, the familiarity of a young girl who had far too much responsibility for her tender age. But she had a feeling it was also to do with Sol. His obvious concern and care for the young girl and her sister and mother was irritatingly touching.

She was ashamed to admit that she’d been attracted enough to the man when she’d thought he was just a decent doctor but also a gargantuan playboy. Seeing this softer side to him was only making the attraction that much stronger.

‘Why not do it?’ He shrugged and the fact that he was clearly hiding something only made Anouk want to get to know him that much more.

It was galling, really.

Checking on little Isobel and consulting with her team was the opportunity Anouk needed to regroup, and as she worked she let the questions about Sol fall from her head, even as he worked alongside her. Her patient was her priority, as always. Soon enough it was time to take the girl to CT to scan her head and neck.

‘Can I go with her and hold her hand?’ asked Katie, the concern etched over her face jabbing into Anouk’s heart.

She usually let parents go in to be with their child, but unnecessarily exposing an eleven-year-old to ionising radiation, however short a burst, was different.

‘How about if I go in?’ Sol announced over her shoulder. ‘You can wait outside but I’ll hold Izzy’s hand for you?’

Katie eyed him slowly for a moment.

‘Okay, thank you,’ she conceded at length.

‘Great, you walk with Anouk here and your sister. Okay?’

Something jolted in Anouk’s chest at the weight of Sol’s gaze on her.

‘Fine with me. You’re going to get leaded?’

‘I thought I might. They probably won’t let me in the room otherwise.’

He made it out to be a light-hearted joke, but Anouk knew better. Usually only parents were allowed to accompany their younger children into the room when the imaging was in progress.

‘You don’t have any patients up on Neurology?’

‘I’ll sort it. The only one I’m worried about right now is a Mrs Bowman, but I’ll deal with that.’

The fact that Sol was putting himself into that position in lieu of the girls’ mother said a lot more about him than Anouk expected.

She couldn’t shake the impression that it was also more than he would normally like a colleague to know about him. Why did she feel compelled to suddenly test him?

‘Boost your reputation around here to compassionate hero as well as playboy, huh?’ she murmured discreetly, so only Sol heard.

He glanced at her sharply, then formed his mouth into something that most people might take to be a smile. She knew better.

‘Something like that,’ he agreed with deliberate cheerfulness that instantly revealed to Anouk that this was the last stunt he wanted to be pulling.

He didn’t fool her. She couldn’t have said how she knew it, but Sol was doing this for Isobel and for Katie, *despite* the fact that it was going to make him all the more eligible within the hospital’s pool of bachelors, and not *because* of it. Which suggested there was more to Sol Gunn than she had realised.

Anouk wished fervently that the concept weren’t such an appealing one.

‘Right.’ Shoving the knowledge from her head, she smiled brightly at Katie and then at her patient. ‘Let’s get you to CT, shall we, Izzy? Don’t worry, your sister will be right beside you until you go in, and then again the moment you come back out.’

And that sharp jab behind her eyes as Katie slipped past her to walk next to the gurney and take her sister’s hand in her own wasn’t tears, Anouk told herself fiercely.

Just as she wasn’t softening in her opinion of the Smoking Gun. She couldn’t afford to soften, because that would surely render him more perilous than ever.

CHAPTER TWO

‘WHAT’S THE STORY, BRATIK?’

Lost in his own thoughts, a plastic cup of cold, less than stellar vending-machine coffee cupped in his hands, Sol took a moment to regroup from the out-of-the-blue question from his big brother.

Then another to act as though he didn’t know what Malachi was getting at.

‘The scan revealed no evidence of any bleed on the brain and Izzy hadn’t damaged her neck or broken her jaw in the fall, which we’d suspected, hence why she’s been transferred to Paediatric Intensive Care. Maxillofacial are on their way to deal with the teeth in Izzy’s mouth that are still loose. We have the two that came out in a plastic lunchbox someone gave to Izzy, but I think they’re baby teeth so that shouldn’t be too much of an issue. We won’t know for sure until some of the swelling goes down.’

They had left Izzy with her mother and sister for some privacy, but, without having to exchange a word, both brothers had chosen to remain on hand. The girls’ mother was going to need help, if nothing else.

‘I know all that,’ Malachi cut in gruffly, as though it pained him to ask. ‘The paediatric doctor told me. I was asking what the story was with you, numb-nuts.’

An image of Anouk popped, unbidden, into Sol’s head, but he shoved it aside.

‘Don’t know what you’re talking about.’

It was only a partial lie.

He knew what his brother was getting at, which was surprising since they didn’t *do* that *feelings* stuff, but he didn’t know the answer to the question himself.

‘You know exactly what I mean.’ Malachi snorted. ‘You forget I’ve practically raised you since we were kids. You can’t fool me.’

