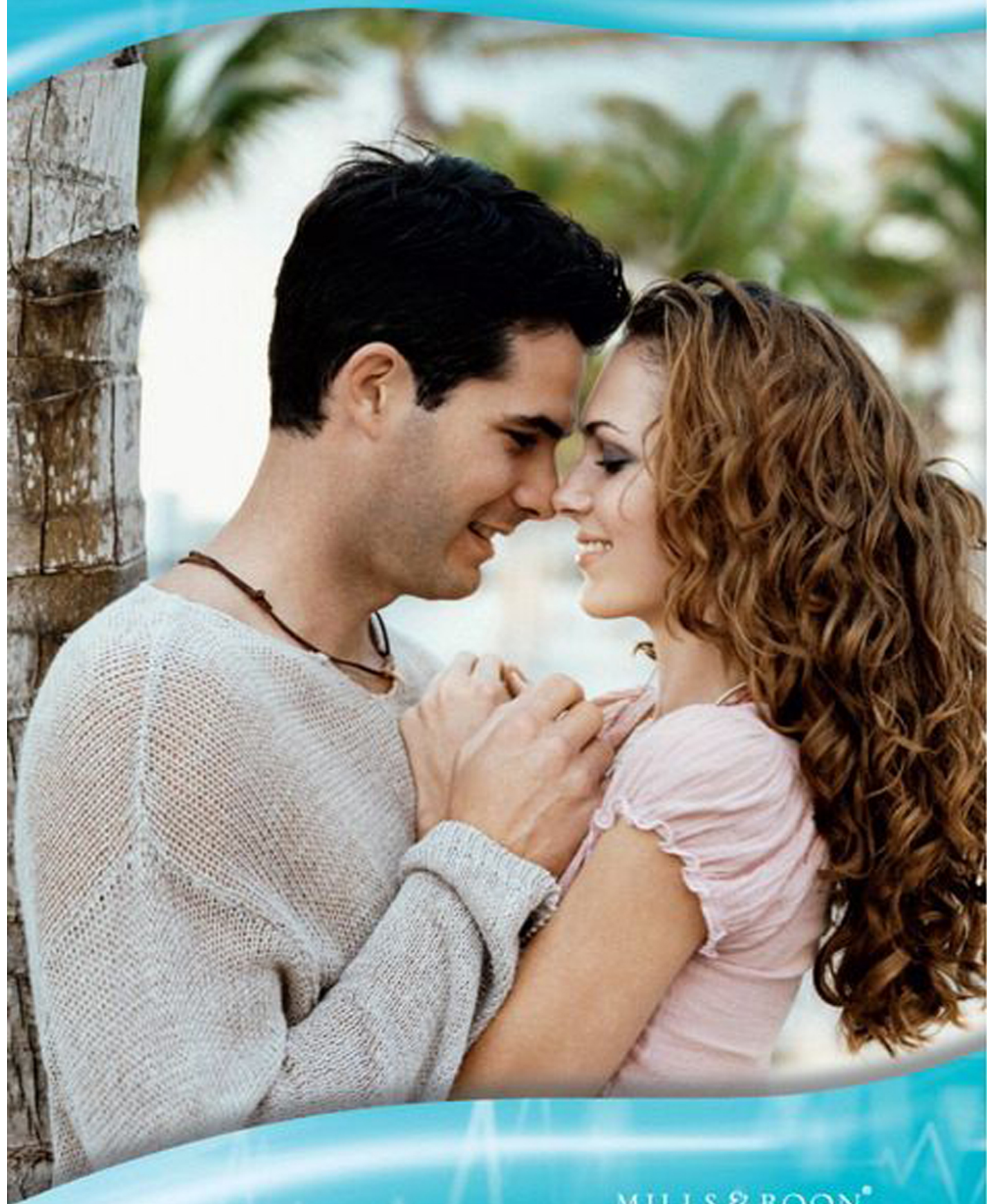


THE WIFE HE'S BEEN WAITING FOR

Dianne Drake



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The Wife He's Been Waiting For

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A bride for Dr Sloan Dr Michael Sloan's brilliant surgical career ended after he was badly injured. Sheer strength and determination got him through, but scars run deep. Now, as a ship's doctor, he can avoid emotional entanglements. Until a beautiful passenger falls into his arms...Dr Sarah Collins has taken time out to travel the world and rebuild her shattered confidence. The attraction between her and the gorgeous doctor is instant – and while Michael shows Sarah she still has abilities to heal, this caring, beautiful woman makes Michael believe that he is, most definitely, a man worth loving.

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Could or would he ever let himself fall in love?

Yes, Michael had thought about what might happen if he ever did, thought about what kind of woman would be attracted to someone like him.

Of course he'd be lying to himself if he said his injury didn't bother him—but that wasn't the reason he'd avoided any number of women who'd made advances on him these past months since he'd come to work as a ship's doctor. God knows, he wasn't a saint when it came to that part of his life. Wasn't even close to it. Yet right now getting involved in *any* manner wasn't right—not when he had so little to offer someone else.

But Sarah... she was different. Someone who intrigued him. Someone who captured his interest and held it. Someone so sexy and yet so vulnerable he couldn't even begin to imagine what it would be like to have a woman like that in his life for a little while, maybe even forever. He hadn't meant to look, hadn't meant to go any farther after he had. Just look at him, though, all caught up in thoughts he simply didn't need to be having. Sarah was on his mind in ways he didn't want and couldn't control.

Now that her children have left home, **Dianne Drake** is finally finding the time to do some of the things she adores—gardening, cooking, reading, shopping for antiques. Her absolute passion in life, however, is adopting abandoned and abused animals. Right now Dianne and her husband Joel have a little menagerie of three dogs and two cats, but that's always subject to change. A former symphony orchestra member, Dianne now attends the symphony as a spectator several times a month and, when time permits, takes in an occasional football, basketball or hockey game.

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A FAMILY FOR THE CHILDREN'S DOCTOR

THEIR VERY SPECIAL CHILD

THE WIFE HE'S BEEN WAITING FOR

BY
DIANNE DRAKE



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With all my heart I dedicate this book to Jason, and all
the brave ones in the battlefield, wherever it may be.

CHAPTER ONE

THE sound of laughter wafted though the walls of Sarah's cabin. People in the hallways were anxious to get underway, were planning the holiday of their lives, with expectations of fun and adventure on this cruise. Not only expectations, but so many dreams were invested in a few simple days. They would eat all the marvelous foods fixed by the gourmet chefs on board. See new sights they'd only seen in picture books. Make new friends. Visit the various ports and come away with gifts and mementoes of the wonderful time they'd had on this cruise—things they wouldn't think of buying back home—like hideously large straw hats and brightly colored plastic gecko lizards. Memories to last a lifetime.

But for Dr Sarah Collins, none of that was going to happen. Staring out the porthole, she sighed the same sad sigh she'd been sighing for months now. It never changed, no matter where she went or what she did. It simply never changed.