Sol opened his mouth to jibe back, as he normally would. But tonight, for some inexplicable reason, the retort wouldn’t come. He told himself it was the situation with Izzy. Or perhaps the fact that sitting on hard, plastic chairs, in a low-lit, deserted hospital corridor in the middle of the night, played with the mind.

He had a feeling it was more like the five-foot-seven blonde doctor who was resurrecting ghosts he’d thought long since buried. He had no idea what it was about her that so enthralled him, but she had been doing so ever since the first moment he’d met her.

It had been an evening in a nightclub where Saskia, already a doctor at Moorlands General, had brought Anouk along so that she could meet her new colleagues. The night before, he’d seen Anouk as a focussed, driven, dedicated doctor. And she’d been so uncomfortable that it had been clear that clubs definitely weren’t her thing.

He’d seen her from across the room. She’d looked up and met his gaze and something unfamiliar and inexplicable had punched through him. Like a fist right to his chest. Or his gut.

If it had been any other woman he would have gone over, bought her a drink, probably spent the night with her. Uncomplicated, mutually satisfying sex between adults. What could be better? But as much as his body might have greedily wanted the pretty blonde across the room, possibly more than he’d wanted any woman, something had sounded a warning bell in his head, holding him back.

And then someone had spiked her drink—they must have done because he’d seen her go from responsible to disorientated in the space of half a drink—and he’d found himself swooping in to play some kind of knight in shining armour, before any of her colleagues could see her.

Sol couldn’t have said how he knew that would have mattered to her more than almost anything else. There was no plausible explanation for the...*connection* he’d felt with her.

So he'd alerted the manager to the situation before pushing his way across the room, grabbing the dazed Anouk's bag and coat and putting his arm around her before anyone else could see her, and leading her out of the nightclub.

Only one person had challenged him on the way out, a belligerent, narrow-eyed, spotty kid he hadn't known, who he suspected had been the one to spike Anouk's drink. It hadn't taken more than a scowl from Sol to send the kid slinking back to the shadows.

He'd got Anouk home and made sure she was settled and safely asleep in bed before he'd left her. The way he knew Saskia would have been doing if she hadn't snuck away by that point. Along with his brother. Sol had seen them leave. Together. So wrapped up in each other that they hadn't even noticed anyone else.

He'd headed back to the club to advise them of the situation, before calling it a night; there had been a handful of women all more than willing to persuade him to stay. None of them had enticed him that night.

Or since. If he was being honest.

Not that Malachi knew that he knew any of it, of course, and he wasn't about to mention it to his big brother. Not here, anyway. Not now. Not when it included Saskia. If the pair of them had wanted him to know they'd ever got together then they wouldn't have pretended they didn't know each other back when Malachi had brought Izzy's mum up to the ward and Saskia had explained to her what was going on with the little girl.

He'd tackle Malachi about it some other time, when he could wind him up a little more about it. The way the two of them usually did.

Sol glowered into his coffee rather than meet Malachi's characteristically sharp gaze.

'I haven't forgotten anything.' He spoke quietly. 'I remember everything you went through to raise us, Mal. I know you sold your soul to the devil just to get enough money to buy food for our bellies.'

For a moment, he could feel his brother's eyes boring into him, but still Sol couldn't bring himself to look up.

'Bit melodramatic, aren't you, *bratik*?' Malachi gritted out. 'Is this about Izzy?'

'I guess.'

His second lie of the night to his brother.

'Yeah. Well,' Malachi bit out at length. 'No need to get soppy about it.'

'Right.'

Downing the last of the cold coffee and grimacing, Sol crushed the plastic cup and lobbed it into the bin across the hallway. The perfect drop shot. Malachi grunted his approval.

'You ever wondered what might have happened if we'd had a different life?' The question was out before he could stop himself. 'Not had a drug addict for a mother, or had to take care of her and keep her away from her dealer every spare minute?'

'No,' Malachi shut him down instantly. 'I don't. I don't ever think about it. It's in our past. Done. Gone.'

'What the hell kind of childhood was that for us?' Sol continued regardless. 'Our biggest concern should have been whether we wanted an Action Man or Starship Lego for Christmas, not keeping her junkie dealer away from her.'

'Well, it wasn't. I wouldn't have asked if I'd known you were going to get maudlin on me.'

'You were eight, Mal. I was five.'

'I know how old we were,' Malachi growled. 'What's got into you, Sol? It's history. Just leave it alone.'

'Right.'

Sol pressed his lips into a grim line as the brothers lapsed back into silence. Malachi could claim their odious childhood was in the rear-view mirror as much as he liked, but they both knew

that if they'd really locked the door on their past then they wouldn't have founded Care to Play, their centre where young carers from the age of merely five up to sixteen could just unwind and be kids instead of responsible for a parent or a sibling.

If there had been anything like that around when he and Malachi had been kids, he liked to think it could have made a difference. Then again, he and Mal had somehow defied the odds, hadn't they?

Would the strait-laced Anouk think him less of an arrogant playboy if she knew *that* about him?

Geez, why did he even care?

Shooting to his feet abruptly, Sol shoved his hands in his pockets.

'I'm going to check on some of my patients upstairs, then I'll be back to see Izzy.'

He didn't wait for his brother to respond, but he could picture Malachi's head dip even as he strode down the corridor and through the fire door onto the stairwell.

He wasn't ready for Anouk to come bounding up the steps and, by the way she stopped dead when she saw him, she was equally startled.

'You're still here?' she faltered.

'Indeed.'

'I'd have thought you'd have gone home by now. I heard Izzy's mum arrived.'

She glanced nervously over his shoulder, as if checking no one could see them talking. He could well imagine she didn't want to be seen as the next notch on his bedpost. He almost wanted to ask her how much free time she imagined a young neurosurgeon to have that he could possibly have made time for so many women.

He bit his tongue.

What did it matter to him if she believed he was as bad as all those stories? Besides, hadn't he played up to every one of them over the years? Better people thought him a commitment-phobe than realise the truth about him.

Whatever the truth even was.

'Mal and I stayed to help.'

'Mal?'

'Malachi.'

'That's right.' She clicked her fingers. 'Your brother. You did say he was collecting the girls' mother.'

'He's through there now.' A thought occurred to him. 'With Saskia.'

'Okay.' She nodded, but her eyes stayed neutral.

Interesting. She clearly didn't know that Saskia and Malachi had had a...*thing*. He wondered what, if anything, Anouk remembered from that night. The club? The drink? The fact that he'd been the one to escort her safely home? Did she not remember him at all from that night?

'Anyway, I have to go.'

'Women waiting for you?'

That prim note in her voice had no business tingling through him like that.

'Always.'

She shot him a deprecating look and he couldn't help grinning, even as he moved to the flight of stairs, heading down two at a time.

'See you around, Anouk.'

He was briefly aware of her grunt before she yanked open the door and shot through it. Waiting a few seconds to be sure the door closed behind her, Sol turned around and headed back upstairs to the neurology department to check on his patients.

He felt somehow oddly...*deflated*.



Anouk tapped her fingers agitatedly on her electronic pad as she waited for the lift.

Why did she keep letting Solomon Gunn get under her skin? It was ignominious enough that her body was clearly attracted to him but it was so much worse that she kept wanting him to be different from the playboy cliché—*imagining* that she saw glimpses of something deeper within him, for pity's sake.

She who, of all people, should surely have known better?

She'd spent her entire childhood managing her mother. Playing the grown-up opposite her childlike mother—a woman who had perfected all the drama and diva-like tendencies of the worst kind of Hollywood star stereotypes.

She had watched the stunning Annalise Hartwood chase playboy after playboy, fellow stars and movie directors alike, convinced that she would be the one to tame them. It was the same story every time. Of course each finale was as trite as the last. Her biological father had been the worst, by all accounts, but ultimately they'd all ended up using her, hurting her, dumping her.

And Anouk had been the one who'd had to pick up the pieces and put her mother's fragile ego back together.

Not that Annalise had ever thanked her for it.

Quite the opposite.

Anouk had never quite matched up to her mother's mental image of how she should be as the daughter of a famous movie star. She'd been too gawky, too lanky; too introverted and too geeky; too book-smart and too gauche.

It had taken decades—and Saskia—for Anouk to finally realise that the problem hadn't really been her. It had been her mother.

That deathbed confession had been the most desolating moment of all. The betrayal had been inconceivable. It had laid her to waste right where she'd stood.

That was the moment she'd realised she had to get away from her old life.

She'd changed her name, her backstory, and she'd come to the UK. And Saskia, loyal and protective, had dropped everything to come with her.

In over a decade in the UK no one had come close to getting under her skin and poking away at old wounds the way Sol had somehow seemed able to do.

The lift doors *pinged* and she stepped forward in readiness. The last person she expected to see inside was the cause of her current unease. This was the very reason she'd waited for the lift instead of returning via the staircase. For a moment, she almost thought he looked as unsettled as she felt.

But that was ridiculous. Nothing ever unsettled Sol.

'Have you decided against getting in after all?' he asked dryly when she'd hovered at the doors so long that he'd been compelled to step forward and press the button to hold them. 'Anyone would think you were avoiding me.'

No, they wouldn't. Not unless he'd equally been avoiding her, surely?

Her mind began to tick over furiously. Her school teachers had called her an over-thinker as a kid. They'd made it sound like a bad thing.

'I thought you were leaving? Women to meet.'

'I am.' He shrugged casually, leaning back against the lift wall and stretching impossibly long, muscled legs in front of him.

'Up in Neurology?' she challenged.

'I forgot something.'

She eyed him thoughtfully. No coat, no bag, no laptop.

'What?'

'Sorry?'

'What did you forget?' she pushed.

'What is this?'