Continuing with the task of tucking her clothes into the closet and tiny bureau, she wondered about taking part in some of the shipboard activities, then immediately wiped that out of her mind. Sure, it was a holiday, just like the last one had been and the one before that. Thanks to a conservative lifestyle while she had been a practicing doctor, and a lucrative sale of her part of the medical practice after she'd decided not to practice medicine any longer, her life had been a succession of holidays this past year, skipping, without thought or too much planning, from one to another, like she hadn't a care in the world.

Quite the contrary was true, though. That's all she had—cares, memories, sadness. Which was why her life had turned into a series of events requiring no commitment. What better way to avoid reality than by going on holiday? Over and over again.

This was her first cruise, though, and she wasn't sure why she'd chosen it. It was so...populated. Hundreds and hundreds of people. Planned activities. Normally, she stuck to herself. A self-guided foot tour of Paris was perfect as no one paid any attention to a single woman passing her days wandering the streets, tourist sights, museums, and her nights tucked into a cabaret corner, spending all evening nursing one or two glasses of wine, listening to the cabaret singer spill out her own version of the blues. In those moments she felt a connection to the singer, understanding how life had a way of slapping you down the way the singer was depicting in her words. But all too soon the night and the music would end and Sarah was on to the next day, next destination. A rental car to see the castles of Scotland, where no one took a second look at a solitary tourist passing though. A hike through the Canadian Rockies and bicycling up the coast of Nova Scotia. Both very nice, and quite solitary.

Then this. To be honest, she couldn't explain what had gotten into her, booking a cruise. Two weeks long at that. Maybe it was the boredom factor finally creeping in, or her lack of companionship these last months. Normally she was a very social person, loved being around other people. Maybe

that's what was getting to her—the isolation. Or maybe she'd just run out of ideas and this had seemed easy.

Whatever the case, she was here, in a tiny little cabin with sparse amenities, not sure about her decision. For her to find all the amenities a cruise offered, she'd have to leave her cabin and mingle with the other passengers, and while that did seem appealing, it was also more frightening than anything she'd taken on in the past year.

Just thinking about what she was about to embark on caused Sarah's hands to shake, made her break out in a cold sweat.

Damn, it was happening again.

The walls were closing in on her. The ceiling inching down. Room spinning.

Deep breath, Sarah. You know what it is.

Gripping the edge of the bureau, she hung on praying for the feeling to pass. This had been a stupid, crazy idea! Even entertaining the notion that she could endure two weeks on a ship was totally insane. Yet here she was, getting ready to set sail, and having another panic attack over it.

Breathe, Sarah. One more deep breath and you'll be fine.

Two weeks of this, either cooped up and alone or mixing with so many people that even the thought of it nauseated her.

Another breath. You can do this.

It hit her all of a sudden. Once they set sail she couldn't get off. Bad thought. Wrong thought. Her pulse was racing now, her breaths so shallow her lips were tingling.

"Got to get off." The urge to run was hitting her so hard and violently it nearly choked the breath out of her. She had to get off. Now! Couldn't wait. Forget the clothes, they were only clothes. They could be replaced.

Sarah bolted for the door, fumbled the latch with shaking hands, then finally threw it open, looked first to the left, then to the right to get her bearings. Elevator...to the right, she thought. She had to get there. There was still time. Had to be enough time. She hadn't heard the all-ashore warning, had she?

Running hard, zigging and zagging in and out of the other passengers on their way to locate cabins, she did make it to the elevator and managed to squeeze in just as the doors were about to shut. "Excuse me," she gasped, wedging her way between a buxom older lady smelling of gardenias and wearing a large purple hat that took up enough space for two people and a hard body in a white uniform she didn't care to investigate. "Could I just have a little more room?"

Too many people crammed in, too many different cloying perfumes, too many voices... "More room, please," she begged again, just as the elevator started to spin. Not literally. She knew that. It was her head spinning. Damn, she'd meant to eat something this morning...last night.

Stupid! She was a doctor. She knew better. But she recognized a good case of low blood sugar when she felt it, and she felt it. *As soon as I get off the ship*, she promised herself. She'd go and find the closest little café to the dock and have herself a decent meal. Except the claustrophobia left over from her panic attack combined with the wooziness of her hypoglycemia were conspiring to bring her to her knees. As the elevator dinged its way from deck to deck, without anyone getting off, she was glad for the crowded conditions now as there was no way she could make it to her knees.

But her body was trying to make her collapse. Voices getting louder...smells stronger...ringing in her ears. Head spinning...no place to fall except into the immense bosom of the purple hat lady or into the hard body behind her.

In the end, the decision wasn't Sarah's to make. As the elevator jolted to a stop on yet another deck, her head took its last spin and she sank directly into the arms of the hard body, who had the good sense to hold her up until everybody was off the elevator. Then he scooped her up into his arms and carried her out.

She was vaguely aware of him, vaguely aware that she was babbling something incoherent. She knew that she wanted to get off the ship and go someplace where she could be alone again. But all the vagueness lasted mere seconds, then nothing. Sarah had passed out in the arms of a stranger.

"Everybody, out at the next stop," Dr Michael Sloan ordered, as the dark-haired woman slumped against his chest. She wasn't unconscious yet, but he'd bet his medical license that would be the next thing to happen.

He'd noticed her when she'd got on. Pale, nervous. Panicked look on her face. Or maybe frightened. Whichever it was, she'd squeezed in and the instant the doors had shut he'd noticed her breathing. Shallow, rapid. All indicators of someone who didn't want to be there. Panic attack, maybe. Or someone in some kind of real physical distress. Then she'd gone and slumped into him, right into his arms, like she'd had it planned, and now the only thing he could do was hold onto her until they could get off. Then he'd take a look, see what the problem was.

As the doors parted, the dozen or so people crammed into the elevator started to file out while he kept a tight hold on his new patient. He'd never before had one drop into his arms the way this one had. In fact, he couldn't recall that he'd ever had any woman swoon like this, whether or not she had been sick. Too bad this one was sick, because he liked the way she smelled. Fresh, something fruity, he thought as the last three people left, leaving him enough room to lead her through the doors.

Yes, he definitely liked her scent. It wasn't the heavy, sickly sweet scent of expensive perfume he smelled so often on the ship. Turning in the direction of the doors, he prepared to exit. "Now, somebody, please hold the door open for me."

The woman with the monster purple hat wedged her ample body in the door opening to prevent it from closing as Michael started to assist his patient through the elevator doors, but after two steps her full weight sagged against him and he had no other recourse but to pick her up and carry her out.

"Get off," she mumbled at him. "Want off...now. Have to...off..."

"We are. Right now," he replied. "We're getting off right now."

"Got to go... Can't stay..."

"That's right. We're going to my office," he replied, as she tucked her head against his chest. "I'm the ship's doctor and I think I need to have a little look at you to see what's going on."

"Want to go...please, let me..."

"Don't worry. I'll get you back to your cabin once I've given you an exam," he said, already deciding she might be in the throes of hypoglycemia. That happened a lot. People got excited about the cruise, then forgot to eat. The next thing that happened was their blood sugar whacking out. It wasn't uncommon and usually very easy to fix. "When was the last time you ate something? Do you remember?" She looked particularly frail, he thought, and a good several pounds under her ideal weight. Pretty, though. Add another ten pounds and she'd be voluptuous. For a moment he envisioned her looking vibrant—her face with some color in it to better contrast with the raven black of her hair, her dark brown eyes filled with something other than anguish. The more he studied her, the more he was taken by her beauty.

Then she shifted in his arms, laid her hand on his chest and for an instant he felt a tingle, which immediately snapped his attention back to his professional assessment of her. Without a test, hypoglycemia was still his first call. That's what he had to keep his mind on, that he was carrying a patient to his office, not a beautiful woman to his bed.

Although it had been a long time since he'd had a woman there, no matter how she got there—walking on her own, carried in his arms, or somersaulting.

"Too loud. So many people..." she mumbled, snapping him back once again. "Don't want to—"

"Can you tell me if you have low blood sugar?" he interrupted, his voice rather stiff and husky. "Have you ever been diagnosed with a condition called hypoglycemia?"

Instead of answering, she merely sighed, then snuggled in a little more. And snaked her arm up around his neck, causing another tingle to skitter off the tips of her fingers and run down the full length of his back.

Michael cleared his throat heavily, like that would clear away the tingle. “Have you been diagnosed with...” He tried again, but her other arm went up, and now what should have been a simple hold on a patient looked more like a lover’s embrace. But only for a moment, then both her arms went limp and her hold on him vanished.

His patient had fainted again.

Sarah finally opened her eyes, squinting into the overhead exam light, before she twisted her head to the side and opened them fully. Where was she? Why was she here? “What’s that?” she asked, spotting the IV stand with its bag hanging next to the bed, not yet realizing that it was anchored into her arm.

“Sugar water,” came a voice from the other side of a blue-and-green-striped curtain. “Your blood sugar was low so we’re giving you something to bring it back up to normal.”

Curtain, hard bed... She glanced around as the surroundings started making sense to her. Medical equipment. Now it was all coming back. Panic attack, hypoglycemic episode. She’d gotten into the elevator. It had been crowded...she did remember that much. The perfume, the large woman with the purple hat. Then she’d keeled over, hadn’t she?

An involuntary moan slipped through Sarah’s lips as her recall returned in full and she remembered collapsing straight into the hard body’s arms. Now here she was in the ship’s hospital. As a patient, though. Not as a doctor.

“We did a little test,” he continued.

Well, of course he would, she thought, not too surprised by his verdict. This was the hospital and he was a medic of some sort. “How low was it? My blood sugar?”

“Forty-two when I brought you in. Normal values start at eighty, and run all the way up to one-hundred. But you were well under the norm, which was why you passed out.”

She knew all that. Her days as a practicing physician might be over, but her medical knowledge was certainly as good as ever. It had been only a little over a year since she’d quit medicine altogether, and yet she still read the journals to keep up, even though she had no intention of returning to practice again. But old habits died hard, and her love of medicine hadn’t diminished one bit.

Naturally, she wasn’t going to explain all that to the medic. No need to. As far as he was concerned, she was merely another tourist on holiday who’d gone and done something stupid, like forgetting to eat. And, actually, that’s what she was, wasn’t it? The perpetual tourist? “I don’t suppose I’ve eaten anything for a while,” she admitted, almost too embarrassed to say so since she did know better.

“How long ago?” he asked.

He had a nice voice. Soothing. Deep. The kind of voice a patient would trust. “Two or three meals, I think,” she stated, although she was pretty sure she’d skipped maybe one more than that. “I was...uh...excited about the cruise. All the arrangements, last-minute details.” Such a lie. Over this past year she’d neglected to eat as many meals as she’d eaten. Truth was, she had no appetite. She would eat occasionally, but only enough to sustain her, to keep her blood-sugar levels intact. Except this time she hadn’t even done that much, and she was mildly embarrassed for messing up that way. “As soon as the dextro...um, the sugar water is in, can I get off the ship?”

“I’m afraid you were still pretty groggy when the ship set sail half an hour ago. Which means you’re on a cruise now.” Michael stepped out from behind the curtain, stopping at the foot of the bed. “And from the looks of things, you could probably use the rest.”

Handsome man, she thought. Strikingly so. Tall, a little over six feet, broad shoulders, athletic build. Dark brown hair, with eyes to match. Nice smile. But his eyes were...well, she couldn’t tell.

They weren't unfriendly, but they didn't sparkle. "Believe me, I've had plenty of rest." That was an understatement. She'd had nothing but rest since she'd quit her medical practice.

"You were trying to get off the ship, weren't you? That's why you were so frantic in the elevator. You weren't going to stay and take the cruise."

"I changed my mind. Decided I didn't want to..." That sounded like a silly explanation, didn't it? She'd spent thousands of dollars to book a two-week cruise, then changed her mind minutes before setting sail. It sounded silly enough that he probably thought her addle-brained.

"It could have been the hypoglycemia talking. The lower your blood sugar gets, the more that can alter your thinking. Once you've rested up, got a good meal in you, and your blood sugar is staying normal and not fluctuating, you'll change your mind and start enjoying all the things we have to offer here."

"Not necessary. I'll be fine, um... I didn't catch your name."

"Sloan," he said. "Michael Sloan." He walked around the bed, extending a hand to her. "In case you're wondering, I'm the one you collapsed onto in the elevator."

She'd already guessed as much. Somehow she had recognized the hard body, even though this was the first time she'd seen his face. An amazing face. "I'm Sarah Collins," she said, taking his hand. Nice, soft. Good touch for a doctor...for anybody. "Like I was saying, it's not necessary for me to stay here and take up your time or your hospital space. I'm fine now. Ready to have the IV out so I can go back to my cabin, since it seems I'm taking a cruise. Or, at least, the first leg of it."

"Well, my hospital space is your hospital space. You're my first patient of the cruise and I think I'd like to hang onto you a little while longer just to show the ship's captain that I'm earning my keep." He chuckled. "And by the time we've reached the first port you might decide that taking a cruise isn't such a bad idea."

It wasn't such a good idea either. "Well, you weren't the one who started your cruise with such a bang the way I did, were you?" she said, her voice sagging into disappointment. It really didn't make any difference where she was—on a cruise in the Caribbean, on a camel somewhere in Egypt, in a cyclo in Cambodia. It had all been the same lately. One place after another, and she'd hardly noticed any of it. "But thank you for doing the gallant thing and bringing me to the hospital. I suppose if I had to collapse into somebody's arms, it was a good thing I chose a doctor's."

"It was either me or the lady in the purple hat."

He smiled at her and his eyes flickered into a genuinely little sparkle. Not much, but it was there. Nice eyes, she thought. Nice sparkle, too, although very short-lived. Come and gone in an instant. "So what's your best guess on how long I'll be here?" she asked.

"I want to do another blood test in about ten minutes, then we'll see."