He laughed convincingly and anyone else might have believed him. She probably *should* believe him.

‘The Inquisition?’

‘You were checking on your patients,’ she realised, with a start.

Who was that patient he’d mentioned earlier? Ah, yes.

‘Mrs Bowman, by any chance?’

He swiftly covered his surprise.

‘My patient, my responsibility,’ he commented briskly.

Anouk ignored him.

‘And now you’re going back to support Izzy and her family.’

‘Is that so?’

Her heart thundered in Anouk’s chest and she didn’t know if it was at the realisation of what he was doing, or the fact that she was confronting him about it.

‘You play the tough guy, the playboy, but you’ve actually got a bit of a softer side, haven’t you?’

‘Vicious rumour,’ he dismissed.

‘I don’t think so.’

The lift bumped gently as they reached the ground floor and when she swayed slightly, Sol instinctively reached out to steady her. The unexpected contact was a jolt as though she’d grabbed hold of an electrical power cable with no Faraday suit to protect her.

It coursed through her, zinging from the top of her head to the tips of her toes.

His darkening eyes and flared nostrils confirmed that she wasn’t the only one who felt it.

A little unsteadily, she made her way out of the lift with no choice but to walk together across the lobby or risk making things look all the more awkward.

The doors slid open and the cool night air hit her hard. In a matter of seconds he’d be gone, across the car park and into that low, muscled vehicle of his.

Any opportunity would have evaporated. For good.

She stopped abruptly at the kerbside.

‘Can I ask you something?’

‘Shoot,’ he invited.

She opened her mouth but her courage deserted her abruptly.

‘Those mince pies the other day...were you also the one who decorated the desk with tinsel?’

He grinned.

‘Sometimes in a place like this—’ he bobbed his head back to the hospital ‘—it can be easy to forget Christmas should be a celebration. Don’t underestimate how much a bit of tinsel and a few mince pies can lift the spirits.’

‘Blue and white tinsel hung like an ECG tracing,’ she clarified.

‘Festive and atmospheric all at once.’ He grinned again, and another moment of awareness rippled over her skin.

‘Right.’

‘Indeed.’

They watched each other a moment longer. Neither speaking. Finally, Sol took a step forward.

‘Well, goodnight, Anouk.’

‘Can I ask you something else?’

He stopped and turned back to her as she drew in a deep breath.

‘How is it you know this family so well? Well enough that you’ve saddled yourself with four of the worst shifts of the year just to get the night off to sit with those girls in there whilst your brother is helping their mum?’

A hundred witty comebacks danced on his tongue. She could practically feel them buzzing in the air around the two of them. But then he looked at her and seemed to bite them back.

'Malachi and I work with a young carers' group in town,' he heard himself saying. 'Katie and Isobel are two of about thirty kids who come to the centre.'

'So many?'

It was the bleak look in his eyes that gouged her the most.

'That's not even the half of it.' He shook his head. 'You've read the reports, probably around a quarter of a million kids are carers for a parent or other family member. All under sixteen, some as young as four or five. We want to reach them all but we've only just got the council on board. Sometimes the hardest bit is getting people to even acknowledge there's an issue.'

'You're raising awareness?' Her eyebrows shot up.

This really meant something to him? He truly cared?

He watched her carefully, wordless for a moment. As if he was waging some internal battle. She waited, holding her breath, although she didn't understand why.

'We're having a fundraiser on Saturday night, to throw a spotlight on the centre.'

'Solomon Gunn is throwing a charity gala?'

Something flitted across his eyes but then he grinned and offered a nonchalant shrug, and it was gone.

'What can I say? Lots of attractive, willing women to choose from, so I guess I get to kill the two proverbial birds with one stone.'

The silence pulled tighter, tauter.

A few hours ago she would have believed that. Now she knew it was an act. And that was what terrified her the most.

Was she being open-minded and non-judgemental? Or was she simply being gullible, seeing what she wished she could see?

'Come with me.'

She had a feeling the invitation had slipped out before he could stop himself.

She frowned.

'Sorry?'

For a moment she thought he was going to laugh it off.

'Be my guest at the gala.'

Something rocked her from the inside. Like thousands of butterflies all waking up from their hibernation, and beating their wings all at once.

She had never experienced anything like it.

'Like...a date?'

'Why not?' he asked cheerfully.

As though it was no big deal to him.

It probably wasn't.

'With you?'

'Your eagerness is a real ego boost for a man, you know that?'

She aimed a sceptical look in his direction.

'I hardly think a man like you needs any more ego massages. You have women practically throwing themselves at you at every turn.'

'I'm not asking them, though, am I?' he pointed out. 'I'm asking you.'

She schooled herself not to be sucked in. Not to fall into that age-old trap. But it wasn't as easy as it had been for all those other men who had flirted with her over the years.

Because those other guys hadn't been Sol, a small voice needled her.