"Have you done a blood test since the initial one?" she asked, trying not to sound so clinical. What concerned her was that a reading of forty-two wasn't too far from critical or even near-death in some cases. She recalled a patient at her clinic not all that long ago who'd gone into cardiac arrest at a blood sugar of thirty-five, and couldn't be revived. Just another reason to quit medicine, she rationalized. Things that should be easily reversed weren't always what they seemed. One small speck of melanoma should have been easy to remove, easy to treat. A little case of being overtired should have been cured by a couple days of rest.

But what should have been didn't always happen. Or, in her case, didn't ever happen.

"Your blood sugar's seventy now. Good, but not good enough to be up and wandering around yet."

"Then how about I go back to my cabin right now, go to bed and order something sweet from room service?" That was the easy way to do it, then she didn't have to be bothered by anyone, including the doctor.

"How about you stay right where you are for another ten minutes, then we'll decide what you'll get to do after that?"

That worked too, she supposed. It wasn't like she had someplace else to go, or anything else to do. And she really did want to prove that old saying wrong, that doctors made the worst patients. It wasn't her aim to be a bad patient. Dr Sloan was only doing his job and she didn't want to give him any grief over it. In other words, she wanted to be the kind of patient she used to like treating, so she'd stay there and take his advice. "Ten minutes," she agreed, then shut her eyes, not so much to sleep as to simply block him out. This past year she'd stayed away from a lot of things—life, commitments, friends—and the one thing she'd assiduously avoided at all costs had been anything medical. Dr Michael Sloan, handsome as he was, standing there with his stethoscope around his neck and a chart in his hand, was definitely medical. And definitely someone to avoid.

Too bad. Something else on her list of things to avoid was becoming involved in another relationship. Two so far, and all she'd done had been to prove what a miserable failure she was. She'd had two wonderful men in her life and the best she'd done in both relationships had been to fail them. Miserably.

So what was the point of even looking, when that's as far as she'd let it go? Honestly, buying one of those brightly colored plastic gecko lizards the tourists all seemed so thrilled over didn't seem like such a bad idea for a relationship. At least she wouldn't let a chunk of red, yellow and green plastic down.

Or kill it.

Well, she wasn't sleeping. Trying hard to pretend she was, perhaps, but he knew better. In spite of her attempt to even out her breathing, her eyelids were fluttering—a dead giveaway that she was awake and faking sleep.

Michael chuckled as he returned to his office. Something big was bothering her, but he wasn't going to guess what it was. Wasn't even going to pry. He was a doctor whose commitment to his patients was only as long as this two-week cruise. He took care of their physical woes while they were on the ship, then said goodbye to them as he welcomed aboard a new bunch. That's all he was here for—to treat them and leave them—which suited him just fine. So if there was something about Sarah Collins that needed figuring out other than a case of hypoglycemia, he'd leave that puzzle to someone else. Lord knew, he was the last one to figure out anybody...especially himself.

"Repeat a finger-stick in about five minutes," he instructed Ina Edwards, one of the ship's nurses. "And let me know what it is."

"You OK, Mike?" she asked him. "Your leg? Can I get you something?"

Old enough to be his mother, Ina doted on him. And while she meant well, and he appreciated the concern, it annoyed him. He was fine. Perfect. Just dandy. Except people didn't want to believe that. One war injury and a couple of years later so many pieces of his broken world still weren't back in place. But he didn't take it out on those who cared about him. He merely smiled his way through it. People cared. They wanted to show compassion he didn't deserve, though, considering what he'd done.

Sighing, Michael faked a smile at Ina. "I'm fine, thanks. Just not prepared to start duty so early into the cruise. Normally they don't start coming in until after the first round of bon-voyage parties. Hangovers and all that."

"Well, I can go fix you a cup of tea," she offered, not to be put off. "I brought my own special blend on board again. The one you like."

It was bitter. Harsh in his belly. He hated it, and usually poured it out when she wasn't looking, but Ina was hard to refuse. Sometimes he wondered if she was in cahoots with the other women in his family who wanted to over-mother him. "I'd love a cup," he lied.

"Cream?"

Cream did it no earthly good, and it was a waste of good cream. "I'd love cream," he said, still forcing a polite smile.

That was all Ina needed to be pleased, as she rushed away to brew up her hideous potion, leaving Michael to take Sarah Collins's blood test. Well, that didn't matter, did it? It was a simple finger stick. Took ten seconds. But there was something about her...something that bothered him. Maybe it was the way she'd clung to him when in the elevator, or the little tingle he'd felt when they'd touched.

Or maybe it was the haunted look in her eyes. He knew that haunted look on a deeply personal level. Saw it in his own mirror sometimes.

Yes, that had to be it. Someone afraid. Someone numbed. He didn't often think about the battlefield these days, or all the wounded men he'd treated during those months on active duty. Grueling hours, hideous wounds. Another life altogether that he didn't allow to spill over into this one. What was done was done, and he wasn't going back. Now he worked on a cruise ship, drank insufferably bad tea with an overly protective surrogate mother and spent his off-duty hours in the lounge on the Lido deck, listening to bad karaoke and drinking diet cola.

"This won't hurt," he said to Sarah, as he pressed the barrel of the lancet device to the index finger on her left hand, then pushed the button to let the lancet prick her.

She flinched involuntarily, turning away her head when he squeezed a drop of blood from her finger and smeared it on the test strip. Probably squeamish, he decided. "Are you on this cruise with someone else?" he asked, as he counted down the seconds for the results to register. "Friend, family member, group tour?" *Spouse?*

"Alone," she said. "It's the best way to travel. You get to go where you want, do what you want. No compromises, no one impinging on your time."

Spoken like a true cynic, he thought. Or somebody badly burned by life. "One hundred and one," he pronounced. "I think you're good to go, so long as you don't overdo it."

Sitting up, then swinging her legs over the side of the bed, she said, "Believe me, I never overdo it."

"If anything, I suppose you could say that you underdo it. Which is why I'd like to have you check in here three times a day so I can do readings. For a couple of days anyway. And since there's always food available, I'd like to see you eating five or six times a day."

She laughed over that. "What you'd like to see and what I'm able to do are two entirely different things, Doctor. I'll take better care of myself until I get off the ship. That's a promise since I don't want to bother you again. But I'm afraid that doctor's orders are falling on deaf ears otherwise. I can't eat that many times a day."

"Small meals," he said. "Constant fuel for your body, so your blood sugar doesn't fluctuate so much." Was that a small spark of defiance flickering in her eyes now? Did the lady have a little challenge in her? "Unless you like being a patient in here. Because if you don't take better care of yourself, we're bound to meet under these very same circumstances again." Not that it would be a bad thing, the part where they met again, anyway. But he surely didn't want it to be under these circumstances. And now that he knew Sarah Collins was here, on the ship, all alone...

No! He didn't do that. Hadn't even been tempted before. He knew others of the crew indulged in little shipboard flings, but he didn't. Even though the emotional scars had long since healed from his last try at something more enduring than a casual fling, he didn't indulge at all now, and he was surprised that Sarah had brought out that little beast in him, especially with the resolution he'd made. Well, time to put the beast away. Michael Sloan was off the market, didn't look, didn't touch. Didn't anything! Not until he knew what came next for him.