Anouk gritted her teeth.

'Is that why you're inviting me? Because you don't like the fact that I'm not falling over myself to flirt with you?'

'That's exactly it,' he replied, deadpan. 'I find my ego can't take the knockback.'

'Sarcastic much?' she muttered, but a small smile tugged at her mouth despite herself.

'I'll pick you up at half-past seven.'

'I might be on duty.'

'You aren't.' He shrugged.

'I beg your pardon?'

'Relax. I was just checking the rotas before and I don't remember seeing your name.'

She told herself that it meant nothing. It was pure coincidence.

'What makes you think I want to go?'

'What else are you doing that night? It's fun, and, hey, you can do something for charity at the same time.'

He was impressively convincing.

'People will think I'm just the next notch on your bedpost.'

'Some women are happy to have that accolade.'

'I am not *some* women.'

'No,' he agreed. 'You are not.'

The compliment rolled through her, making long-dormant parts of her body unfurl and stretch languidly. Her head was rapidly losing this battle with her body.

'How about this?' he suggested. 'I'll give you my ticket and you can take Saskia, or whoever you want, as your plus one.'

'You would give me your ticket?'

'Sure. That way you won't feel like I'm trying to obligate you in any way.'

'And I could take anyone?'

'Of course.'

She narrowed her eyes.

'Even a date of my own?'

'Oof!' He clutched his stomach as though she'd delivered a punch to his gut, making her laugh exactly as he'd clearly intended. 'You know where to strike a man, don't you? Yes, even a date of your own.'

'And you would miss out? On something as important to you as you've suggested these young carers are?'

'Oh, I won't miss out,' he said airily. 'I'll just go as someone else's plus one.'

It shouldn't hurt to hear. Yet it did. Anouk arranged her features into what she hoped was a neutral expression.

'Of course. You must have a whole host of potential dates just waiting for you to call.'

'So many it can become exhausting at times,' he concurred blithely.

'I'll leave the tickets behind the Resus desk for you before your shift ends tomorrow.'

And then, before she could answer, or say anything uncharacteristically stupid, Sol walked away. The way they probably both should have done ten minutes earlier.

CHAPTER THREE

‘THIS PLACE IS STUNNING,’ Anouk breathed as she gazed up at the huge sandstone arches that lined either side of the gala venue, and then up again to the breathtaking vaulted ceiling.

‘Isn’t it?’ Saskia demurred.

‘I feel positively shabby by comparison.’

‘Well, you don’t look it.’ Saskia laughed and Anouk wondered if she’d imagined the tension she’d noted in her friend over the past few months. ‘You look like you’re sparkling, and it isn’t just the new dress. Although I’m glad you let me talk you into buying it.’

‘I’m glad I let you talk me into buying it, too,’ admitted Anouk, smoothing her hands over the glorious fabric.

It was amazing how much confidence the dress was giving her, from its fitted body and plunging sweetheart neckline to its mermaid hemline. Three strings of jewelled, off-the-shoulder straps swished over her upper arms whilst the royal-blue colour seemed to complement her blonde hair perfectly.

‘You look totally Hollywood.’

‘Don’t.’ Anouk shuddered, knowing Saskia was the one person she could be honest with. ‘I think I’ve had enough of Hollywood to last me a lifetime.’

‘Me, too. But still, the look is good.’

‘Maybe I should have been in more festive colours.’ She glanced at Saskia’s own, stunning emerald dress, which had looked gorgeous on the rack, but on her friend’s voluptuously feminine body seemed entirely bespoke, complementing Saskia’s dark skin tone to perfection.

‘I look like a Christmas tree.’ Her friend laughed, before waving towards the glorious eighteen-foot work of art, complete with elegant decorations, that dominated the entrance. ‘Although if I looked *that* amazing I’d be happy.’

‘You look even better, and you know it.’ Anouk laughed. ‘You’ve only just walked in and you’ve turned a dozen heads.’

‘They’re probably looking at you, and, either way, I don’t care. Tonight, Anouk, we’re going to relax and enjoy ourselves.’

‘We are?’

‘We are.’ Saskia was firm, taking a champagne flute from the tray of a passing waiter, her beam of thanks making the poor guy fall for her instantly. ‘Starting with this.’

She passed the drink to Anouk.

‘You still feeling sick?’ Anouk frowned.

‘Yeah.’ Saskia pulled a rueful face but Anouk didn’t miss the flush of colour staining her cheeks.

If she hadn’t known better she might have suspected that Saskia was pregnant. But that surely wasn’t possible? Up until ten months ago Saskia had been engaged and, for all Saskia’s confidence and effervescent personality, Anouk knew her ex-fiancé had been only the second man her friend had ever slept with.

But he hadn’t been as loyal, and Anouk had never really taken to him. Whenever she’d looked at him she’d seen yet another playboy—just like her mother’s lovers.

Just like Sol, a voice whispered in her head.

‘Relax.’ Saskia nudged her gently. ‘Enjoy your drink.’

‘I don’t really like...’ Anouk began, but her friend shushed her.

‘You do tonight.’

Anouk balked.

She still wasn't sure what had happened at that nightclub. She had the vaguest memory of starting to relax and trying to have a little fun, and then a sense of panic. After that it wasn't clear, but she'd ended up back home, in her own bed, alone.

Safe.

The popping bubbles looked innocuous enough—fun, even—but all Anouk could see was her mother, downing glasses and popping pills. Had anything else passed her lips in those final few years?

'One glass doesn't make you your mother.' Saskia linked her arm through Anouk's, reading her mind.

Anouk offered a rueful smile.

'That obvious, huh?'

'Only to me. Now go on, forget about your mother and enjoy this evening. You and I both deserve a bit of time off, and, anyway, we're supporting a good cause.'

'We are, aren't we?' Anouk nodded, dipping her head and taking a tentative sip.

It wasn't as bad as she'd feared. In fact, it was actually quite pleasant. Not the cheap plonk, at least, with no bitter aftertaste. Including that of her mother.

Sighing quietly, Anouk finally felt some of the tension begin to uncoil within her.

This was going to be a good evening. She was determined to enjoy it.



'I was beginning to think you weren't coming after all.'

His voice was like a lightning bolt moving through her, pinning her to the spot. Her mouth felt suddenly dry, and even her legs gave a traitorous tremor beneath the gorgeous blue fabric.

Gathering up all her will, Anouk made herself turn around, even as Saskia was sliding her arm from Anouk's and greeting Sol as if they were good friends.

Then again, they were. Saskia had been at Moorlands General for years. Admittedly a much nicer hospital than Moorlands Royal Infirmary, where she herself had trained. Why hadn't she made the transfer sooner?

She was so wrapped up in her thoughts that she only just caught Saskia murmuring something about going to check the seating plan, too late to stop her friend from slipping away into the faceless crowd.

And just like that she was alone with Sol.

As if the couple of hundred other people in the place didn't even exist.

It should have worried Anouk more that she felt that way.

'You look...breathtaking.'

Ridiculously, the fact that he had to reach for the word, as though it was genuine and not some well-trotted-out line, sent another bolt of brilliant light through her.

And heat.

So much heat.

Which was why he had a reputation for being fatal. He was the Smoking Gun, after all.

She would do well to remember that.

'You thought I wasn't coming?' she made herself ask, tipping her head to one side in some semblance of casualness.

'I did wonder.'

Some golden liquid swirled about an expensive-looking, crystal brandy glass in his hand. But it was the bespoke suit that really snagged her attention. Expensively tailored, it showcased Sol to perfection with his broad shoulders and strong chest, tapering to an athletic waist. The crisp white shirt with the bow tie that was already just a fraction too loose suggested a hint of debauchery, as though he was already on the brink of indulging where he shouldn't.

With her?

She went hot, then cold, then hot again at the thought. It was shameful that the idea should appeal so much. The simmering heat seemed to make her insides expand until she feared her flesh and bones wouldn't be able to contain her. He was simply too...*much*.

He isn't your type, she told herself forcefully. Only it didn't seem as though her body wanted to listen.

'I thought perhaps I could introduce you to some people.'

'Oh.' That surprised her. 'Is that why you came over, then?'

He hesitated, and then offered a grin that she supposed was meant to look rueful but just looked deliciously wicked instead.

'Not really.' He made it sound like a confession yet he deliberately didn't elaborate and Anouk wasn't about to play into his hands by asking him.

'I see,' she lied.

'Do you indeed?' he murmured. 'Then perhaps you might explain to me why I couldn't resist coming over here the instant I saw you walk in.'

Her chest kicked. Hard. It didn't matter how many times she silently chanted that he couldn't affect her, Anouk realised all too quickly that she was fighting a losing battle. She had no idea how she managed to inject a disparaging note into her voice.

'Does that line usually work?'

'I don't know, I've never used it before. I'll tell you next time I try.'

She bit her tongue to stop herself from asking when that next time would be. He was clearly baiting her, but what bothered her was that it was working.

'Besides...' his eyes skimmed her in frank, male appreciation, and everywhere his eyes moved she was sure she nearly scorched in response '...if I hadn't come over then some other bloke would have. You're much too alluring in that gown.'

'But not out of it?' she quipped.

His eyes gleamed black, his smile all the more wolfish. Too late, Anouk realised what she'd said.

'Is that an invitation? I have a feeling I would be breaking quite a few harassment in the workplace rules if I admitted to imagining you out of that dress.'

'I mean... I didn't mean... That isn't what I intended.'

'Then be careful what you say, *zlotse*, you can build a man up too quickly otherwise.'

'*Zlotse*?' she echoed. It sounded... Russian, maybe?

'*Zlotse*,' he confirmed.