"OK, so maybe you're right. But I don't like your prescription, Doctor, so here's my compromise. I'll eat my three meals a day, maybe have a small bedtime snack, but that's still up in the air, depending on how I feel at bedtime. And I'll stop in here once a day to have my gluco... blood-sugar level checked. Not the three times you wanted." She smiled sweetly at him. "That's my final offer."

"Most people don't defy doctor's orders." He liked it that she did.

“And most people don’t go on a cruise to avoid social interaction, which is why I’m here, Doctor. To avoid social interactions, or even professional ones such as yourself. Once I get myself accustomed to the ship and its schedule, I’ll be fine. I’m sure you’ll be very busy tending patients who really want your attention once this cruise gets well underway, so there’s no need to bother about me. I know how to take care of myself.”

“No, you don’t, or you wouldn’t be lying here in my bed right now, arguing about it.” He charted her latest blood-sugar result then set the clipboard on the stand next to the bed. “I can’t force treatment on you, and I’m not even going to argue with you about it. You know what I want, and it’s up to you to decide how you want to take care of yourself. You can do it the right way, or...do whatever you want to do.” With that, he spun around and walked away. No use arguing with her. She was already dead set on what she intended to do and, as pretty as she was, that didn’t always translate into smart. Which seemed to be the case with Miss Sarah Collins.

Or maybe not. He couldn’t tell. She’d be back, though. One way or another—following doctors orders, or going against them—she’d be back. He was counting on it.

Sarah returned to her cabin under the escort of a nurse named Ina. She was a nice sort, had even fixed her a decent cup of tea, which had hit the spot. Ina probably would have stayed to tuck her into bed, but Sarah opted for a shower in preparation for going for a late-night meal. OK, so she was going to be good and eat the way she was supposed to. Either that or have herself another time of it in the hospital, and while she certainly had nothing against the hospital—it looked to be magnificently equipped—she had a thing against medicine in general. Loved it, hated it, wanted it, wanted to avoid it.

Mixed feelings all the way around, and the best way to avoid that was to avoid the issue causing the problem. Which was why she’d eat, which was why she’d consent to one, *maybe* two blood tests a day. Her mother used to say something about an ounce of prevention being worth a pound of cure, and since with her condition a pound of cure came in the form of a hospital and a good-looking doctor, she would opt for the ounce of prevention. For a few days. Then she’d get off the ship and see what else she could find for herself. Maybe Japan. Or, better yet, Hong Kong. Nobody there would force food and blood tests on her.

After a quick shower, Sarah finally gave in and went off in search of a light meal. Off the beaten path...not in any of the main dining rooms, or at the continual buffet of lobster and fruit and so many other delicacies it nearly caused her to go queasy thinking about all the choices. No, she stayed away from all the main sources and instead opted for a dark, cozy little lounge on the Lido deck where one of the passengers, who was a little too inebriated to show good sense, was attempting a tune on the karaoke, and doing a miserable job of it. He was singing about an anguished phantom and sounding more like a walrus with bellyache. Which suited Sarah’s purposes as the lounge was practically empty.

She ordered a small salad and a cup of seafood chowder, and settled into one of the back booths to wait, trying hard not to listen to the off key warblings that were getting more off-key by the moment. Shutting her eyes, she leaned her head against the back of the booth, fighting away the image of the good doctor, which had been lingering there a while longer than was comfortable.

Bad impression, she decided. That’s why she kept thinking about him. He’d made a bad impression on her. But the images there were anything but bad, which was why she decided to force her concentration on the second verse going on at the front of the lounge. More off key than the first. And much louder.

At the point where it became nearly unbearable Sarah decided not to wait around for her food. She wasn’t hungry, and she could eat in the morning. So she opened her eyes, started to scoot out of the booth, only to be stopped at the edge of the seat by a large form she recognized from the sheer size of him, since in her little corner of the lounge it was too dark to see much of anything. “Spying on me?” she snapped.

He placed a cup of chowder down in front of her, along with her salad, then wedged himself into the seat right next to her, pushing her back from the edge. “Apparently, I am,” he said, handing her a soup spoon.

CHAPTER TWO

“SO, WHAT do you want, Doctor? What do you *really* want?” She was a little flattered by his attention, actually. It had been a long year avoiding everybody with whom she’d come into contact, and there were so many nights when she would have enjoyed a dinner companion, a male companion especially. No strings attached, separate checks, light conversation, going their separate ways at the end of the meal, of course. Someone to share a little space with her at the same table, someone staving off the appearance that she was so pathetically alone.

She wasn’t antisocial, even though it appeared she was. Just cautious these days, as getting involved came easily to her. Easily, but with such a high price...costly mistakes she was bound to make again if the occasion arose. And she simply didn’t trust herself to do otherwise, which was why she kept to herself now. “Did you follow me here, or do you moonlight as a waiter when you’re off duty in the hospital? Are you serving up syringes of penicillin by day and dry martinis with a lemon twist by night?”

He laughed, raising his hand to signal the waitress. When he caught her attention, she gave him a familiar nod, then scurried off to the bar. “Some might think that’s the same thing, one cure being as good as another. When you’re on holiday, a ship has amazing opportunities, with so many things to do. But when you’re on a ship for your employment as well as your living space, those opportunities are pretty limited and the space gets rather small, the longer you’re confined to it. I don’t fraternize with the guests in the planned social activities, don’t date them, don’t play shuffleboard with them, don’t serve them drinks either. Most of the time I try to keep to places where there aren’t so many people hanging around. Keep the separation between crew and guests intact. And right now this seems the place to do it.”

“Sounds...dull. So many things to do, and here you are with me, probably the one and only avowed antisocial passenger on board. Not very interesting at all, Doctor. Not for a man who could have other choices, if he so wishes.” She glanced at the waitress who was giving him an admiring appraisal, then at a table with three well liquored-up women, all of whom had that same look for him. It seemed the good doctor did have his opportunities if he cared to take them. “A number of other choices,” she said.

“If you *want* those choices.”

“And you don’t?” She arched a curious eyebrow. “That surprises me.”

“It surprises me too, sometimes. But it avoids a lot of complications in the long run and who needs complications when you can have all this?” He pointed to the karaoke singer standing under the dim blue light on the postage-stamp-sized stage, singing his off-key heart out.

“Sounds like a been there, done that to me. Once burned, twice shy, or something like that.”

“It’s that obvious?” He said that with a smile, but that wasn’t at all the impression she was getting from him. There was something deep, something disturbing in his voice. Some sadness, maybe? Or wistfulness? It was a hauntingly familiar tone, and one she recognized from her own voice when she wasn’t trying so hard to mask it with something lighter, something less truthful, the way Michael was trying to do. Something compelled her to hear his voice again, to elicit that emotion from him once more, but as she opened her mouth to speak, the karaoke singer hit a particularly loud, startlingly sour note that caused even him to sputter, then giggle an apology into the microphone—but not quit singing.

Michael cringed visibly, and this time the smile that spread to his face was genuine. “You can see why there aren’t so many people around here.”