It was the way his voice softened on that word—as if he hardly knew what he was saying himself as he moved closer, his body so tantalisingly close to hers and his breath brushing her neck—that sent a fresh awareness singing through her veins. It made her forget even to draw breath.

Her mind struggled to stay in control.

'You don't intend to elucidate?' She barely recognised her own voice, it was so laced with desire.

'I do not,' he muttered.

Now that she thought about it, Sol and Malachi both had a bit of a Russian look about them. But if they were Russian then it was something Sol didn't share with many other people. Certainly it wasn't common knowledge around the hospital.

Which only made her feel that much more unique.

Dammit, but the man was positively lethal.



Three hours had passed since she'd arrived.

Three hours!

It felt like a mere five minutes, and all because she'd been in Sol's company.

The man had turned out to be a revelation. She'd known he was intelligent, witty, devastatingly attractive, of course. The whole hospital talked about him often enough. But knowing it and *experiencing* it turned out to be two entirely different things.

He had a way of making her feel...special. And it didn't matter how many times she cautioned herself that this was his trick, every time he stared at her as though she were the only person in the entire room, an incredible thrill skewered her like a javelin hurtling through her body.

Even as he'd introduced her around the room—to contacts to whom many of the top consultants would have amputated their own limbs to be introduced—she'd had to fight to concentrate on what he was saying. The feel of his hand at the small of her back kept sending her brain into a tailspin.

She felt like a reed, bending and turning, twisting wherever the breeze took her, and right now that breeze took the form of Solomon Gunn. He was swaying her at will and yet all he was really doing was moving smoothly through the throng, his hand barely touching her searing flesh.

Still, she smiled and greeted and charmed, just as she'd learned to do at the knee of her Hollywood mother. And she made no objection to what Sol was doing.

Perhaps because a portion of her longed to wallow shamelessly in the glances cast their way?

Some admiringly. Others enviously. She'd been on the receiving end of enough sugar-coated scowls and underhanded digs to know that she wasn't the only one to have noticed Sol's attention to her. Or realise that this was more than just his usual behaviour towards a woman on his arm.

He was giving her his undivided attention and presenting her as though she were a proper date. Half of the room seemed to be more than conscious of his body standing so close to hers. As though she were more than just a colleague.

As though there were something intimate between them.

And yet she couldn't bring herself to care the way she suspected she might have cared a few days ago.

His gentleness and compassion with the young family the other night still played on her mind.

Sol might be renowned for caring about his patients, but she'd seen the way he'd stayed with that family even when he was off duty, helping the girls' mother even when he should have been getting much-needed rest.

Too natural, too easy. A world away from the playboy Lothario she'd once thought him to be. It fired her curiosity until she couldn't ignore it any longer.

'I must say that, whilst I don't know your brother all that well, I wouldn't have thought a gala ball to raise money for kids was something you'd be interested in. Let alone quite so heavily involved with. It begs the question of *why*.'

'If there is something you want to know, then ask. I am an open book, *zlotse*.' He shrugged breezily, and yet it tugged at Anouk.

Was there more going on behind his words than Sol was willing to reveal?

It was all she could do to stay brisk.

'Next you'll be telling me that you're misunderstood. That your playboy reputation is a terrible exaggeration.'

Was she really teasing him now?

'On the contrary.' He shook his head, his stunning smile cracking her chest and making her heart skip a beat or ten. 'My reputation is something for which I've never made any apologies.'

'You're proud of it,' she realised abruptly.

And there was no reason for the sharp stab of disappointment that lanced through her at that moment. No reason at all.

'I wouldn't say I was proud of it, but then I'm not ashamed of it either.'

His nonchalance was clear. She had only imagined there was another side to him because that was what she'd wanted to see. What her mother had always done with her own lovers.

It galled Anouk to realise that she was more like her mother than she'd ever wanted to admit.

‘Perhaps you should be ashamed of it,’ she challenged pointedly, but Sol simply flashed an even wider, heart-thumping grin.

‘Perhaps. But you could argue that I’m better than many people because I’m above board. I don’t pretend to be emotionally available and looking for a relationship to get a woman into bed, only to turn around and ghost her, or whatever.’

‘No, but women practically throw themselves at your feet and you sleep with them anyway.’

‘They’re grown women, Anouk, it’s *their* choice.’

Anouk snorted rather indelicately.

‘You must know they’re secretly hoping for more.’

‘Some, maybe. But I make no false pretences. Why does this rile you so much, Anouk?’ His voice softened suddenly. ‘Is this about what happened with Saskia? Or did some bloke treat you that badly in the past?’

He might as well have doused her with a bucket of icy water.

What was she doing arguing with him about this? Letting him see how much it bothered her just as clearly as if she’d slid her heart onto her sleeve.

She fought to regroup. To plaster a smile on her face as though she weren’t in the least bothered by the turn of conversation. But she feared it looked more like a grimace.

‘No, I’m fortunate that I’ve never been treated that way.’

She didn’t add that she’d watched her mother repeat the same mistake over and over enough times never to be caught out like that.

‘Never?’

‘Never,’ she confirmed adamantly.

As though that would rewind the clock. Back to the start of the conversation when she hadn’t been quite so revealing about herself. Or the start of the night before she’d let Saskia walk away and leave her alone with him. Or three days ago when they’d worked together on little Isobel and she’d arrogantly imagined she saw something in the man that no one else appeared to have noticed.

The worst of it was that there was some component of her that didn’t want to rewind anything. Which, despite every grey cell in her brain screaming at her not to be such an idiot, was enjoying tonight. With Sol.

‘In that case, there’s something else you should bear in mind.’ He leaned into her ear, his breath tickling her skin, and it was like a huge hand stealing into her chest and closing around her heart. ‘There are plenty of women who enjoy no-strings sex just as much as I do.’

Don’t imagine him in bed. Don’t.

But it was too late.

Anouk wrinkled her nose in self-disgust.

‘I get that in your twenties, but you’re—what? Mid-thirties? Don’t you think you might want to grow up some time? Settle down. Be an adult.’ She cocked an eyebrow. ‘You aren’t Peter Pan.’

‘That’s a shame, because you’d make the perfect Tinker Bell.’

‘I’m not a ruddy fairy,’ she huffed crossly.

‘See?’ he teased, oblivious to the eddies now churning within her. ‘You even have the Tinker Bell temper down flawlessly. Clearly we’re perfectly matched.’

‘We most certainly are not,’ she gasped.

And he laughed whilst she pretended to be irritated, even though she still didn’t try to pull away. So when Sol’s hand didn’t leave her, when his body remained so close to hers without actually invading her space or making her feel crowded in, and when he deftly steered her out of the path of a couple of rather glassy-eyed, lustful-looking men, she found it all such an intoxicating experience.

As though Sol wanted to keep her to himself.

No, she was being fanciful, not to mention ridiculous.

And still that knot sat there, in the pit of her stomach. Not *apprehension* so much as...anticipation. She was waiting for Sol to do something. More than that, she *wanted* him to.

Perhaps that was why, when reality cut harshly into the dream that the night had become, Anouk was caught completely off guard.

'Now, these are the Hintons,' he leaned in to whisper in her ear as a rather glamorous older-looking couple approached. 'She was a human rights lawyer whilst he was a top cardiothoracic surgeon. They're nice, too.'

'How lovely to meet you.' The older woman smiled at her, but her old eyes burned brightly as they looked her over thoughtfully. 'Anouk Hart... Hartwood... Hmm. You seem familiar, my dear?'

'No, I don't think so.' Anouk forced herself to smile back but her cheeks felt too frozen, her smile too false.

The woman peered closer and Anouk could feel the blood starting to drag through her veins even as her heart kicked with the effort of getting it moving again.

'Yes, definitely familiar.' She nudged her husband, who was still beaming at Anouk. 'Don't you think so, Jonathon?'

He pondered the question for a moment.

Anouk tried not to tense, not to react, but she could feel herself sway slightly. Not so much that a casual observer might notice, but enough that a man standing with his hand on her back might. Certainly enough that Sol did.

His head turned to look at her but she kept staring straight ahead, a tight smile straining her lips.

'Around the hospital, no doubt.' She had no idea how she injected that note of buoyancy into her voice. 'Or maybe I just have one of those faces.'

'Oh, no, my dear, you do not have *one of those faces*.' The woman chuckled.

'More like a screen icon,' her husband agreed, then his face cleared and Anouk's stomach plummeted. 'Like Annalise Hartwood.'

'Annalise Hartwood,' the woman echoed delightedly. 'And she had a daughter...what was her name, Jonathon? Was it Noukie?'

How she'd always hated that nickname. She was sure her mother had known it, too. It was why Annalise had used it all the more.

'Noukie...' He nodded slowly. 'Yes, I think it might have been. You're Noukie Hartwood.'

As if she didn't already know! They said it as if it were a nugget of gold, a little bit of information that they were giving her.

Anouk wanted to shout and bellow. Instead, she stood exactly where she was, her smile not slipping, muscles not twitching.

'Anouk Hart.' She tried to smile. 'Yes.'

'My goodness, I can hardly believe it. Annalise was such a screen icon in my day. But, my dear, you don't have any American accent at all, do you? How long have you been over here?'

How it hurt to keep smiling.

'My friend and I came to university over here...' she paused as if she were searching for the memory, when the truth was she knew practically to the week, the day '...so a little over ten years ago.'

The moment her mother had died and Anouk had finally felt free of her. What kind of person did that make her?

But then, after her mother's deathbed revelation, who could blame her? To realise that her mother, her grandmother, had been lying to her about her father for eighteen years.

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