The moment was gone. It was too late to try and discover something she had no right to discover. “Well, I think earplugs are a good remedy,” she said lightly, shaking off the building intensity and

finally relaxing into the moment between them a little more. His motives seemed innocent enough, and she did understand how this was a good place to come if you were seeking solitude on a crowded ship—nice, dim room, secluded entryway making it easy to overlook, perfect low-key ambiance, comfortable booths arranged intimately so they gave the seeming appearance of aloneness. This one in particular, tucked in behind a column, was especially private, which was why she'd chosen it. For a moment it crossed her mind that this might be Dr Sloan's regular booth for all the same reasons she had taken to it. "Or maybe he could do with an adenoidectomy." Meaning the removal of the little piece of tissue located where the throat connected with the nasal passage. Often adenoids were the cause of nasal congestion, thick breathing or, in some cases, a nasal-sounding voice.

Michael shot her a curious look. "You know what an adenoidectomy is? I wouldn't think that's too common a term."

Her comment had been too medical, especially when she was trying to hide from everything that connected her to medicine in any way. But sometimes it just slipped out. Natural instincts coming back to haunt her. Well, that was a mistake she wouldn't repeat. "I don't suppose it is common but a friend of mine had it done," she lied. It had been a patient of hers, so in the longest stretch of the word maybe that hadn't been a lie after all. "Opened up her nasal passages quite nicely, helped her stop talking through her nose, breathing easier...." Too medical again. "You know. Whatever goes along with that kind of surgery." Sarah watched, out of the corner of her eye, to see if he believed her, which apparently he did because he turned his attention to the waitress who was on her way over to the table with a soda and a sandwich. She placed them on the table in front of him, bending much too close for anything other than what she had in mind, which had nothing to do with serving him food, practically slathering him with a come-hither smile. Of which he took no notice.

Most men, having it flaunted in their faces that way, would at least look, but Michael Sloan did not, which made Sarah wonder all the more about him.

Michael and the waitress chatted for a another moment about someone who worked in the business office—she still showing the same interest in him while he showed none in her—then when the waitress had decided that she was wasting her time she scampered away to wait on a another customer. That's when Michael returned his attention to Sarah. "It's like a little city here. Everybody knows everybody else's business."

Like the waitress who knew what Michael wanted even though he didn't have to order it? Briefly, Sarah wondered how much business the waitress and Michael knew about each other, and if his lack of a show of interest in her had been for appearances only. She was young, blonde, built the way every good plastic surgeon wanted his surgical enhancements to turn out. Of course, he'd already denied involvements or, as he called them, complications. Still, a man like Michael...good-looking, smart... She wondered. "The same way it is in a hospital," she said, trying to sound noncommittal.

"Do you work in a hospital?"

Damn. She'd slipped again, when she'd promised herself she'd be more careful. Twice inside two minutes. Something about him eased the tension right out of her, made her feel almost normal again, and she was going to have to be very careful around him. "No, but I like to watch those hospital shows on television. They're very...realistic. Make you feel like you're really there." Ah, the lie of it all, but the look of mild amusement on his face told her he'd bought her rather impaired explanation.

He chuckled. "Real life wrapped up in an hour, minus time out for commercials, once a week. Everybody gets cured or killed at the end, don't they? Or falls in love and lives happily ever after. Well, you are right about one thing. Gossip prevails in the hospital, too. Sometimes it can get so bad it's like it takes on an existence of its own."

"Which you can't live without?" she asked.

"That might be putting it too strongly. Personally, I can live without it quite nicely, like I can live without a good cup of strong, black coffee if one's not available to me. But for some people a little good gossip can start the day off with a bang, the way a good cup of coffee can."

"If you indulge," she said. Somehow, she didn't see him as the type.

"Which I don't. In the gossip, anyway. Can't say that I'd turn down a good cup of coffee, though."

She was glad he'd redeemed himself with that one because she didn't want to picture Michael Sloan as petty in any way, and gossip could be so petty. Being the brunt of it herself over her break-up with Cameron Enderlein, she knew. "So why did you choose a cruise ship?" she asked, knowing she probably shouldn't get that involved. But it seemed right to her. The mood between them was pleasant enough, his company nice. And she desperately missed companionship, not only in a personal way but in a medical one. It had been such a long time since she'd talked medicine with anybody, and while this wasn't going to go into any medical depth, it seemed harmless enough on a superficial level. An encounter with someone from her own profession was stimulating. Then, after tonight, she'd get lost in the ship's crowd, and he'd get busy in the ship's hospital, and that would be that. So it didn't matter. "Rather than a hospital or a clinic somewhere, why here?"

"It's a good job," he said, this time his voice the guarded one she'd already heard bits of before. "The facilities are excellent, patients are usually pretty nice, and I like the tropical islands. Oh, and the food is great." He picked up his sandwich and took a bite of something that looked to be a huge Cubano—pork, vegetables, and a whole lot of other ingredients that added up to one large meal between two pieces of bread.

And one large avoidance, too, she thought as she picked at her salad, finally spearing a grape tomato. But what was it to her? If he didn't want to tell her, she didn't care. They weren't friends, after all. They were barely acquaintances.

"So what kind of job do you do?" he asked, after he'd swallowed and taken a drink of his diet cola. "Wait...let me guess." He leaned back in his seat, folded his arms across his chest and studied her for a moment.

Studied her so hard she blushed under his scrutiny. Good thing the lights in here were dim and he couldn't see her reaction.

"I don't take you to be a lady of leisure," he said. "You've too much purpose in your eyes."

If only he knew how wrong he was. She'd been nothing but a lady of leisure for the past year, and there was absolutely no purpose in her eyes. Maybe once, but not any more.

"Am I right?" he asked, when she didn't respond to his first guess.

Rather than answering, she played his game and busied herself with her soup. If he could indulge himself in a little avoidance, so could she.

"So the lady isn't going to answer. Which means I'll have to take a wild guess. You're too short to be a fashion model, you don't eat with enough passion to be a chef, this is October, which is the middle of the school year so you're not a schoolteacher, and you're too pale to be a professional golfer."

"A golfer?" She laughed over that one. "Where did you come up with that?"

"I'm a doctor. I saw your muscles when I examined you. Very nice, but not overly developed. I can picture you swinging a golf club."

"I'll just bet you can," she said. "Sorry to disappoint you but I don't have a golf swing and I don't play golf. Never have."

"Well, that narrows the field down, doesn't it?"

"That ends the field, Doctor," she said, scooting toward the other side of the booth. This was entirely too enjoyable, and it would have been easy to spend another hour or two here, chatting about nothing and enjoying everything about it. Which was why she had to leave.

"Call me Michael, please," he said, not trying to stop her from leaving.

That surprised her a little. She'd expected a small protest from him, or maybe even an offer to walk her back to her cabin, which she might have taken him up on. But as she climbed out of her seat, he stood and offered a polite hand to her, then turned and signaled the waitress back over to refill his glass—both with the same insouciant effort. All casual, all impersonal, as was his goodnight to her.

"I want to see you in the morning for a finger stick," he said. "I'll be on duty at eight."

She nodded, offered him a half-smile, and scooted out of the lounge to a popular song being mutilated by a short, round, bald-headed Elvis impersonator who sounded like he needed an adenoidectomy, too.

* * *

She slept in, avoiding the morning finger stick, and when, at nearly ten, she heard a knock on the cabin door, she assumed it was Michael, coming to do her blood work. But she was wrong. It was one of the ship's medical technicians. Cheery smile, bright face, she was more than happy to poke Sarah's finger. "It's a little low," Paulina Simpson said, showing the monitor to Sarah, who read the blood-sugar result at sixty-five. "You need to eat something," Paulina continued, fishing some sort of breakfast bar out of her pocket. "Doctor Sloan told me to bring this along, that you'd probably need it."

"Dr Sloan thinks of everything, doesn't he?" Sarah said amiably.

"He's a good doctor. Most of the docs come and go, work a few weeks here and there, but the cruise line likes Dr Sloan because he keeps coming back. He's reliable. The patients trust him and he does an outstanding job."

A bit of a crush from the med tech, too? Sarah wondered.

"And he's received commendations from the cruise line," the girl went on.

Well, so much praise on Michael's account was all well and good, but that still didn't put Sarah in the mood to deal with him. For what it was worth, she felt a little slighted, being passed off to a tech when she'd expected the doctor to come calling on her. "Well, tell Dr Sloan thank you for the breakfast bar, but that I'm doing fine on my own and I no longer require medical attention."

Paulina arched a puzzled eyebrow, then nodded. "He said you'd say that, so he gave me this." She handed over a slip of paper.

Sarah took a look at it, then handed it back. "Tell Dr Sloan I don't need a diet guide, that I'm quite capable of eating what I need, when I need it. But I appreciate his concern."

"He said you'd say that, too. So..." she pulled a small glucose monitor from her other pocket and handed it to Sarah "...he told me to give you this, so you can check yourself at any time. Although he would like to take a daily reading of his own, just to see how you're doing."

Apparently, there was no getting away from Dr Michael Sloan, even when he wasn't present. If he went to all this fuss over a simple little case of hypoglycemia, she could only image how he'd react to a serious illness. Good doctor, she decided, adding her own silent praise to Paulina's as she remembered the days when she'd been at least that persistent with her own patients. "Tell Dr Sloan thank you for the glu-cometer, and that I'll use it. And that if he insists, I'll allow him to do an occasional test, too." She didn't really need it, but who was she to interfere with a doctor doing his duty?

Too bad he was hiding away on a ship, she thought as she unwrapped the breakfast bar. The world needed good doctors like Michael. Of course, she was hiding away on a ship too, wasn't she? And by most accounts she'd been a pretty good doctor herself.

It was turning into a long day, and the hospital was getting busy. Predictable conditions, the lot of them. Upset stomachs, seasickness, diabetic upheavals from people going wild over so much food available to them. People underestimated their stamina on a ship and he got to patch up the results. It was very different from general surgery, and sometimes he did long for the days when he'd spent his life in the operating theater.

But now... "Take two of these pills this afternoon, and two more before you go to bed. If you're still nauseated in the morning, come back and see me and we'll try something different." He handed the bottle to the fifty-something woman, and watched her leave the examining room, her face a little less green than it had been when she'd come in. "And no seafood for a couple of days," he called

after her, remembering that this particular incident of gastric upset had come after a rather large consumption of lobster for lunch.

He couldn't blame her, really. Cruises were all about overindulgence. Of course, there was Sarah, who wouldn't indulge at all. He was willing to bet she hadn't eaten a thing since her breakfast bar. She was a hard one to figure out. Last night, in the lounge, after she'd relaxed a little, she'd seemed like she had been enjoying his company. He'd certainly enjoyed hers. But just when things had finally slipped into a nice, casual mood, she'd upped and left him there. It wasn't his place to ask her questions, but he was curious. He saw all kinds of people on the ship. Lonely widows and widowers, people getting over the break-up of a relationship, people pressed with tough life decisions running away for a while to think. And people who were simply on holiday. As for Sarah, well, he wasn't sure where she fit in. Normally he was pretty good at telling, but he couldn't get a reading on her. Other than the fact that he liked her, and something about her drew him in, he simply didn't know.

One thing was certain, though. She didn't want a personal relationship in her life as much as he didn't want one in his. That alone made a shipboard friendship seem appealing. "Hello," he said to his next patient, as he stepped into the examining room to have a look at a casualty of a volleyball game—a soft-looking fortyish man who didn't exercise at home but who took the opportunity to start once he'd hit the high seas. "I understand you hurt your back? Maybe twisted an ankle, too?"

The man, who was sitting on the edge of the exam table with his bare, skinny legs sticking out from under the sheet draped over his lap, nodded, looking up from his bent-over position. "Guess I'm a little out of shape," he admitted. "Haven't played in a while."

Michael wasn't going to ask how long that translated into. Instead, he took a look, diagnosed a few strained and sprained muscles and sent the man off to the spa to spend the afternoon in a whirlpool. It wasn't a precise medical therapy exactly, but why not give the man what he'd come for? Something he didn't have in his real life.

So, after what seemed like an interminably long day of routine aches and pains, Michael signed the next watch over to the following doctor on duty, a competent general practitioner named Reese Allen, and headed for his quarters. His leg ached a little more than usual, although it shouldn't, and it was time to get off it for a while. But as he walked down the corridor to his cabin, which was adjacent to the hospital, he changed his mind and caught the elevator up to the sundeck. He didn't actually get outside much on these cruises, and right now he felt the urge for a little sun on his face. And he knew the perfect place. It was amidships, in a little tuck-away behind one of the bars that didn't usually go into use until dark. There were a few deck chairs there, maybe three or four, and no one ever lounged there because there was no real view, unless you enjoyed looking at the back bar or the bottom side of the little rise holding the deck chairs with a perfect view of the pool. Good spot, he thought, heading off in that direction. Very good spot. He'd spend an hour, maybe two, go to the lounge and have Hector fix him a Cubano for supper, then...well, nothing came after that. He didn't make plans, although the thought of a little time spent with Sarah Collins suddenly popped into his mind.

It was a wish that came true almost immediately as he rounded the corner to his little tuck-away and found her in one of the deck chairs. Just her. Nobody else was around. She was there, stretched out almost elegantly in the chair, wearing a simple, one-piece black swimsuit that exposed beautiful long legs, even though they were pale. The black of the swimsuit complemented her black hair and the milky color of her skin was a startling, sexy contrast. Sarah had on black sunglasses, through which she was reading...he couldn't tell what, for sure. It looked like a copy of the *New England Journal of Medicine*, but she snapped it shut and tucked it into her big straw bag the instant she saw him. It was probably a fashion magazine, he decided as he headed toward her. Or another of the women's specialty magazines available from the ship's store.

She tilted her head down and gave him a long, cool glance up and over the top of her dark glasses before she finally spoke. "So, you *are* spying on me."

"I admitted it once, and I'm sticking to it."

"Have you come to do a blood test? You're so dedicated that you'll chase your patients down no matter where they're hiding?"

"I'd like to say yes but, unfortunately, I don't have my medical equipment with me. I'm afraid I'm off duty right now, too."

"Somehow, I doubt that you're ever *really* off duty," she said, that cool stare of hers continuing. It was cool, but not unfriendly. More like wary. "You strike me as one of those doctors who lives and breathes his work. Dedicated beyond reason. Otherwise why would you become a ship's doctor? I don't imagine you can ever really get away from it here, can you?"

"Actually, I have this little hiding place where I go so I *can* get away. No one knows about it, no one goes there, except..."

"Me?" she ventured. "Just like I know about your booth in the karaoke lounge?"

"It is funny, isn't it, how we keep bumping into each other in all the places no one else wants to go? You know, the secluded places."

"I'm antisocial," she reminded him with a hint of a smile tweaking her lips. "What's your excuse, other than you're spying on me?"

His leg was starting to ache even more now, that dull throb he despised that had never completely gone away, and he really needed to sit down. He hated it when this happened. The reminder, the memories...of so many things he wanted to forget. *Damn, he hated it!* "My excuse is that I've been coming here for the better part of a year now."

She arched her eyebrows...beautifully sculpted eyebrows. Everything about Sarah Collins was beautifully sculpted, in fact. "Well, then, by all means, you should sit down."

"And interrupt you?"

"You're assuming that you being here would interrupt me."

"Would it?" he asked, summoning every bit of determination he had to fight off the inevitable limp that came when he was tired...fight it off long enough to take the last ten steps toward the deck chair next to her. Gritting his teeth, he took one step, then another. Sure, it was a vanity thing, being self-conscious like he was. There was no disgrace in his disability. But, damn, he had the right to hold onto a little vanity, didn't he? His limp caused questions, which required explanations. And the whole sordid story, once he'd explained it, brought pity, which he didn't want. Especially not from someone like Sarah Collins. So he took another few steps toward her, until he finally reached the chair. Then he sat, letting out an involuntary sigh of relief. Two hours off his feet, and he'd be fine. But one thing was sure—those two hours were going to be spent right here. He didn't have it in him to get up again. So if Sarah stayed, he'd spend them with her, and if she didn't stay...

"There's nothing to interrupt," she said. "I was doing exactly what you intend to do, enjoying a little sun well away from the crowds. Having someone else doing the same alongside me wouldn't be an interruption."

"But an intrusion, perhaps?" he asked, shifting to find a comfortable position.

"I don't think you're an intrusion. But if that becomes the case, I'll let you know." With that, she pushed her sunglasses up again, making her intention not to converse quite clear. Then, out of the blue, "You don't snore, do you?" she asked. "Because if you do, that's an intrusion."

He chuckled. What was it about her that he liked so much? She put up walls, and she wasn't engagingly friendly either. Polite when interaction was forced on her but remaining at a distance. And so damned intriguing that he didn't even care if they spent the next two hours lounging next to each other without speaking a word.

The truth was, he liked Sarah Collins.

While she hadn't been looking for him, not consciously, on some unexplainable level she wasn't displeased that he'd found her. On a limited basis, Michael Sloan was rather pleasant company. Sarah found herself wishing, just a little, that she could talk in-depth about medicine with him, though. She'd just read a brilliant article in the *New England Journal* on advances in medication used to treat

hypertension, and she would have loved some lively discussion on that with a colleague. But she had to remind herself almost daily that she'd left medicine behind her, then content herself with the void in her life that that decision had caused.

Unfortunately, the passion hadn't left her, which was why she wasn't engaging him this very moment. She stayed away from medicine because she could so easily be drawn back.

Although, as a doctor, she had noticed his limp. She hadn't stared, of course, especially with the way he had been trying so hard not to limp. Male ego, probably. In her experience as a doctor, the one thing she'd learned well was that men preferred to grit their teeth and bear it rather than admitting a weakness. Actually, that's what had almost killed Cameron. He'd been tired, he'd been losing weight. He'd blamed it on working too much, even though she'd asked him to have himself checked out. *And he a doctor!* Well, the dreadful truth had turned out to be leukemia. The other dreadful truth was that she should have insisted on him getting checked, then kept on insisting when he'd refused. Even tied him up and dragged him to a clinic, if she'd had to. But she hadn't. Probably because avoidance and denial had been easier.

Luckily for Cameron, his ending turned out to be a happy one in so many ways. He'd beaten his cancer, found a perfect wife and now they had a family.

It seemed, though, that the good doctor lying next to her right now was much the same as Cameron. Too stubborn, or too large an ego...she didn't know which. But it was on the tip of her tongue to say something to him. To ask him what was wrong, and if he'd sought medical attention. Which was none of her business. Still, he'd shown a sufficient amount of pain to someone with a trained eye, and whether or not she was calling herself a doctor these days, she was concerned. "Do you ever get time off?" she asked, not sure how to broach the subject without seeming too medical about it.

"Between cruises. A few days here and there."

"Nothing sustained, though? Maybe a few weeks where you can go and treat yourself to some real rest? On one of these tropical islands where we're going to stop on the cruise, perhaps?"

"Social worker," he said.

"What?"

"Last night, I was trying to figure out what you do. My guess right now is social worker. You show just the right amount of concern for other people's concerns, which would make you a very good social worker."

"Well, I'll take that as a compliment because I admire anyone who has the dedication to be a social worker but, no, that's not what I do. And I'm not a librarian either, if that was going to be your next guess."

"I might have. I've always thought librarians have a smoldering, secret sensuality about them, which fits you."

Sarah laughed. "Nothing smoldering in me."

"But there is, Sarah. It's there, and you do a nice job of hiding it, which is why you'd make a good librarian. They have that reserved exterior, but on the inside—"

"Let me guess," she interrupted. "When you were young you had a secret crush on a librarian."

"Not so secret. Her name was Mrs Rowe, and the way she pinned up her red hair, and those tight tweed skirts she wore..." Michael faked a big shiver. "I used to check out books every day. Big books, adult books that I thought made me look intelligent and old. As many as I could get in my canvas bag, like I thought she believed I was taking them home and reading them every night. I was eight, by the way."

"So what brought an end to the love affair?"

"After a couple of weeks, Mrs Rowe asked me if I wouldn't rather have books from the children's section, then she handed me one about a precocious monkey and told me I'd do better with that than the one on quantum physics I was attempting to check out."

“She was probably right, unless you were a child genius.”

“Not even close.”

“Then I’d say Mrs Rowe had good insight.”

“And a good figure, too,” he commented under his breath.

Sarah laughed. “Not to be missed, even by a boy of eight.” Which further proved her theory about men. They were not all alike, as some people said, but they were certainly similar in some ways. Even now, as he shifted in his deck chair, she saw a little grimace of pain on his face, yet, come hell or high water, he wasn’t about to admit it.

Well, back to the original premise and she was sticking to it. It was none of her business.

She was still concerned, though.

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